

Anchor: Part I – Clark Kent

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Summary: A tragedy in another universe threatens all life on that universe's Earth. Can Clark Kent AKA Superman save the world and set things back on the right path while finding a place for himself at the same time? An alternate universe story.

Story Size: 115,215 words (612Kb as text)

Author's note: This story has been in the works for a long time and admittedly grew to be much longer than I'd anticipated! I'd like to dedicate this story in memory of my father, who is ultimately responsible for my love of L&C/Superman. I'd also like to extend thanks to the readers on the message boards for their thoughtful comments and encouragement and to KSaraSara for assuring me that all the tears and feels were a good thing :)

Content warning: I have set the rating as PG-13 for depictions of violence, including gun violence in which some of the victims are young children.

Chapter 1

Our reality is created by the continuous stream of pictures and sounds that pass in front of our eyes and enter our ears. I see and hear more than most. However, my reality is a lonely, limited place. I live alone, work alone, walk alone... Fly alone.

Today, like every day, I'm also running alone. I suppose it's odd that I try to find time to go running each day. After all, I'm Superman — I don't need to exercise, and my schedule is understandably quite busy. But I find the activity relaxing. I don't use my powers, and I remain grounded, anchored. Most mornings, I run a 5-mile loop that takes me around Centennial Park. And the paparazzi have learned to leave me alone. Most of the time.

I pull on an old baseball cap and my running shoes — Nikes that have seen quite a few too many miles — and exit my apartment. The light rain falling has chased away all but the most persistent of the paparazzi, and I wave cordially, like always, as I jog down the steps and move into a brisker pace, heading out toward the park.

Everyone I pass stares and gawks, still, even after all this time. Sure, they pretend not to. But, as I said, I see and hear more than most. A sharp intake of breath as I jog by, or an abrupt increase in heart rate as they notice me, or a shift slightly off the path to give me a wider berth. Yep,

they all know who and what I am. They know I can fly and deflect bullets and start fires with my eyes. Do they fear me? I'm not sure. But they are aware that I'm different. And they treat me as such.

And so, I run, alone, along the edges of the vast park. I veer off the sidewalk onto a thin dirt track leading through the middle of the park, and I adjust my pace a bit as the path winds around trees and skirts the edge of a small pond. The morning is chilly, and a thin layer of mist floats just above the pond. The view is calming to me, and I stop for a moment to watch a duck float lazily in the middle of the pond, ripples of water cascading out around it. I step off the path as two other runners pass by, and I ignore the whispers that they seem to forget I can hear.

"That was him, I'm sure of it."

"Superman, really?"

The duck flaps its wings and resettles itself into the water. It is not alone. Two other ducks descend out of the mist and skim the top of the water briefly before landing gracefully next to their comrade. Together, they float silently along. I feel my jaw twitch involuntarily, and I turn back to the path, which is now clear.

Moments later, I accelerate again as I exit the forested path and merge back onto the sidewalk. Unexpectedly, the light rain turns into a downpour, and I welcome the cacophony of sounds the raindrops create. I love the sound of rain; it temporarily mutes the other sounds that always intrude into my consciousness. I jump over a puddle and continue along the sidewalk, again following the outer edge of the park. I briefly consider taking a longer route, but decide against it. The rain is likely to create more work for my other persona, and I instead pick up my pace again to get home quickly so I can take to the skies for my morning scanning of the city.

My thoughts wander, as they usually do at this point in my loop, and I find myself thinking of her. I picture her beautiful deep brown eyes and kind smile that saw me like no one else ever had. I find myself wondering what she is doing. She's with him, I'm sure. And they are happy. And definitely not alone. I'm happy for them, really. I just wish...

No. Stop it, I tell myself. I often have to remind myself that she was only in my life for a very short time. I only knew her when she briefly visited my world — turning everything I'd known upside-down — and then for a few more days when I visited her world just a few months ago. Yes, I mean that. She is not from my world — not from my universe. She has her own Clark Kent. Her own Superman. And he has her. Lucky man. I hope he knows how truly lucky he is. Like the ducks, he's not alone. Not like me.

I stumble, blinking several times as I pull myself back to the present and focus my eyes on the path ahead. I pass

a bench, where an old man huddles under his only possession — a thin orange quilt, now soaked from the downpour. I frown but keep running. One mile left. The rain continues to pound down. From across the city, I hear tires screeching and metal crunching. I close my eyes for a brief millisecond, wondering if maybe I'm not needed. However, as screams penetrate through the rainfall, I no longer hesitate. This is my job. I don't live for myself. I live for them. For those whom I help. I launch myself into the sky and toward the sound, spinning into the iconic blue, red, and yellow suit as I ascend.

This is my reality. Some days I can accept it for what it is. Some days, my work is deeply fulfilling, even. Other days...I struggle. I wish to be anonymous. And yet, I wish to be seen, wanted, and loved for who I am, not just for what I can do. It is only 7 a.m.; however, I can tell that today is not going to be an easy day.

I see her face again.

I wish...

I shake off my feelings and speed through the sky. No wishing or hoping. Just action. Save lives now, mope around later.

Yep. This is my reality.

Chapter 2

The morning passes slowly as I move from one accident to the next. The downpour continues, and I am glad I don't feel the cold. But I am drenched. And dirty. My boots will need to be polished again, I realize, as I land in the mud on the side of the highway and lift a silver Toyota Camry out of a ditch. The family inside is safe. Two adults and a young child. The child stares at me in awe, her beautiful, innocent blue eyes wide. "*Mommy, it's Superman! He saved us!*" I smile at her, nod at her parents, and take off again down the road.

Hours later, when the rain finally begins to subside and the morning traffic thins, I can take a break. I should be happy. I should feel proud. I prevented several fatalities, after all. But I just feel numb. I fly home, my cape clinging to my back rather than billowing out regally. Does he have this same problem when flying in the rain? Probably. Physics should work the same in their universe, I expect.

I land on my balcony and spin out of the suit as I enter the dimly lit apartment. The suit, now balled up in my hands, drips mucky rainwater onto the floor, and I sigh as I survey the mess. I toss the suit into the washing machine, clean up the floor, and then speed through a quick shower. It's now 10:30 a.m.; I'm late to the morning staff meeting, as usual. I'm surprised I still have a job, really. A paying job, that is. They certainly don't keep me on because I'm a productive writer. No, they just haven't fired me yet because I sell papers. Well, Superman sells papers, and I

get to write most of the stories about myself. They expect it of me. And because of that, they allow me some leniency with regard to attendance. Not exactly what I imagined when I decided on a career in journalism. Then again, nothing about my life is what I'd imagined.

I hurry to work, managing to fly fast enough through the light rain to avoid becoming drenched again. The Daily Planet building buzzes with activity, and with practiced ease, I focus my superhearing as I trot down the stairs in the stairwell to the newsroom on the third floor. The staff meeting is nearly over. My entrance at this point would only cause a distraction. Instead, I exit the stairwell and head for my desk. The temperature in the room seems to drop ten degrees as my colleagues realize I've arrived. I ignore this, and the murmurs, and the sideways glances. After all, I have work to do, a story to write. I can see the headline now: *Freak Alien In Brightly Colored Tights Saves Family From Having To Call A Tow Truck*, by Clark Kent. Boy, I'm fully embracing my self-pity today, aren't I?

I sit and switch on my computer. As it boots up, I consider heading to grab a cup of coffee. I raise my eyes and study the newsroom. From my desk in the far corner — closest to the stairwell, so I don't bother anyone with my frequent comings and goings — I can see the whole room, bustling with activity. The staff meeting has just adjourned, and a crowd has gathered around the coffee station. So I decide to wait. James Olsen — Daily Planet owner and Editor-in-Chief — exits the conference room and nods a quick hello to me from across the room. I nod back, and he turns and heads into his office. No one else so much as looks in my direction. Almost like it's forbidden. Careful, the alien might fry you with his eyes if you make him mad. Don't look at him and he won't notice you.

I shake my head. *Quit it*, I tell myself. And I start typing. The real headline — my actual good deeds for the morning — *Superman Prevents Traffic Fatalities During Rainstorm*, by Clark Kent. Even after all this time — and what has it been, about two years now? — it is still hard for me to write about myself in the third person. Superman did this. Superman did that. But Mr. Olsen insists that is what readers prefer. So, I write about myself in the third person. It doesn't change how people look at me. Or how they don't look at me.

I type at normal speed. Don't want to attract any more attention than I already do. It's a short write-up though, and within a few minutes, I finish. Just in time, too. My superhearing kicks in right as I hit the 'Send' button to email the story to Mr. Olsen.

"Flight 315 from Los Angeles to Metropolis. This is co-pilot Daniel Benson. We are experiencing a major engine failure. Crash imminent."

I'm already halfway up the stairwell, and as I finish spinning into the suit and jump into the sky, I focus ahead, extending my senses. Screams fill my sensitive ears, and I turn sharply to the right and pick up speed as I find the airplane. It is fifty miles west and losing altitude rapidly. Within seconds, I am there. I mute the screams from inside the plane so I can focus. However, I already know everything I need to know. There are 178 passengers and flight crew aboard the aircraft. Twelve children, including one infant. The mother is terrified. One older passenger is having a heart attack and will need to be transported to the hospital as soon as we land. I position myself under the strongest part of the frame about mid-plane, and I reach out to take control. I exert appropriate pressure, and the plane levels out. I then slow the plane as we approach Metropolis International Airport, and I concentrate my hearing on the pilot, co-pilot, and air traffic control tower. They know I'm there and that I have control of the plane. I hear their hope, relief, and gratitude. They give me instructions for landing the plane, and I focus ahead through the heavy cloud layer and see the emergency crews waiting for us on the runway. I descend with the plane through the clouds and slow carefully as we approach the ground. The passengers in the plane erupt with cries of joy as I set the plane down, and I listen briefly, allowing myself a small smile. There is no fear of the freak alien when I've just saved their lives. Only appreciation and awe.

I direct the emergency crews to help the older gentleman and check in with the mother of the young infant. The pilots thank me. I linger a moment longer, until everyone is safely off the plane. Then I wave and take off back to my lonely desk in the corner of the newsroom, hiding in plain sight. I'll be a bit more generous to myself with this headline, I decide. *Superman Saves 178 Passengers And Crew After Airplane Engine Failure*, by Clark Kent. I land on the roof of the Daily Planet, spin out of the suit as I fly down the stairwell, and exit onto the third floor again. Televisions around the room are showing the story, and I feel the collective gaze of the newsroom shift to me briefly before remembering it's forbidden to look at the alien. Hushed whispers. Nothing changes.

The coffee station is crowded again, but I'm feeling bold. Keeping my hands in my pockets and my eyes on the ground ahead of me, I walk toward the group of reporters and stand patiently at the back of the line. The idle chat stops, and in front of me, travel correspondent Jake Mercer turns and moves out of the line, motioning me ahead of him. I shake my head. I don't want or expect any special treatment.

"Thank you, but I can wait," I say. The first words I've spoken to any of my colleagues all day. Maybe all week. I

reach up and adjust my glasses. Jake nods and steps back into line. The silence slowly fades, but conversation is muted. Within a few minutes, it is my turn, and I quickly pour myself a cup of coffee, plain black, and head back to my desk.

I sit and, for the second time that day, write a short story about myself in the third person. At least this time, I'm sipping coffee.

I type at normal speed. Don't want to attract any more attention than I already do.

Rinse and repeat.

Chapter 3

I end up spending most of the rest of the day in Japan. It's not as great as it sounds though. I'm there on business. Super business, of course. And the work is hard — mitigating mass flooding from a tsunami caused by a huge offshore earthquake. I pull people from the roofs of their houses and cars and move them to higher ground. I redirect the water flow when possible. I stop homes and buildings from being washed away. And I pull lifeless bodies from the raging waters. Hours of work again, and this time in the dark of night, which saps my energy faster. The death count rises. I numb my mind to it so I can keep going.

When the waters finally recede, and I have done all I can, I fly straight up into the dark sky. The atmosphere thins, allowing me to move faster. In the blink of an eye, I'm on the Moon. I land on the dusty surface and sit heavily, holding my knees against my chest and resting my head down. Three hundred fifteen lives lost. I don't cry. I have no tears anymore.

I wrap the red cape of the suit around me. It feels comforting. And, though I try not to, I think of her again. If she were here, she'd remind me of the hundreds, if not thousands, I was able to save. She'd say, "*Whatever you can do — it's enough.*" And I'd believe her. But here, by myself, alone, I feel nothing but misery.

I stand and turn back toward Earth. It is beautiful from here. I launch off the Moon and head back to Metropolis. I need a shower and a change of clothes. And maybe to just shut off my hearing for the rest of the day. Although I shouldn't, I feel physically tired, but I know Mr. Olsen will expect the story on the tsunami turned in before deadline. When is that? I look at the sun beginning to drop lower in the sky as I fly over Metropolis toward my apartment. I don't have long.

I descend rapidly, and in under a minute, I shower and change. It's not until I'm on my way back out the door that I sense him. I turn abruptly toward the kitchen. The short, older gentleman stands facing me, a troubled look on his face. His characteristic bowler hat and spectacles are slightly askew, and he opens his mouth to speak.

“Ah, Mr. Kent, so sorry to barge in like this,” he apologizes. He moves a step closer to me and clasps his hands in front of him as he regards me for a moment.

I push my glasses up onto my nose and shove my hands into my pockets. Every time he shows up, things get weird. I don’t know if I have the energy for it today. In fact, I almost turn back around and take off. Let him catch up with me at the Planet after I’ve finished my story. Not ambush me inside my home. And he doesn’t particularly look like he has good news for me. I sigh.

“Mr. Wells,” I say simply. I can’t say “*Good to see you,*” or “*No problem, you’re welcome at my home anytime,*” because, well, I try not to lie. He seems to sense my hesitation, and he looks down and mumbles something under his breath that even I can’t understand.

Last time he’d shown up at my door — at least then he’d had the courtesy to knock — he’d taken me to an alternate dimension — to her dimension. I had pretended to be her Clark and her Superman for a couple days while we saved the world from the evil criminal Tempus, who had banished the other Clark to a nanosecond in time by tricking him into a time window and then causing it to explode. Yeah, sounds crazy, I know. So I’m understandably a bit skeptical about why H.G. Wells is now standing in my kitchen. And yep, he’s H.G. Wells, the dead fiction writer. Only he’s not really dead. And his stories on time travel are not entirely fictional.

I rub the back of my neck.

“Right, yes, Mr. Kent, I need to speak with you, and it is urgent, I’m afraid.”

“It always is,” I reply defeatedly. I immediately feel guilty. He must have a good reason to be here. And I do owe him a lot. After all, if not for Wells, I would have never met her. And I would never have become Superman; I would still be hiding my true self from the world. And I would probably be married to Lana — I shudder and shake my head to push away the thought. I remember my manners and start toward the kitchen. “Sorry, Mr. Wells. It’s been a long day. Please sit. Would you like some tea?”

“Tea, yes, quite. Thank you, my boy.”

He shifts around the kitchen a bit while I prepare the tea. I use my heat vision to boil the water — it is faster than using the stove, and Wells seems like he’s as uncomfortable as I am. As the tea steeps, I motion for him to have a seat at the table. He fidgets for a moment, again muttering to himself, but finally acquiesces. Even for him, this behavior is odd. I find myself clenching my jaw. When the tea is ready, I hand him his cup, offer him milk and honey, and take my own seat across from him at the table. He sips the tea cautiously, staring off somewhere into the distance.

“Mr. Wells, I don’t want to be rude, but you said it’s urgent. Why are you here?”

He starts at the sound of my voice.

“Right, yes. Well,” he says noncommittally. He sets down his cup and gets that sort of mysterious look in his eye, like he knows I will have trouble believing what he’s going to say. But the troubled look from earlier still clouds his face. “Mr. Kent, I have two things to tell you. The first, well, it’s unfortunately very sad news, and, well, I…”

His hesitation is enough for me to know that his news must be about her. Maybe not *her* her. Maybe *my* her. I tighten my hands on my cup to keep them from trembling.

“Did you find her?” I ask simply. I know the answer already. But he confirms it.

“I did.” His tone is sorrowful now, and I feel my stomach lurch. He continues. “As we knew, the Lois Lane of your world disappeared on assignment in the Congo in 1993. Even with my time machine, it was difficult to follow her.” He pauses and takes another sip of his tea. I study the wood grain of the table, unable to look at him. I force myself to take deep breaths as he continues. “She arrived at her destination and began her work with gusto, as one would expect from any iteration of Lois Lane. But she soon became quite ill, and she took refuge at a mission outside of Bolobo. I met and spoke with her, Clark. And it was not an acute illness. You see, she had been diagnosed with advanced pancreatic cancer months before she left for the Congo. She kept this diagnosis a secret from everyone. When she became ill, she chose to stay there at the mission rather than return home. She thought it would be easier on her friends and family. She passed away on November 15, 1993.”

I feel as though someone punched me in the gut with a kryptonite-coated battering ram, and the world spins around me.

She is dead.

My Lois Lane is dead.

It is strange that I feel this way because I’ve never actually met her. The Lois Lane from my world that is. My chest constricts, and I stand suddenly, needing to move.

“I’m so sorry, my boy. I wish I had better news for you.”

His voice sounds far away, though I’m still standing only a few feet from him. I exhale carefully. No need to knock my apartment building down with an uncontrolled breath. I nod and sit back down.

“Th-thank you for finding her,” I manage. My voice sounds hoarse. I’m not sure if I can breathe. And I don’t know what else to say.

“Well, my boy, that’s not all. I have news from another dimension as well.”

I look up at him sharply. “Please don’t tell me —”

“No, not *that* dimension,” he interrupts, probably seeing the panic in my eyes. “Another different dimension. You see, I’ve been visiting other worlds to study how minor events can cause major fluctuations in outcomes hundreds of years in the future.”

My gaze shifts back to the table. There is a small scratch in the wood just under my thumb. I rub it absently. He takes another sip of his tea and continues.

“Most dimensions I’ve visited are versions very similar to the other Lois and Clark’s world. There is Superman, and Lois and Clark are married and generally living a happy life. And Utopia exists just as I have experienced it at its best — a world free of crime, poverty, and war, a truly ideal world.”

I hold back a sneer. I’m always the outlier. An abomination, even in the multiverse of infinite possibilities.

“But I encountered something very peculiar, you see, when I visited one of these worlds. The timeline for the whole world was shifted back maybe a year or so. And the Clark of that universe, well, he had been gone from Earth for three months to help the Kryptonians on New Krypton. However, Zara and Ching returned alone.”

I look up from the table. “Uh, I’m sorry, what? Zara and Ching? More Kryptonians? I thought I was the last one.”

“Oh, dear, you’re right. Yet another difference with this world of yours, my boy. You see, in the other Lois and Clark’s universe, and most other ones I have visited, before the planet Krypton exploded, a fleet of several thousand or so Kryptonians was sent to colonize a different planet, which they called New Krypton. They grew and thrived there, despite the harsh landscape. However, when an evil lord named Nor attempted a coup, two of the Kryptonian nobility, Zara and Ching, sought out Kal-El — Clark — for his help because he — you — were the rightful ruler of the Kryptonian people.”

I feel a headache coming on. Thankfully, Wells doesn’t give me much time to process all of this.

“So, on this alternate Earth I visited,” he continues, “Zara and Ching had just returned to Lois with dreadful news that Kal-El had been killed in the final battle against Lord Nor.”

I definitely have a headache now. I remove my glasses and rub my eyes.

“You’re saying my doppelganger in another dimension is dead, and he died fighting an evil Kryptonian lord on a planet called New Krypton, which doesn’t even exist here, in my universe. Did I get that right?”

“Quite, yes.”

I feel light-headed, and a sudden rush of pain to my gut leaves me breathless. I close my eyes, but they are quickly

open again. A dark red sun gleams in the distance, setting over a tall, barren mountain range. Wind blows dust into my eyes, and I reach up to shield them. My hand is dark and wet. Is that blood? I keel over as pain courses through me. I am on my knees, I notice, and my hands fall to the hard rock beneath me. I cough and taste blood in my mouth. A tall, thin man in all black armor stands in front of me. He laughs, I think; it is difficult to hear over the roar of the wind. He pulls me to my feet and holds me upright as I sway nauseously. I look down momentarily. My left hand grips my side, where a dark red stain grows on my tunic. A black blade slick with blood presses against my chest, and I raise my eyes to the man’s defiantly, ignoring the numbness spreading into my chest from my left arm. I hear his voice over the wind now, dripping with hate and revulsion. “*Nice try, Kal, but now, you die.*” As his blade pushes into my chest, my right hand flies to my belt, and I unsheathe a short dagger from a hidden scabbard. It momentarily glows with a blinding white light and pulses with a sort of supernatural power, and I use the last of my energy to thrust the blade deep into his neck. We fall to the ground together, his sword lodging into my chest. I feel no pain anymore. Everything is numb. My vision blurs. A thought embeds itself in my head. “*Take care of her for me.*” It is my voice, but not *my* voice. Everything goes dark.

My eyes fly open. I am back in my apartment, and I jump up from my seat at the table, sending my chair crashing into the wall behind me.

“What — what was that? What d-did you do to me?” I hear the fear in my own voice. I grab my chest with shaking hands, but my shirt is clean and dry, and there is no blood on my hands. I swallow hard, and my heart pounds in my chest. On the other side of the table, Wells looks as taken aback and confused as I am. “I — I had a vision,” I explain quickly. I hold his gaze for a moment before turning away from him and running my hand through my hair. “I think I just saw his death.”

“Oh, my.”

I start pacing. “*Take care of her for me.*” The message echoes in my head. The final request of a man who knows he is dying and whose only concern is that the love of his life is protected. I feel the words now more than hear them. And with certainty, I know he is speaking directly to me. Somehow. I stop and turn back toward Wells. He sits, sipping his tea, his eyes wide and thoughtful.

“I did — see his death. Just now, I mean.” My voice is quiet. I bite my lip uneasily and blink several times. My breathing is steadier now, but I can still feel the point of the lethal black blade pressing into my chest. “I — uh... His Lois — is she okay? He was...um, his last thought was of her.”

Wells furrows his brow for a moment and drums his fingers on the table. He seems to be studying me intently.

An image of a beautiful face — hers, but not as I've ever known it — flashes in my mind. Her smile is bright and carefree, and her long dark hair drapes down around her shoulders, curling softly at the ends. Her deep brown eyes meet mine, and my heart stops. I feel his love for her, stronger than any emotion I've ever felt before. The air is sucked out of my lungs again.

"Wells, please tell me she is okay," I beg.

"Oh, sorry, yes, my boy." He nods quickly. "When I met with her, she was in good health and unharmed, although quite distraught, understandably."

Relief washes over me, and I cross my arms over my chest and close my eyes.

"However," he says hesitantly, the word sticking to his tongue, "this brings me to the real reason I am here, Clark. You see, this Lois — her world is on the brink of destruction." I open my eyes and meet his gaze. He is troubled again, worry lines appearing on his forehead and in the wrinkles around his eyes. "When Superman left three months ago, the world quickly fell into chaos. Hope was lost around the globe. Alliances that had been steady and strong for decades began to fall apart. I fear nuclear war may be imminent. And Utopia — it has disappeared from the future."

He raises his chin slightly toward me, and I understand what he wants. I absently wonder if he has any other Clarks like me, whom he transports around the multiverse whenever a problem needs fixing. But the image of her face, filled with life and promise, flickers in my mind again, and with a sigh, I resign myself to being Wells's personal multidimensional handyman.

"How long will I need to be gone this time?" I ask. My arms fall down to my sides, and I feel my shoulders tense. This doesn't seem like a short-term commitment. Wells frowns, confirming my suspicion.

"My boy, what would you say if I proposed that you don't come back?"

Chapter 4

The sun is down just below the horizon now. I hover in the sky over the Daily Planet, hesitating as I scan the building. Deadline is rapidly approaching, and reporters scramble to finish their stories as Mr. Olsen pops his head out from his office.

"Anyone seen Kent?" he yells with annoyance, his voice carrying across the room.

I flinch at his tone. A few reporters risk a glance over to my empty desk, but no one responds, and Mr. Olsen shakes his head and sulks back into his office, the door slamming behind him. He is missing my write-up of the tsunami

incident, I know, and I silently curse Wells's timing. He couldn't have waited until after I'd finished work for the day to show up out of the blue and ask me to go on an interdimensional adventure. Nope, that would have made my life easier. And nothing ever happens to make my life easier. In fact, things are about to get even more complicated.

I sigh and scan the newsroom one more time. Mr. Olsen is on the phone now. My cell buzzes in the pocket of my suit, and I realize he's calling me. I hit a button to silence the call and groan inwardly. No more delays from the safety of five hundred feet in the air.

I dive down decisively, spin out of the suit as I wind through the stairwell, and exit on the third floor, a gust of hot air following behind me. Not the subtle entrance I usually try to make, but I'm in a hurry. I ignore the pointed whispers and uneasy looks from my colleagues and jog over to my desk, adjusting my glasses as I go. I keep my head down as I switch my monitor on and sit, my fingers already flying across the keyboard. I'm not typing at a normal speed right now. In fact, I can barely keep myself from going too fast and frying the computer. I pause a moment as I hear Mr. Olsen's voice, and I look up.

"Kent, am I going to have that story on the tsunami in the next two minutes or do I need to fill the page with something else?" he asks. Direct and to the point, as always. The question hangs in the air for a millisecond as I freeze, my fingers stilled on my keyboard. The whole newsroom has turned and is looking at me. I scan the room without moving my head, and movement and sounds return abruptly as everyone suddenly pretends that they have things to do. Watch out, the alien has laser eyes. I swallow.

"In your inbox in thirty seconds, sir," I reply respectfully, lowering my eyes back to my computer monitor and resuming my rapid typing.

I wish I had more time to do this story justice. But it will go to print without additional details exploring infrastructure upgrades that may prevent future devastation from similar natural disasters or a more in-depth commentary on the Japanese government's lack of prompt response to the disaster. I finish and send the story to Mr. Olsen with a minute to spare before deadline. I stare at the headline on my screen. Superman Assists With Rescue Efforts After Tsunami Hits Southern Japanese Coast, by Clark Kent. Possibly my last headline here, at this Daily Planet, in this universe.

The thought is sobering. I reach forward and turn off my computer and monitor. I need to speak with Mr. Olsen to let him know I will be gone for...a while. But I'd prefer to have more privacy. Mr. Olsen can get enthusiastic...and loud. I don't really have any personal belongings at my

desk, but I tidy up a bit and prepare a couple handwritten notes as I wait for the newsroom to clear out. When I am finished, I glance at the clock on the wall over the elevators. 6:57 p.m. Wells will be back at my apartment to get me at 8 p.m., assuming his rendezvous with *her* goes as planned. That is not much time to organize my life for an indefinite absence.

In our discussion earlier, Wells told me that my world has become stable; my presence as Superman has given hope and courage to the people of my Earth. He promised that even if I leave tonight, as we are planning, my world will survive and thrive without me. There is no Utopia on my Earth, because there is no Lois Lane to help me build it, but there is general peace and prosperity. And that will not change at this point. However, for whatever reason, in her world, the world of this new Lois Lane, with her long dark hair and beautiful deep brown eyes and dazzling smile, Superman's presence is still needed; peace is tenuous. Wells explained that her Clark, her Superman was more than just a colorfully clad superhero who flew around and saved lives. He'd both shaped the goodness of her world and held it together. And his absence was immediately met by increased crime, skirmishes breaking out at borders between counties worldwide, and threats of violence and nuclear bombings from Russia, Iran, and North Korea. Wells says my presence — yes, just my presence as Superman — will help heal her world and set it back on the right path.

"*But what does Lois think?*" I had asked. Certainly, I could not just show up on her Earth the day after she'd been told her Clark was dead. He had twiddled his thumbs almost nervously before admitting that she had first screamed at him, threatened to call the police, told him he was crazy, and nearly killed him by throwing a flower vase at his head. She'd then collapsed crying on her couch and begged him to explain it all to her again — time travel, interdimensional voyages, Utopia — all of it. She'd reluctantly agreed to allow Wells to come and talk to me. And right about now, he should be meeting with her and telling her how I'd not-so-reluctantly agreed to leave my home and step in as her world's Superman. Perhaps permanently.

I swallow hard and close my eyes for a moment, focusing my hearing outside the building. I want to remember this city, which has been my home for several years now. Its sounds fill my ears. People walking, driving, talking, eating. Cars idling in evening traffic. Horns honking. Pigeons settling into their nests under an overpass near Centennial Park. Leaves falling from a tree and landing on the damp grass. I hear the man who slept on the bench this morning, his wet orange quilt pulled over him; he hums quietly as he tosses bits of bread to the ducks in

the pond. The ducks flap their wings indignantly as they quarrel over the last morsel.

A police siren cuts in, drowning out the other sounds. "*Bank robbery in progress. Metropolis Credit Union at 10th and Simons. All units respond.*" I decide the police can handle it. I will stay and wait for Mr. Olsen to be available.

I open my eyes and scan the room. Most of my colleagues have finished up their work for the day, and the newsroom is now quiet. Mr. Olsen sits at his desk, scowling as he talks animatedly on his phone. I don't listen in on his conversation, but I stand, take a deep breath, and then slowly walk across the newsroom. Mr. Olsen hangs up the phone just before I reach his office. He settles back in his plush chair and waves me in as he notices me.

"Kent, did you need something?"

My jaw tightens as I hear the nuance in his question. I see him shift a bit uncomfortably. I lower my eyes for a moment as I remember how he used to treat me — how they all used to treat me — before Tempus had exposed my secret and tried to convince the world that I was part of an alien invasion and intent on ruling the world. Yes, the same Tempus who banished the other Clark into a time window. Before all that, before Tempus and Wells and time travel and universe hopping, they used to see me just as another person. No different from them. They would actually look at me, hold eye contact, smile, converse. Now, my presence is met with uneasiness, discomfort, apprehension. Mr. Olsen is not scared of me, I know. But he is not at ease when I'm around. None of them are. Although Tempus didn't succeed in turning the world against me, he planted just enough doubt in their minds. I breathe out and step into Mr. Olsen's office.

"Yessir, actually, I needed to speak with you for a moment, if you have time," I say, my tone formal. He nods and motions to a chair opposite him on my side of the desk. I don't move to sit. "This won't take long. I just have to tell you that I'm going to need to take an extended leave of absence."

He looks up at me sharply, confusion plastered over his otherwise boyish features. "I don't understand, Kent. An extended leave of absence? Aren't you already absent enough?"

The question stings, and I look away as I stuff my hands into my pockets. It's true that I haven't been the best employee. I miss meetings, like this morning, and my writing has suffered as I focus more on my superhero duties and less on the investigative part of investigative journalism. But I know I am a decent writer. And I used to have more time and dedication to show that. I also used to have the support of my boss and colleagues. I look back up at him with resolve.

“That is not a fair comment, sir. You know that I am here when I can be, and I’m out making the news that sells your papers when I’m not here.” In a rare moment of assertiveness, I allow myself to sound more like Superman than Clark, and I see Mr. Olsen’s eyes widen in response. I continue, choosing my words carefully. “I have an emergency I must attend to that is not on this Earth, and I am not sure how long I will be gone. I have to leave immediately. I hope you can give this letter to Perry White for me and perhaps publish this short statement on my behalf.”

I reach into the pocket of my coat and pull out two plain white envelopes — one addressed to Perry White, the former Editor-in-Chief of the Daily Planet, and the other inscribed with the words “Statement on Leave of Absence”.

Mr. Olsen tentatively takes the envelopes from me, his eyes lowering briefly. He nods, staring at my writing on the outside of the second envelope.

“Um, yes, of course, Kent, I can...” His voice trails off, and he looks back up at me. I see he is nervous to pry, but also intensely curious and somewhat worried. “Did you say ‘not on this Earth’? Where are you going?”

I shake my head. “I can’t say, sir. But my presence is urgently needed there.”

I pause but do not break eye contact. Does he deserve any more of an explanation? I honestly am not sure. He’s given me so much flak in the last two years, but at least he didn’t let them fire me. I know he fought to keep me on payroll, even when everyone on the board of directors argued against it. But no, I decide, he is too much of a pragmatist; telling him I’m heading to a different universe in which my doppelganger was killed fighting an evil warlord on a distant planet might just be too much for him to comprehend. Instead, I reach out and offer my hand to him, a final handshake goodbye. He stands, but doesn’t reciprocate the gesture. I’m disappointed, but not surprised, and I frown slightly, nod, and then turn toward the door. My back to him, I add, “Thank you for all the opportunities you’ve given me, sir. I truly appreciate it. Goodnight.”

I don’t wait for him to respond. I shove my hands back in my pockets and head out of his office and to the stairwell. Not bothering to change into the suit, I fly up and out of the building. Hovering a hundred feet above the city, I close my eyes. Wells said Clark Kent’s identity is a secret on this new Earth. And Martha and Jonathan Kent are still alive. And Perry White is still Editor-in-Chief of the Daily Planet. And her — she’s there. Even if her feelings for her Clark will never allow us to have a relationship, I will get to see her and talk to her and spend time with her.

And maybe people will treat me like less of an outsider.

Maybe I will have a chance at being happy. I certainly don’t have that here.

I’m almost scared to hope.

I swallow nervously and open my eyes. The bright lights of the city flicker below me. I stare at it one final time before hurrying home to pack.

Chapter 5

“Ready, my boy?”

We stand together in the middle of my living room, and Wells gives me a sideways smile as I shoulder my duffle bag. It is filled with clothes, spare Superman suits, toiletries, and the few possessions I can’t stand to leave behind — some books, photographs, and my journal. But it feels woefully inadequate for the journey ahead. I nod tightly, and Wells mutters a quick “Quite, yes, well, here we go,” and pushes a button on the gadget in his hand.

Instantly everything goes black — the darkest pitch black imaginable. I almost feel the molecules of my body dissolving into the empty void. Then, sudden light fills the empty space, shifting across the color spectrum as though we are passing through a rainbow. Everything is bathed first in red, then yellow, green, blue, and violet. With a final white flash, which probably should blind me but miraculously does not, the living room rematerializes around us.

It is the same room. But also distinctly different. The walls are a brighter color, and the couch sits at a slightly different angle. An abstract art piece with geometric patterns in vivid purple, green, and blue adorns one wall, and the bookcase holds many unfamiliar titles, with a clear slant toward nonfiction travel books written in various languages. Several journalism awards — Kerthys and even a Pulitzer — sit on a shelf in the bookcase. And framed photographs are placed on the side table next to the couch and on a brick mantle — photographs of a man who looks exactly like me, but whose smile reaches his eyes.

I hear a small noise, almost like a squeak, from the kitchen, and I sense her presence for the first time.

“Take care of her for me.”

The statement is only an echo in my mind now, but I can almost feel his raw emotion. He never wanted to leave her, and he regretted the decision every day. I force a neutral expression on my face as I turn toward the sound.

My breath catches in my throat. Lois. She is just as I pictured her — or rather, just as he let me see her. Beautiful does not begin to describe her. Her long brown hair is pulled back into a low ponytail, and her eyes, which shift anxiously from me to Wells and back again, are deep and intelligent. Her gaze meets mine for a brief moment, and she shakes her head as fresh tears stream down her cheeks. She covers her face with her hands and sits down

heavily in a chair at the table. An overwhelming need to comfort her tugs at me, and I open my mouth to speak. However, Wells clears his throat softly, and I understand his unspoken words. *Give her a minute.*

Quietly, I set my duffle bag down next to the coffee table and pick up a framed photograph of them. Clark Kent and Lois Lane. I've seen a similar photo before, I realize, in the other Lois's wallet when she first visited my world. She is hanging on his arm, one hand resting on his chest, and she looks up at him with pure adoration and a bright smile; he is laughing, his smile matching hers. The moment captured in the photo is beautiful — so full of love — I feel almost like an intruder just looking at it. I carefully place the photo back onto the side table and turn toward the kitchen again.

She watches me with bleary eyes full of sadness. For a moment, as our eyes meet, I see all of her emotions. I realize she is no longer the woman in the photograph — no longer the woman he showed me. That woman is gone, lost to grief the moment he died. I swallow hard and lower my eyes briefly. The intensity is too much.

Wells clears his throat, more loudly this time, and steps toward her. I glance up at him and then back to her. She is still studying me. Her troubled, penetrating eyes don't leave mine as Wells speaks.

"Ms. Lane, I do understand this is a difficult situation, but please, let me introduce you to Mr. Clark Kent."

Her eyes close, and I can tell she is fighting not to start crying again. My throat feels dry, and I stuff my hands in my pockets to hide their shaking.

"I'm glad to meet you, Lois," I say quietly.

I hear her heart rate increase, and she looks up at me again. She reaches up and wipes the tears from her cheeks, then stands, wrapping her arms around herself almost protectively. Without losing eye contact, she deliberately closes the distance between us, stopping about two feet in front of me, and I hold my breath and my shoulders tense as she studies me. She smells of strawberries and chocolate; I file this information away in the back of my mind.

When she speaks, her voice is calm and clear. "You look so much like him. But you're not him, are you?"

It is a rhetorical question, I know, so I say nothing. She looks like she wants to reach out and touch me, to see if I'm real, but instead, she lowers her eyes and turns back to the kitchen.

"Yes, quite. Well, I'm sure you two have a lot to talk about now, so I should probably be going back to my own travels," Wells states. He straightens his glasses and shifts uncomfortably. "As I proposed, I will stop back in one week from now, and we shall see if this arrangement will work out. Is that quite all right, Clark, my boy?"

"Yessir," I agree.

From the kitchen, Lois snuffles and turns to face Wells. He tips his hat to her, and she nods slightly.

"Thank you, Mr. Wells," she says softly.

"You're quite welcome, Ms. Lane. I know he's not your Clark, but he's a good man. I think you will see what I mean."

I feel my cheeks heat up, and I look away, pretending to study the books in the bookcase again.

"Right, well, off I go then."

I hear him push the button on his interdimensional transport device, and the sound is followed a millisecond later by a small pop.

And Lois Lane and I are alone.

I swallow hard and turn back to the kitchen. She is standing over the sink, her hands gripping the granite countertop. I notice for the first time several items piled on the kitchen table, and I cautiously move closer to take a look. Three notebooks, closed and wrapped tightly together with a black cord, sit next to a set of keys, a black leather wallet, and a modest cell phone. A laptop bag hangs on the chair closest to me. His stuff, I realize.

Lois hears me approach, and she spins around sharply, her eyes meeting mine.

"Is this...?" My voice trails off. I'm not sure of the right words. "*Are these things his, but since he's dead and I'm here to pretend to be him, are you giving them to me?*" just sounds a bit callous. She seems to understand my hesitation, though, and she nods and clears her throat.

"Yes, um," she answers. She steps over to the table and motions for me to sit. I oblige. "I'm sorry, this is a lot to take in, I'm sure you know."

"I understand," I respond quietly. "And I want you to know that — that I'm only here to help. I —"

"I know," she cuts in. She spreads her palms out on the table and takes a deep breath. "And I really appreciate you dropping everything to come here for me — for my Earth. I only hope Mr. Wells is right and that you can help set things right again here."

She looks up at me, and I see a fire in her eyes.

"I will do my best, Lois," I promise.

She nods and lowers her eyes again. Her fingers absently reach out and caress the soft leather of his wallet. Her hands are shaking, I notice. Again, the overwhelming urge to comfort her hits me.

"Tea — maybe, can I make you some tea?" I ask abruptly. "Assuming there is some here, and you like tea, of course," I add.

"I do like tea. Tea would be great," she answers, her fingers stilling on the wallet. She gives me a half-hearted smile, a tiny morsel. I want more. But I know it will take time.

“Great.”

I stand up and make my way around the edge of the table to the cupboards. A wide selection of different teas, many apparently imported from various Asian countries, is stashed in one cupboard, and I pick out an appropriate calming blend of Oolong and chamomile. I easily find the coffee mugs, and, as I had earlier that day, I fill both mugs with water and use my heat vision to bring the water to a boil. I add the tea bags to steep, and when they are done, I set one of the mugs in front of her.

“Milk or sugar or honey, maybe?”

She shakes her head. “No, I drink mine plain.”

“Me too,” I admit.

She looks a bit surprised, but I don’t pry. He probably had a different preference, I suppose. I sit back down across from her at the table and take a sip from my mug. The flavor is stronger than I’m used to, and I savor it as I take a second sip. She takes a cautious sip as well. Her eyes close for a moment, and I see she is holding back tears again. When she opens her eyes, she manages another small smile. My heart skips a beat. *Careful, Kent, she is not yours.*

“He made this same tea for me the night before he left for New Krypton,” she explains. A wistful sigh escapes her lips, and I wait for her to continue. “He said that both teas help with relaxation and that combining them made the effects stronger.”

I nod in agreement and take another sip. “Can you... tell me about him?” I venture softly.

Her brow furrows. Maybe it is too soon. But she surprises me by nodding weakly. Her eyes meet mine, and she hesitates for a second.

“He was the strongest man I’ve ever known,” she starts, her voice wavering. “And I don’t mean how much he could bench press.”

Another hint of a smile. I’ll take it.

“He was kind and honest, and he loved everything about life. He loved reading and traveling and writing.” She lets out a sad laugh and wipes a tear off her cheek. “I never told him this, because I’d never admit it, but he was a better writer than me. By far.”

I smile at her admission and take another sip of my tea. Her eyes are still sad, but I see a brilliant light in them when she talks about him. She laughs again.

“When he was nominated for the Pulitzer,” she motions vaguely toward the living room, where I’d seen his awards on the bookshelf, “I almost lost it. I couldn’t believe he had been nominated — he’d only been at the Planet for six months.”

“What was the story about? The one that got him nominated, that is,” I ask.

“It was, um —” She takes a shaky breath and closes her eyes a moment. “It was a series of articles he wrote exposing the unfair treatment of sexual assault victims at major universities around the country.”

Oh wow. Heavy stuff. I suck in a sharp breath. I haven’t written stories like that in years now, not since Superman arrived.

“Yeah, he later told me that those articles were the toughest he’d ever written. They were...heartbreaking. He has a portfolio somewhere, if you’re interested.”

She stands up stiffly and hurries into the living room, where she rifles through a few drawers before returning with a thick white folder stuffed with newspaper clippings. She hands me the folder.

“I think the Pulitzer stories are marked with the yellow tabs there.” She points to a yellow label sticking out the top of the folder.

I set the folder on the table and nod.

“I’ll read it all. Later tonight, or maybe tomorrow, I think.”

Lois moves back to her side of the table and settles back down. Her movements are still stiff, but she seems slightly less tense. She takes a long sip of her tea and then eyes all of the other items sitting on the table.

“I think, um, we should talk about —”

My superhearing kicks in as a bank alarm blares several miles away. “*Bank robbery in progress. Metropolis Credit Union at 10th and Simons. All units respond.*” Odd. The same robbery happened in my world several hours prior. I notice she has stopped talking and is watching me expectantly. I frown and adjust my glasses.

“Sorry, w-what — we should talk about what?” I stammer.

“It’s not bad, is it?” Her voice is tinged with concern.

“What, the uh — no, it’s j-just a bank alarm. It’s nothing. The police can handle it, I’m sure.”

She nods, almost with relief. “Oh, good.” My confusion must be evident because she adds, “Earlier today, there was a plane crash. Everyone on board died. He could have — you could have...” She doesn’t finish the sentence. I swallow hard and feel slightly nauseous.

“Flight 315 from Los Angeles? One hundred seventy-eight passengers and flight crew, including twelve children?”

She exhales and nods again. “Did you...?” Again, she doesn’t finish her sentence. But I understand.

“Yes, in my world. It happened this morning, at about 11 a.m. I landed the plane safely and no one was injured.”

“Good,” she says simply. Her hands close around her coffee cup. “And that’s why we should talk about how to, um, bring Clark and Superman home, so to speak.”

“Right,” I agree. Her heart rate increases noticeably, and I barely suppress the urge to reach out and take her hand. Her expression saddens even more.

“Did Mr. Wells tell you our cover story?” When I shake my head, she continues. “It was Clark’s idea — he thought it would make life easier for me. Um, we told everyone that Clark — that he would be going with Superman and the Kryptonians to New Krypton and then report on the journey when he — when he returned.” Her voice breaks, and she reaches up to cover her mouth as she fights back a sob. “S-sorry, I just —”

“Please, Lois, you don’t have to apologize.”

She takes a shaky breath.

“I, um, I convinced Perry — Perry White, do you know him?”

“Yes, he is the Mayor of Metropolis on my world, but he used to be the Editor-in-Chief at the Planet.”

“He is still the Editor-in-Chief here.”

Her voice is steadier now, and she meets my eyes. I am lost for a moment in their depths, and I have to again remind myself that she is not mine. She is his. Even in death. “*Take care of her for me.*”

“So, I convinced Perry to keep Clark on the Planet’s payroll, with the promise that he’d give the Planet the exclusive story when he returned,” she explains, her fingers now tapping anxiously on the table.

“That was a good idea,” I say with a quiet smile.

“Yeah, I thought so. Anyway, I, uh, figured that you could, um...” Her voice trails off, and she pushes aside her coffee cup and picks up the three bound journals. With a deep sigh, as though letting go of him again, she slides the journals across the table toward me.

Tentatively, I reach out and accept her offering. Each journal is a thick black leather-bound book, well used. I carefully untie the cord holding them together and glance up at her before opening the cover of the journal on the top of the pile. Neat handwriting, though quite distinct from my own, fills the page. I skim the words, but don’t start reading. My fingers trace down the page, and I am suddenly somewhere else — a small, sterile room, all white, with a small white desk and no windows. A quiet, steady hum reverberates throughout the room. I sit at the desk and lift a pen in my shaky hand. I open the journal in front of me. The blank page stares back at me, and I start writing. “*Day 1. We are already light-years away from Earth. They say we will arrive on New Krypton in the equivalent of about three more Earth days...*”

I blink, and I am back at the table in his kitchen, sitting across from Lois. My hand still rests on the first page of the journal. I look up at her sharply. She is watching me with a curious look.

“He was left-handed,” I blurt out, surprising myself as much as her.

“Well, yes... You aren’t?”

I shake my head, and my eyes move back to the journal page. The first sentence jumps out at me. “*Day 1. We are already light-years away from Earth.*” Just like in my vision. I shake my head in disbelief. The visions are real.

“Oh, well, that’s kinda...”

“Weird?” I finish for her. I glance up at her with a tight smile, and she nods. “So, uh, he kept these journals while he was gone? And the other Kryptonians — Zara and Ching — returned them to you yesterday?”

“Yeah, yes, that’s — yeah. I thought...”

She is so tired. Her eyes flutter closed for a moment and then open again. I lower my eyes back to the journal and flip through the pages. Every page is filled with text and drawings and strange characters — maybe the Kryptonian language.

“You thought I could use these journals to write the ‘Superman Returns’ exclusive for the Planet, which will announce his return and allow me to take up Superman’s duties,” I deduce.

I close the first journal and pick up the next one cautiously. I hope this one won’t give me another vision. At least not right now. It is disconcerting, and I’d rather she not be watching me as I am given odd bits of insight into the final months of her fiancé’s life. Thankfully, I stay present in the moment. The first entry in this journal is dated “*Day 28*” and starts with several lines of carefully written Kryptonian characters. I squint at the page for a moment as a deep memory tugs at me, and I suddenly understand the writing. My fingers follow along with the strange characters on the page, and I read out loud slowly.

“Kal-El visited the front lines for the first time today. The war is brutal, and Lord Nor continues to push us back toward the capital city of El-Vandar...” I stop reading, and I realize I am shaking.

“Y-you can read that language?” she asks reluctantly. I raise my eyes to meet hers.

“I guess so,” I answer uneasily. I close the journal. “I’ve never seen it before though...”

Silence fills the room for several minutes. Finally, she stands and moves to place her now empty mug into the dishwasher. She turns back to me.

“So, um, do you think you can write the story?”

I raise my chin slightly to try to look confident, and I nod. “Yes, I can. I will get it done tonight. Or, by tomorrow morning, I mean.”

She looks surprised again, but she doesn’t respond. Instead, she steps closer to me and lifts the laptop bag from where it hangs on my chair. I watch her work as she removes the computer from its case, sets it gently on the

table, and pushes the power button. The battery is drained, so she pulls out the power cord and plugs it into an outlet on the wall nearby. Within a moment, the computer has powered up, and she types in his password — a series of seemingly random numbers and letters. I commit the password to memory as she pushes the laptop toward me.

“I’ll, uh, just write down his password for you, although you can change it, of course, if you want,” she mumbles, turning to look for a notepad and pen.

“Oh, you don’t have to write it down, I got it,” I explain. I reach toward the computer and open up a blank document.

“You — you remember that password that I just entered?” The disbelief in her voice makes me smile.

“Well, yeah. Is that — did he —”

“He had a terrible memory for things like that — numbers and dates,” she confirms with a feeble laugh. “He keeps — I mean, there is a file on his — on the laptop that lists all of his passwords and pin numbers. I think he would have forgotten his own birthday if his parents had let him.”

The slight smile on her lips fades abruptly, and all the color drains from her face.

“Oh, God, his parents. I haven’t — I — they don’t know.” Her voice cracks, and she buries her head in her hands as fresh tears wet her cheeks. “I should call them. Oh, God, poor Martha —”

I stand and move toward her as she sobs again. I know it’s not my place, but I can’t help myself. I wrap my arms around her gently and pull her into an unassuming hug. Just a hug. A friendly, comforting hug. To my relief, she doesn’t yell and scream and push me away. Instead, she melts into my arms and cries, her hands gripping my T-shirt as she shakes. I rest my head on top of hers and murmur “Shh,” and I try, unsuccessfully, to ignore the wonderful feeling of holding her in my arms while she clings to me — the warmth, the sense of belonging. It’s been so long since I’ve felt this. But now is not the time or place...

Her sobs gradually subside, and I loosen my arms from around her. She snuffles as she steps away and wipes the tears off her cheeks again.

“Thank you,” she whispers quietly. Her cheeks are red with embarrassment, and I lower my eyes and move back toward my side of the table.

“You’re welcome.”

I hesitate and glance at the clock on the wall. It is after 10 p.m. Normally, I would be out doing my last scan of the city about now, and all would be quiet this late at night. However, here, in this new world, it is noisy out there — if I allow my hearing to focus outside the apartment, I hear police sirens, gunshots, scuffles, yelling, and screeching

tires. It is difficult to ignore. Hopefully I won’t have to for much longer. I swallow hard and sit back in my chair.

“I, um, don’t know his parents of course, but it’s pretty late. And when I was young, my parents went to bed early... Maybe you can call them first thing tomorrow?”

She doesn’t answer, and I wonder if I made a faux pas with the suggestion. I shift my gaze from my hands to look up at her. Her face has softened, and her eyes hold a kindness and sympathy that I haven’t seen maybe since the first time I met the other Lois. She knows, I realize — she knows that I lost my parents when I was a child. Wells must have told her. Well, at least that is one less thing I have to explain.

“Tomorrow, that’s — yeah, I’ll call them tomorrow,” she agrees.

She dips her head as she tucks a stray strand of hair behind her ear. My stomach flutters, and I lower my eyes as well. *Beautiful. She is beautiful.*

“Well, um, I guess you have a lot of work to do if you’re going to get that story written, and, uh, I-I should probably get home,” she says quietly as she gathers her coat from off the back of her chair. “And I am really tired, so I guess the tea is doing its job.”

There’s that small smile again, which warms me. She struggles slightly with her coat, her hands shaking, and I quickly jump up and move around the table.

“Here, let me help you,” I offer. Her body tenses momentarily, but she allows me to hold the coat for her, and she slips her arms into the sleeves.

“Thank you,” she manages, turning around and crossing her arms protectively over her chest. I step back and nod slightly. Her eyelids flicker closed for a second.

“Lois, please, let me take you home. I don’t think you should be driving right now.” I realize my mistake as soon as the words are out of my mouth — who am I to tell her what she should or shouldn’t be doing? — and I instantly backtrack. “I mean, you seem very tired, and I —”

“It’s okay, Clark. Yes, I would appreciate a ride home. You’re right that I’m too tired to drive.”

I feel one of the protective walls around her start to crumble as she hands me the keys to her car. Does she trust me because she senses I am a good person or because I look and sound like him? Either way, I vow to myself that I will not betray that trust. I will be the person she needs — a friend and a superhero. I will not expect anything more. Although I already know that I am falling in love with her.

She grabs her purse off the counter, and I stuff his wallet into my pocket and follow her out the door.

Chapter 6

She gives me her address, rests her head against the window, and closes her eyes. I'm pretty sure she falls asleep before I've even pulled her black Jeep Grand Cherokee away from the curb. The drive is short, but I am unable to relax. Outside the walls of the apartment, it is more difficult to keep my superhearing in check, and I clench my jaw and stare at the well-lit road ahead of me as I try to block out the harsh noises of this Metropolis. A man is holding up a liquor store down the street, and the store clerk is terrified, her heart racing. Across town, police are in a standoff with a gunman holding his wife and child hostage. And a fire rages at a warehouse down in Hobbs Bay. I resolve again to get the story written by tomorrow morning so Superman can get back into the skies.

Before long, we arrive at her apartment building. A parking spot is conveniently open right near the entrance, and I carefully ease the Jeep into the spot. She doesn't wake as I turn off the car. Her breathing is regular and steady, and her lips are slightly parted in sleep. She seems so peaceful, and I am reluctant to wake her. However, I gently reach over and rest my hand on her shoulder.

"Lois?" She shrugs and mumbles but again does not wake. I squeeze her shoulder softly and raise my voice. "Lois, we're here."

This time, she stirs and sits up, and I pull my hand away.

"Oh, that was a quick drive," she says. Her hands shake as she rubs her eyes and then gathers her purse. "Thank you, Clark."

"You're welcome," I say quietly.

I pull the keys out of the ignition and hand them to her. She stares at them for a minute before shoving them into her pocket, and we step out of the car together. The quiet, tree-lined street is dark except for a single street light illuminating the sidewalk just in front of her building. She locks her car and starts up the steps. She realizes I'm not following her, and she stops and turns around toward me.

"I'll just..." I make a small motion with my hand, which I hope is the universal signal for 'go flying of my own power,' even in her dimension, and give her a small smile. She understands and nods.

"See you in the morning, then."

"Yes. I'll call you when I'm finished with the story," I suggest.

She again nods, which causes her to yawn, and she regards me one final time before turning and heading into the building. I stand in the shadows watching her until she is safely in her apartment with the doors locked behind her, and I then scan the street to ensure no one will see me

before launching myself up into the sky toward his apartment.

Though it is dark, I'm careful as I fly, and I remind myself again that Clark Kent and Superman are two separate people on this Earth. Reflexively, I scan the city, a scowl growing on my face as I see just how bad it is. In addition to what I had heard earlier, I can now see several other incidents that could use Superman's help. There is a huge pile up on the highway involving an overturned tractor trailer and at least five other vehicles. Emergency crews are trying unsuccessfully to extract the truck driver from the overturned cab. Down the road further, at the end of the exit offramp for the downtown district, a man with a gun forces a family out of their vehicle, jumps into the car, and takes off, leaving the mother, father, and young child stranded in the dark. The child is crying and clinging to her mother. And in an alleyway right around the corner from the Daily Planet, a man grabs a woman's purse, shoves her against the wall, and takes off out the alleyway and down the street. I feel heat growing in my eyes and my vision turns slightly red. Then I blink and turn away, knowing I cannot act tonight. It is almost painful.

I reach the apartment — his apartment — and land on the balcony. I am alone for the first time in several hours. And I have a lot of work to do. I let myself in and glance around, studying everything in greater detail than I had before. Not much stands out, except the artwork on the wall, which grabs my attention. I focus my vision on the signature on the lower right corner of the canvas — *Martha Kent*. I smile as I picture my mother as I last knew her. Many of my memories of her faded long ago. But I recall that she loved art and poetry. I remember that she taught an art class at my school on Wednesday afternoons, and all the kids adored her. I wonder if this world's Martha Kent did the same for this world's Clark.

I turn to my task. The journals, laptop, and portfolio still sit at the table, and I quickly formulate a plan. It is going to be a long night, even working at superspeed.

Two minutes later, a fresh cup of coffee in hand, I settle down at the table and read through each journal. The text is detailed, well-written, and sobering. He wrote about Kal-El in the third person, with a clearly practiced air of detachment. Also, he wrote not only for his own benefit — to remember events, traditions, ceremonies, war strategies, places, and people — but also for her. Occasional pages are headed with "*To my love*" rather than a date. His neat handwriting tells of how much he misses her and how determined he is to come home to her as quickly as possible. The messages are not meant for me, but I feel compelled to read them. Then, I again feel as though I have intruded on a private moment between lovers. I close the last journal half way through, after a particularly

heartfelt entry in which Clark explained how he pictured her beautiful smile every time he struggled to get through the challenges he faced.

I reheat my coffee with my heat vision and take a long sip, then open the journal back up, skipping the rest of that entry. As my fingers touch the text on the final page, I feel a dreadful cold sensation spread through my body. I try to pull away, but I can't move. The room around me swirls and dissolves, and I am once again standing in an unfamiliar place, a large broadsword in one hand and some type of laser gun in the other. Wind whips around me, blowing dust into my eyes. In the distance, two twin towers are on fire, and smoke billows into the red sky. Next to me, a man — Lieutenant Ching, I realize — shoulders a large weapon that resembles a machine gun. He turns to me and speaks in a language I should not be able to understand. However, I answer in the same language, and he nods. We turn around. Behind us, our huge army is amassed. I raise my voice and yell a command, thrusting my left arm up into the air toward the burning towers. The army shouts back, and we turn and sprint toward the flames. My lungs burn and my muscles ache with the effort, but we don't stop. There is movement ahead, and the enemy line shudders and erupts with blasts of high-energy lasers and beams of fire as we approach. We continue to forge ahead, straight into the thick of the battle. I swing my sword and fire the gun, striking down enemy soldiers as I continue resolutely toward my goal. Ching remains at my side, and together, we lead our army closer to the burning towers. The wind grows stronger, and I push my way through the masses until I stop atop the flat crest of a hill. Ching shouts a warning from some distance behind me, but I cannot make out his words. The barren rocky surface in front of me spans several miles, but my focus is a man directly ahead of me — a tall, thin man in all black armor. Lord Nor. He is flanked by three guards, but he waves them off and pulls a long black sword from its sheath. It glints in the red sun, which dips lower in the sky, and I feel a shiver of fear run up my spine. He sneers at me and addresses me in perfect English. "*Kal-El, the abomination — the alien. You are not one of us. You don't belong here, Kal. I am the rightful ruler. I know what is right and just for my people. And I will kill you and lead them, as I was born to do.*" He advances with astonishing speed, and I feel his sword cut into my left side as I attempt to dodge the strike.

I inhale sharply and open my eyes to a dimly lit room. I am back at the apartment, sitting at the kitchen table. The pain from the blade still resonates in my side, and I pull my hands away from the journal in alarm.

I don't feel the need to finish reading his final entry. I know the ultimate ending. I close the last journal and move on to his portfolio.

Chapter 7

The next hour is spent studying his writing style, and I realize I have very big shoes to fill. I read through all of the articles in his portfolio, and then I read them all again. Most are stories with his own by-line, but some are shared by-lines with Lois or Perry White. The topics cover local, national, and international news, although he seemed to have been partial to humanitarian-related issues. His writing is meticulous, clear, and sophisticated, with a strong, rich vocabulary that is not overbearing. I find that I agree with Lois; he was a much better writer than I could ever hope to be. But for now, I have to do my best to pretend.

I refill my coffee again and then sit as I mentally outline the article. It will be lengthy and detailed, and I wonder whether Mr. White may need to run it in a special issue. The headline will be simple, I decide. **SUPERMAN RETURNS: An Exclusive Interview And Look At Life On New Krypton**, by Clark Kent. Mr. White may change it, but simple is always a good rule for a headline, and it matches the other Clark's style well.

I take a deep breath and start typing. Definitely not at a normal speed.

I write and write and then delete and rewrite. The article takes on a shape of its own, and I seem to be at its mercy. Occasionally, I get a strong sense that he is guiding my words somehow. Maybe it's because I just spent a substantial amount of time reading his writing, both in the journals and in his portfolio. Or maybe this odd connection he and I share has actually affected and is influencing my writing style. Either way, I am glad for the ease with which the story comes together.

Despite my speed, the article still takes me several hours to write. When I finish, the final article, which is conceptually broken into several subsections, is nearly 15,000 words. The first section, which is the longest, contains an in-depth interview with the Man of Steel and details of the conflict Superman helped to resolve. The next subsections describe various aspects of Kryptonian life — primarily their history, traditions, language, and culture. And the final subsection, which is fairly short but impactful, distinguishes between the philosophies of the people of Earth and the people of New Krypton, with commentaries on the benefits of democracy over aristocracy and the importance of letting humanitarian issues guide political and philanthropic efforts — all topics that he frequently wrote about in the journals.

I reread the article several times, correcting a few typos and grammatical errors, and then, I save the completed file, close the laptop, and settle back into my chair. The enormity of the day's events hits me, and I take my glasses off and rub my eyes wearily. A quick glance at the clock reveals that it is nearly 3 a.m., and I hope maybe I can grab a couple hours of sleep, which should be enough to refresh me.

Leaving my glasses on the table, I stand and move to the sink. I rinse out my coffee mug and put it in the dishwasher and then grab my duffle bag and head into the bedroom. The layout and décor are almost identical to mine, and for a moment, I forget that this is not really my bedroom. I set the duffle bag down on the bed and pull out some sleeping shorts. I then speed through a quick shower, brush my teeth, and collapse onto the bed.

My eyes close, but I don't immediately fall asleep. Instead, I extend my senses out to the city around me. I hear Lois's heartbeat first, steady and strong, and a calming sense of relief fills me knowing that she is sleeping soundly. Reluctantly, I then shift my focus to less comforting sounds — a fight has broken out at a homeless shelter on 17th Avenue in downtown, a television in a neighbor's apartment is reporting on civilian casualties from a NATO-led bombing in Yugoslavia, and breaking news on a local radio station describes the rising death count from a devastating tsunami that hit the southern coast of Japan just hours ago. I squeeze my eyes shut tighter. Then I pull the comforter up around me, bury my head in the pillow, and silence my superhearing. Within minutes, I fall into a dreamless sleep as exhaustion overtakes me.

Chapter 8

I groan as I roll over and glance at the clock on the nightstand next to the bed. 6:30 a.m. Nice to know my internal alarm clock, which never allows me to sleep in past 7, is still working despite my interdimensional travels.

I rub the sleep out of my eyes and sit up. Morning sunlight filters through the window, and I drag myself up out of bed and pad into the kitchen to start a new pot of coffee. As the coffee brews, I step over to the table and tentatively pick up the cell phone Lois had left for me — a well-used Samsung, similar to a phone I'd replaced about a year ago. I'm mildly surprised that my fingerprint successfully unlocks the screen. Besides some important contacts, the phone has been wiped clean — there are no photos, no texts or voicemails, and no search history. Good. It feels slightly less intrusive knowing that I don't have access to this small part of his past life.

I close my eyes for a moment and focus my hearing to find her heartbeat. Unlike last night, when she slept quietly

and her heartbeat was steady and regular, it is now racing and erratic, and I hear her sniffing. I stop eavesdropping and open the contacts page on the phone. She is up, so I can call. Or maybe she'd appreciate a text more than a call, so she can respond when she's ready. Yep, that may be better. I compose a short text.

"Good morning, Lois. I hope you slept well. I finished the article a few hours ago. Let me know if you want to come here, or I can stop by your place so we can discuss. Thanks."

I set the phone down and walk over to the refrigerator. Inside, there are a few staples — milk, butter, eggs, cheese, lunch meats, and some fresh produce. Since the apartment has been empty for three months, I realize she must have somehow managed to find the time and energy to go shopping yesterday. For me. I'm not used to such thoughtfulness. I remind myself to be sure to thank her later.

The cell phone behind me buzzes, and I close the fridge, turn back to the table, and pick up the phone again.

"I will come to you. Be there in a half hour."

The message is impersonal and short, but I don't blame her. Today will probably be more challenging for her than yesterday.

Half an hour. Hm. Plenty of time to make a simple breakfast. Maybe the least I can do for her considering she went through the trouble to stock the fridge for me. A small smile grows on my lips. Time to play Master Chef.

I quickly get dressed in gray jeans and a black T-shirt from my duffle bag, throw on my shoes and socks, and again take stock of the contents of the fridge and cupboards. Flour, butter, strawberries, sugar, bell peppers, eggs, potatoes, and ham. Easy ingredients to make a couple filling dishes, and I should have enough time. With the help of my superspeed and freezing breath, homemade strawberry turnovers are in the oven baking within a few minutes. I then chop up the peppers, potatoes, and ham and crack half a dozen eggs into a bowl. I cook the potatoes and peppers with a bit of melted butter and seasonings and then add the ham and eggs. The eggs cook quickly, and within a few minutes, the scramble is done. I turn off the heat and check on the pastries, which are a perfect golden brown, with bits of the strawberry filling oozing deliciously out the edges.

As I pull the pastries out of the oven, a tentative knock comes at the door. I set the baking sheet on the stovetop, grab my glasses, and jog over to the door. I know it is her before I answer, but I feel a bit anxious, and my shoulders tense. I open the door as I paste a smile on my face — not too enthusiastic, but welcoming — I hope.

However, my smile quickly fades as I see her. Her cheeks are pale, and her eyes are puffy and red. Her hair,

like yesterday, is pulled back in a low ponytail, but a stray lock falls down, framing her face, and she reaches up with a shaky hand to push it back behind her ear.

“Good morning,” I offer as a greeting.

She doesn’t respond. I step back and motion her inside. She wraps her arms tighter around herself and moves past me into the apartment. Her eyes wander around as though she is seeing the apartment for the first time, although nothing has really changed since the day before. I close the door and hurry down the entry steps after her.

“Can I take your coat, or...?”

The question hangs in the air, and she finally shakes her head.

“No, thank you, I’m fine,” she says hoarsely, pulling the coat around herself stiffly. She clears her throat. “Sorry, I, uh — is that breakfast?” I have a feeling she was about to say something else. But I don’t pry.

“Yeah, yes, I-I wanted to thank you for stocking the fridge for me, so I made breakfast — uh, if you’re hungry, that is. There’s strawberry turnovers and an egg scramble with potatoes and peppers and ham. Nothing fancy, but...” My voice trails off as she lets out a small laugh. She turns to face me, and I see a hint of a smile in her eyes. I adjust my glasses. “What?”

“You babble when you’re nervous,” she replies. She turns back to the kitchen. “He used to do that too. It’s adorable.”

“Wh-wha — I don’t — I’m not nervous.”

She laughs again. “You are so nervous.” She steps toward the counter, eyeing the turnovers hungrily. “You’re worried about me, because you’re a kind, thoughtful person, and you want to help make me feel better. So you made me this wonderful homemade breakfast — which is something he could never do, by the way — he could barely heat up water in the microwave — but you’re also worried I’m going to perceive this gesture in the wrong way and think that you’ve overstepped your welcome, which could upset me when my emotional state is already quite questionable. So you’re nervous.” She spins around to face me, a smirk on her face. “Did I get that about right?”

My cheeks turn bright red, and I laugh as I drop my gaze to the floor momentarily.

“Maybe,” I admit. I raise my eyes back up to meet hers, but she has turned back to the kitchen and is leaning over the strawberry turnovers, fresh out of the oven.

“This looks amazing. I can’t believe you put all of this together with what little was here.”

“I can be pretty resourceful,” I say. I move into the kitchen and open the cupboard to find the plates. “Would you like some?”

Her stomach growls in response, and she blushes slightly.

“Yes, please.”

“Okay.” I smile sideways at her as I pull two plates out of the cupboard and am rewarded with a small smile of hers. “Coming right up.”

As I portion out the egg scramble and turnovers, she moves to the table and sits in front of the laptop. She opens the screen and reaches out to the keyboard, but then hesitates.

“Your story... May I?”

I turn toward her, a plate in each hand, and I nod as I set down one plate in front of her and one on the opposite side of the table. I repeat the process with two fresh cups of coffee.

“Yes, of course. It’s pretty long. I hope that’s not a problem with Perry. And I-I did my best to mimic his writing style. You were right, you know — he — his writing was on another level — I’m not nearly as good of a writer as he was. But I read every one of the articles in his portfolio, and I tried to — ” I cut myself off as she looks at me with a goofy grin. “What? Oh, I’m doing it again, aren’t I?” She nods and purses her lips as though trying not to laugh. I chuckle and sit down across from her. “Well, I will admit that I’m nervous about the story. I-I hope you think it’s...good enough.”

Her smile fades as she clicks a few buttons on the laptop. A moment later, she picks up her coffee cup and begins reading. I lower my eyes to my plate, but my appetite is suddenly gone. I shouldn’t be here while she reads, I realize. I shove a big bite of the egg scramble into my mouth and force myself to avoid watching her. After several minutes, she sets her coffee cup down, and I glance up at her. Her face is tight with concentration, and her eyes shift from left to right as she works her way down the page. A single tear slips down her cheek, and she reaches up to wipe it away, but does not stop reading. Her food remains untouched. I drop my eyes again to my plate and pick up the strawberry turnover. The smell distracts me, and I take a big bite, savoring the flavors and texture of the pastry. Her stomach growls a complaint, and she reluctantly reaches for her own pastry. I sneak another glance at her as she takes her first bite. Her eyes close, and a small sound escapes her lips.

“Oh, wow, Clark, this is...very good.”

She gives me a small smile and wipes another tear from her cheek before taking another big bite. Her eyes shift back to the laptop, and she scrolls slowly down the page reading as she polishes off the pastry.

I finish my breakfast and start working on the dishes as she continues reading. Within a few minutes, the kitchen is cleaned up, and I dry my hands and turn back to her. Her

plate is nearly empty, as is her coffee cup, so I grab the pot of coffee and give her a refill as unobtrusively as possible. She swallows as she glances up at me, pain in her eyes, and she murmurs a quiet, “Thank you.”

I nod in response and refill my own coffee cup before settling back opposite her at the table. She is not quite done reading yet, I know. I close my eyes as I sip my coffee, and I again allow myself to focus my hearing outside of the apartment. It is Saturday morning, and compared with the previous night, the city seems calm and quiet. Traffic in downtown is light, with no major accidents. There is a small apartment fire several blocks away, and a peaceful protest march gathering in Centennial Park. Listening out further, I hear a news broadcast describing the tsunami cleanup efforts in Japan, and I inhale sharply as they state the current death toll. One thousand five hundred thirty-two. I lean forward and rest my head in my hands on the table.

“Are you okay?”

Her voice is filled with concern, and I feel her eyes on me. I swallow and nod miserably, but don’t look up.

“Sorry, I-I will be. There’s, uh, there was a-a tsunami in Japan yesterday. Over 1,500 people died.”

“Oh, Clark, I’m so sorry…” She pauses a moment and takes a sip of her coffee. In a quiet voice, she says, “This world needs Superman as much as you need to be Superman.”

I nod again. I feel sick to my stomach.

“The story…are you almost finished? Sorry it’s so long.”

“I just finished,” she answers, setting her cup down. Her long pause makes me nervous again, and I finally raise my eyes. She is watching me curiously, tears still pricking at the edges of her beautiful deep brown eyes. She swallows and looks down. “You were wrong you know. You are every bit as good a writer as he was.” Her voice is soft and kind but filled with an unforgiving sadness. “It is perfectly executed. Long, yes, but it needed to be. And it reads like he wrote it himself.”

I want to tell her that I think he helped me, in some way. But she’s not ready for that.

“Thank you,” I manage instead. “Will P-Perry like it, you think?”

She nods and closes the laptop as she stands.

“You’ll be teacher’s pet, just like he was. It’s very good. And not a single typo in the whole document.” A small smile works its way into the corners of her mouth, and she laughs. “Perry used to joke that Clark didn’t even need an editor. I think he just cheated and always rechecked his work at superspeed several times before turning in the copy.” She glances at me pointedly, and I grin as I shrug an admission while adjusting my glasses.

“Ah ha, guilty, I knew it.” She forces out a laugh and moves her plate to the sink.

Her good mood fades, however, as she turns back to face me. The smile is gone from her face, and she exhales shakily as she meets my eyes.

“I called the Kents right before you texted me this morning.”

“Ah.” I hesitate and lower my voice. “That must have been hard. I’m sorry I wasn’t there for you.”

“No,” she says, moving back to sit at the table again. “No, it was something I needed to do on my own. And not something you needed to hear. Their grief, that is.”

“I understand.”

She closes the laptop and grasps her coffee cup but doesn’t drink anymore. Her fingers tap absently on the mug, and she blinks several times.

“And, um, they weren’t exactly thrilled to hear that you are here,” she admits, glancing almost nervously up at me.

My jaw clenches, but I say nothing. Of course it would be a shock to them. They just found out they lost their son, and now they are told an exact look-alike is here to pretend to be him. Any sane person would struggle with that. Lois continues.

“They…they didn’t have H.G. Wells show up and explain everything, several times, like I did. And they aren’t as connected to the world and international news, so they don’t see quite as much as I do — I mean how bad it is getting out there and how much the world needs Superman. They just see that their son is gone, and I’m telling them I have a ‘replacement.’ I’m sorry, Clark, I know they will come around after they meet you. But grief does funny things to people.”

I nod and rub the back of my neck. The Kents from the other universe had been welcoming and kind, even in the face of tragedy when their Clark had been missing. But at the time, I was just there to help bring him home, and Martha Kent seemed to know that her son was not dead and just needed to be found. I cannot imagine the pain the Martha Kent of this world is feeling right now. But since the Kents now know about me… I look up at Lois hopefully.

“So do you want to call and talk to Perry, and I can, uh, let the world know that Superman is back? There’s an apartment fire on Colman Avenue and 7th Street — ” I shift my focus for a moment to get an update on the fire — “and there’s a young child stuck on the fourth floor who could really use Superman’s help.”

“Oh, right, yes, of course, go!”

She watches me expectantly. I fly into the bedroom and change at superspeed, then stop in the doorway to the bedroom, crossing my arms over my chest as the brilliant red cape settles behind me. Her eyes are wide, as though it

hadn't really hit her that I had superpowers until that moment, and I take a deep, nervous breath.

"Is, uh, my suit — is this the same as his? I didn't check his closet." I turn around once so she can see the whole suit.

"Yeah, yes, it's identical," she replies, fumbling with the buttons on her coat. "It looks perfect. Um, be careful, and all that."

This is probably where she'd usually give him a peck on the cheek or a hug before he'd rush off to save the day. But I'm not him. I nod at her.

"Thanks. I'll be back in a bit," I say, and I take off out the back door to the balcony and launch up into the sky.

I keep my superhearing focused on her for a moment as I speed toward Colman Avenue. I hear her let out a small sob and sit down heavily at the table. The apartment complex comes into view; smoke billows up into the sky, and fire fighters valiantly try to put out the flames. And, as I fly down through the flames, straight toward the young boy huddled fearfully in the corner in the back of his room, I hear her dial a phone number. Her shaky voice, brimming with a sort of forced optimism, says, "Perry, good morning, I...I have some good news."

Chapter 9

The child, who is maybe eight years old, hugs a tiny stuffed elephant against his chest with shaky hands, and tears stream down his face. His blonde hair is ruffled and covered in ash, and several smudges of soot stain his cheeks. He coughs as he sobs. Around him, the ferocious, hot fire burns, lapping at the edges of the room.

I land lightly at the doorway, and the floor creaks precariously under my feet. I shift my weight and feel the wood crumbling below me. No time to waste; the building is going to collapse soon. I float across the room.

"Hey, buddy, I'm going to get you out of here now, okay?"

I raise my voice so he can hear me over the roar of the fire, and he looks up suddenly, startled. His eyes widen as he sees me, and his mouth falls open.

"Superman!"

"That's me," I say. I reach for him just as the floor gives out with a sickening groan. He is safe in my arms, and I gently press his head into my chest so he doesn't realize how close he just came to falling to his death. A gust of hot air carrying burning embers flows around us, and I wrap my cape protectively around him. "Let's get you out of here, okay, buddy?"

He nods his head into my chest and clings on to me sobbing and coughing.

I carefully fly us out of the burning building. As he feels the fresh air, he lifts his head weakly.

"We're flying! Wow!"

He coughs again and his head falls against my chest as he struggles to breath. I can sense his lungs are filled with smoke still, and I hurry down to the EMTs, who look up at me with surprise and relief. From the crowd, held back behind a makeshift police barrier, I hear cries of "Superman!" and "He's back!" I settle the boy onto a gurney and hold his tiny hand in mine as the emergency workers place an oxygen mask over his face.

"Aiden! That's my baby!" A woman in her late twenties pushes through the line of police. Her cheeks are stained with tears. I let the boy's hand go and step back to give her room. "Aiden, my sweet baby, I'm so sorry. Oh, thank you Superman, thank you so much!"

I nod and smile tightly, then turn back to the burning building. The fire fighters spray water from their hoses on the blaze, but it is not making much of a dent. I jog over to the fire chief, who quickly reaches out to shake my hand. I reciprocate the gesture, mildly surprised that he offered a handshake so freely. Most interactions I'm used to are tinged with a certain degree of revulsion or at least hesitation, like Mr. Olsen's refusal to shake my hand the day before.

"Superman, you have no idea how glad I am to see you," he says with relief. Without hesitation, he continues, "We can't get a hold on this. Any chance you can put out the flames for us? I'm worried it will jump buildings soon with this breeze picking up."

"Of course. Give me a minute," I reply quickly.

I launch up into the air again and hover in front of the flames as I hurriedly but thoroughly scan the building, checking that there are no other residents stuck inside. The building is clear, so I fly in and promptly put out the flames using my freezing breath. Within two minutes, the fire is out, and I exit to cheers from the crowd, police, and firemen. I smile and wave slightly toward the onlookers, and, after checking in with the fire chief, who shakes my hand again, and with the EMTs, who assure me that the young boy Aiden is on his way to the hospital and will be fine, I launch myself up into the air and back toward my — his apartment.

Two traffic accidents and an attempted mugging later, I actually make it back. Lois sits on the couch, with the television turned on but muted. Video footage of me flying out of the burning apartment building cradling the young child and lifting an overturned tractor trailer off the highway is on replay. I enter through the balcony, land quietly in the bedroom, and speed through a quick shower to get the ash and soot out of my hair before throwing my clothes back on. She looks up at me abruptly as I exit from the bedroom, adjusting my glasses. A smile tugs at her lips.

“There is already hope again,” she says quietly, motioning to the television.

She picks up the remote control and turns the volume up as I move to the couch and sit at the end opposite her. Together, we watch as the news footage unfolds. The newscasters smile and laugh and replay the footage over and over. Lois turns to face me.

“This is really good. I-I’m really glad you’re here.” She pauses and looks down at her hands. “Thank you, Clark.”

“It was great to help,” I admit, shifting my eyes back to the television.

They are now playing some older footage of him — Superman — receiving the Key to the City and giving some sort of a speech in front of City Hall. He smiles and speaks with ease in front of the large crowds, exuding confidence and poise. And the audience listens respectfully. The scrolling text at the bottom of the screen announces, ‘Breaking news: Superman returns after three-month absence. Saves child from burning building’. I settle deeper into the couch cushions.

“It...it’s very different here. In a good way, really.” My voice is timid, hesitant.

“Oh? How so?” She turns off the volume on the television and shifts her knees up onto the couch to get more comfortable.

“Well, um, I — people here are...not...afraid of me...” I lower my eyes to hide the pain in my expression. No, I don’t cry, but my hands shake, and I fold my arms over my chest to steady myself.

“Afraid of you? Why...why would they be afraid of you?”

Wells hadn’t told her all of my history, I see. I shake my head slightly. I don’t really want to talk about it. But she should know. I open my mouth to speak, but my superhearing kicks on again to rapid firing of gunshots, fairly nearby, accompanied by screaming. A lot of screaming.

“Hold that thought, I — I have to — I’ll be right back —”

I don’t wait for her response. Every second matters in a situation like this, and I’m already half way to the park probably before she can register my words. As I approach, I quickly scan the area. The peaceful protest from earlier has erupted into chaos. I spot three gunmen hiding from the rooftops of buildings surrounding the park, firing down onto the crowd with heavy-duty automatic weapons. Five people are already down in the park by the time I arrive.

With as much speed as is safe, I first target each of the three gunmen, swiping away their weapons. I then deposit them and their weapons with the policemen near the edge of the park. With the cessation of gunshots, the crowd begins to calm somewhat, but screaming persists.

“Help! Someone! Please help!”

I survey the crowd again. There are now six injured, including two children. A mother rocks her child in her arms, blood pooling on the ground beneath them. The child is still breathing, but barely. The other victims are also critically injured, and all need immediate transport to the hospital. I speed over and land next to the mother and her child. Her eyes widen as she realizes who I am, and she cries and holds her daughter to her chest.

“Ma’am, please hold on to her tightly, and I’ll fly you both to the hospital,” I instruct. She nods anxiously, and I lift her gently into my arms, focus to extend my protective aura around her, and launch up into the sky toward the hospital. Within seconds, we land at the entrance to the Emergency Department of Metropolis General. I set the woman down as several nurses and doctors rush out to meet us, and I address them quickly, “This child has a gunshot wound to the chest from an AR-15 assault rifle. There are five other victims. I will be back momentarily — please be prepared.”

“Got it, Superman,” the head nurse replies.

I take off back to the park, returning less than a minute later with the next victim — the other child, who is slightly older and not as critical. They are waiting for us this time, and I again report, “Two gunshot wounds — one to the left leg, one to the left side. Same caliber weapon.” They take the child back into the building quickly, and I hurry back to the park, returning with each of the remaining four victims. I am met each time by prepared and appreciative medical personnel, who listen carefully as I explain each victim’s wounds and then rush off to care for their patients.

After I finish with the final victim at the hospital, I stop at the park one more time, check in with emergency crews, and give the police a brief statement. Before I take off back home, the police chief approaches me and reaches out enthusiastically to shake my hand.

“Superman, we’re so glad to have you back. This situation would have been so much worse without your help.”

“It’s good to be home, sir,” I say solemnly.

I nod to him and launch up into the sky, feeling a sudden strong urge to get back to Lois as my thoughts shift to the other Clark. I try to imagine how he might have felt to be back here, helping, after three long months away. However, I suddenly realize I’m not sure if he’d actually have been up to the task. I remember my last vision, in which he fought valiantly to push through the enemy lines, his singular focus to reach and defeat Lord Nor in order to end the conflict. I recall feeling his anguish every time he struck down an enemy soldier with his sword or gun, every time a life was lost at his hands — it changed him. His purpose, like mine, was not taking lives; it was saving

lives. The work he was forced into on New Krypton went against everything he'd ever stood for and believed in. And he hadn't been mentally prepared for it, which had ultimately cost him his life.

I wipe away a tear as I land in the apartment, grieving for this other version of me whom I will never get to meet, and I spin out of the suit back into my regular clothes. Lois is in the kitchen now, pouring two cups of coffee. So much coffee already, and it's only 9 a.m.

In my hands, the blood-stained suit pulls me back to the present. I know from experience that I need to hand wash it with hydrogen peroxide and cold water right away to get the stain out. A quick scan under the kitchen sink confirms that he used the same method, and I move into the kitchen and nod briefly to Lois as I pull out a half-full bottle of hydrogen peroxide and get started cleaning the spandex.

She seems to sense the change in my mood, and she pushes the cup of coffee toward me on the counter, but stands back while I meticulously scrub the blood out of the blue fabric. This has always been something that I cannot do at superspeed, although I think it has more to do with my needing the time to reflect than on my physical ability to get the stain out quickly. Maybe it was the same way for him. After several minutes, I rinse the suit with cold water and am relieved to see the water run clear. I shut off the water and close my eyes a moment. Her soft voice next to me keeps me grounded.

"Here, I'll stick it in the washing machine for you," she offers, reaching out toward me.

"Thank you."

I hand her the suit and rest my hands on the sink as she exits the room briefly. A moment later, I hear the washing machine start, and she returns. I fix a more neutral expression on my face and turn to her.

"Sorry I —"

The landline phone rings loudly, cutting me off, and I frown. She shrugs with a half-smile and reaches over to answer the phone since she is closest. I pick up my coffee cup and take a long sip.

"Hello?... Yes, Perry, he's right here." She looks over at me expectantly, and I understand she is asking whether I'm ready to speak with Mr. White. I nod an acquiescence and take the phone as she offers it. I take a deep breath to steady myself before lifting the receiver to my ear.

"Good morning, Mr. White, sir." My voice catches slightly in my throat, and I swallow anxiously. Did the other Clark call him 'Perry', like Lois does? I avoid eye contact with Lois, not wanting to know whether I'd just screwed up.

"Clark, son, it's good to hear your voice. I can't believe it. When Lois called me this morning, well, I just darn near

passed out." His familiar voice brings a smile to my face, and I shift the phone to my other ear as he continues. "Your story, Clark, it's — well, it's incredible, son. I've already got it sent to the printer for a special edition. It will be out this afternoon."

"That's great, sir," I say, adding, "I feel honored to be able to tell the story." I look up at Lois, and she is watching me, a single tear sliding down her cheek. She knows I mean *his* story. I adjust my glasses.

"Well, look, son, I know you just got back and must be tired. Consider yourself still on leave until you are ready to come back in, although we all can't wait to see you." The sincerity in his voice hits me, similar to the enthusiastic handshakes and welcoming cheers I'd received as Superman earlier that morning. I swallow hard and close my eyes.

"I appreciate that, sir," I manage, keeping my voice as even as possible. "I'll talk to Lois and let you know."

"Of course, sure, son. You both know how to reach me. Rest well, and spend some quality time with that fiancée of yours. I hope to see you soon."

I cringe inwardly, glad Lois doesn't hear that little tidbit. She seems fairly stable at the moment, and I'd hate for that to change.

"Thank you, Mr. White."

And there I go again. Mr. White, Perry, Chief, sir? I almost laugh to myself. Such a simple thing, yet my mind races, wondering if I've made some huge mistake. But he simply hangs up on the other end of the line. I reach around Lois to hang up the phone on its holder and risk a glance at her. Her expression is unreadable, and she sips her coffee while watching me. I grimace. Bite the bullet and just ask, I tell myself.

"Mr. White, Perry, Chief, or something else?" She raises her eyebrows at me in confusion, so I elaborate. "You call him 'Perry.' The Clark from the other universe I visited several months ago called him 'Chief' or 'Perry.' In my universe, I called him 'Mr. White.'"

"Oh, right," she says thoughtfully, setting down her coffee cup. "I guess Clark usually called him Mr. White as well. So you guessed correctly."

A small weight lifts off my shoulders as I nod in acknowledgement. Maybe this will be more intuitive than I thought.

"But, I'm sorry, um, did you —" She pauses abruptly, her eyebrows furrowed with uncertainty. She blinks several times. "Did you just say, 'The Clark from the other universe'? H-how many universes have you visited?"

Another detail Wells failed to mention to her. I laugh dryly. "Besides mine and yours, just one other. It's a bit of a long story — which of course I'm happy to tell, if you have time..."

She shrugs dismissively, and we move back to settle on the couch. She pulls her knees up and relaxes deep into the cushions. “I have got all day. Entertain me, Mr. Kent.”

“All right,” I agree, moving slightly to sit at the edge of my seat. I rest my elbows onto my knees. “It’s a bit confusing, and long. So don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

And so, I tell her everything. Well, almost everything. I tell her about the day the Lois from the *other* other universe was dropped into my world with H.G. Wells by a madman from the future named Tempus, whose main goal in life was to destroy Superman and all that he stood for. I tell her how the other Lois helped me to become Superman and then how we defeated Tempus, which unfortunately led to my ‘secret identity’ being blown before I even had a chance to protect it. I tell her about how I grew into my role as Superman and how Clark Kent became merely a penname for Superman to use when he wrote the news. Then I tell her about how H.G. Wells showed up again one day and took me with him to the other Lois’s universe, where her Clark had been banished to a nanosecond in time through an exploding time window. Once again, Tempus had been responsible, in his continuing quest to destroy Superman and rise to power. I tell her how I had helped the other Lois to find Tempus, destroy his mind control system, which he had used to enslave the whole country, and stop nuclear missiles from being launched against targets all around the world. Finally, I tell her how I’d met the other Clark briefly, which had been bizarre to say the least. I don’t tell her about the strange but strong connection I felt to the other Lois or about having been engaged to Lana Lang or about meeting the Kents. Or about how lonely and isolating life had become for me.

Miraculously, my storytelling is not interrupted by any other calls for help or emergencies. Lois only interrupts a few times, preferring instead to sit, sip her coffee, and just listen. When I finish, I sit back into the couch cushions again and close my eyes for a moment. The city is quiet around us, although I sense the emergency crews still active at the park a few blocks away. It is almost as though the city has taken a deep breath after having not done so for three months.

Across the couch from me, Lois shifts and clears her throat. I open my eyes to look at her. She is staring at her coffee cup, a stray lock of hair falling in front of her face. Without looking up, she asks a simple question.

“Tempus did more than just reveal your identity to your world, didn’t he?”

Boy, she is perceptive. I don’t answer right away. I’ve only been on this Earth for less than a day, but already I’ve felt more support from the random people I’ve met in the few rescues I’ve made than I had from all of my

“acquaintances” back home since becoming Superman. I lower my eyes and swallow hard.

“Yes, he did,” I admit, running a hand through my hair anxiously. I hate reliving this memory. But she asked, and I will answer. “He told the world that I was the first part of an alien invasion and that I’d — that I’d come to Earth to trick the people of Earth into trusting me so my eventual takeover of the planet would be easier and more... insidious. I don’t think people ultimately believed him, but his ideas left them with enough doubt and mistrust that...” I trail off. *Please don’t ask me to elaborate, Lois. I think you get the point.*

And she does. She nods almost imperceptibly as she sits up and scoots to the edge of her seat.

“The people here, on this Earth, they are different,” she says quietly.

“Yes. Very different.”

She nods again and continues. “They were very welcoming of Superman when he first showed up. He helped lift the Messenger space shuttle into orbit after a series of attempted sabotages. People were genuinely grateful and in awe not only of what he could do but also of how he used his powers for good — to help. I-I didn’t know who he was back then, but I knew he was innately good. He — Superman gives people here a sense of hope. Hope that there is something better on the way. Hope that someone is out there who cares.” She smiles at me with such compassion that I look away. She sees me. She knows. She understands.

“Well, I...” My voice catches in my throat, but I continue. “I hope that I can live up to that —”

“You will,” she interrupts. The certainty in her voice hits me, and I suck in a shaky breath.

“You — you’re pretty confident about that,” I manage weakly.

“I’m usually right about things.”

I smile as I allow myself to look up at her. Despite everything she has been through in the last three days — despite losing her fiancé and best friend and then having to face the future pretending that he’s back — she is strong and confident. And she is the one here comforting me. Is this what it feels like to have a true friend? “*Take care of her for me.*” Sorry, Kal, I think she’s the one taking care of me.

“A major wildfire is moving quickly through the mountains west of Colorado Springs, and authorities are concerned about potential casualties as the blaze is cutting off exit routes for visitors to Pikes Peak.”

I’m standing and have changed into the suit within a second. I glance to Lois, whose eyes are wide and concerned.

“There’s a wildfire in Colorado,” I explain. “It might take a while. Sometimes wildfires —”

“Hurry, then,” she says quickly, standing and crossing her arms over her chest. “And be careful. I...I might head home. I have a few errands to run.”

“Right, of course.” I turn to take off from the balcony. But I stop abruptly in the doorway and add quietly, “Thank you, Lois.”

And then I head out, soaring across the country toward Colorado. The Sun shines brightly almost straight overhead, and I feel its warmth strengthen me as I pick up speed.

Chapter 10

It is a busy afternoon. The wildfire takes nearly two hours to get under control, but I manage to save every one of the stranded hikers, campers, and visitors to the area and then put out the flames. On my way back, I am stopped by a chemical fire at a manufacturing plant in Cincinnati and then a bank robbery turned hostage situation in Pittsburgh. I save a car from falling off a bridge just outside of Metropolis and then stop a burglary at a local jewelry store about three blocks from Lois’s apartment.

By the time I get back, shower, and change, it is late afternoon. The apartment is quiet and dark. I turn on the television and settle down on the couch with a cup of tea. Television broadcasts are abuzz with the news of Superman’s return and the publication of my article in the special afternoon edition of the *Daily Planet*. Every sentence of my article is being dissected live, on air, in front of millions. And it is extremely well received.

I watch for a few more minutes and then stand to get myself a refill of my tea and one of the leftover strawberry turnovers from this morning. From the kitchen table, the cell phone buzzes, and the screen lights up with the words, “Martha and Jonathan Kent”. I nearly drop my tea. I stare at the phone as it buzzes a second time and then a third. I come to my senses, finally, and frantically reach out and hit the answer button before it goes to voicemail.

“H-h-h-hello?” Oh, why do I stutter when I’m nervous? Apparently, I babble as well. I’m just a stuttering, babbling idiot. Silence from the other end. Followed by a quiet sob. I wait another moment and then carefully ask, “Mrs. Kent?”

“Y-yes. God, you sound just like him. I — ” Her voice cracks as she sobs again, this time less quietly. I wait again, and I move to the table and sit slowly, cradling the phone carefully. “I’m sorry,” Martha says finally, her voice still weak. “It’s been a lot to take in, you understand.”

“Of course, Mrs. Kent,” I reply carefully. I want to say so much more, but I stay quiet to let her lead the conversation. After another moment, she continues.

“Lois called us this morning to give us the news and explain the...situation. You probably know that already, don’t you?”

“Yes ma’am,” I reply.

“I’ve been waiting for her phone call for three months, ever since my boy left. But a different type of phone call, you understand,” she explains. Her voice shakes, and I hear rustling on the other end of the line. “So, this morning, well... And Jonathan, he — he’s —”

I swallow hard. She is barely holding herself together right now. I wish I could help. But this isn’t something Superman can swoop in and fix.

“Anyway, I told him I wanted to call you, to see you, actually, and Jonathan, he — he — well, he won’t be back for at least a couple hours.”

I understand. Martha Kent is every bit as amazing as I’d imagined she’d be. And every bit as strong as Lois. This Clark had been a lucky man. I hear the echo again. “*Take care of her for me.*” And this time, “her” has a different meaning. I clear my throat.

“I would love to meet you, Mrs. Kent,” I say. Now my voice is trembling. Small sounds come from the other end of the line, and then I hear sniffing and more rustling.

“I have banana bread and chocolate chip cookies and pie.” She snuffles again. “Jonathan says I bake when I’m upset. He’s probably right. He’s not ready to meet you yet, but... I would love to have you come down, now, if you are not busy.”

I almost can’t speak. A memory flashes in my mind, but it’s not mine. An older woman, whom I recognize as Martha Kent, stands on the front porch of an old farmhouse. I stand next to her. My suit is not the familiar blue, red, and yellow, but instead all black and made of a strange, thick fabric. She moves in front of me and wraps her arms around my waist. “*I know this was a tough decision, and I understand why you have to leave. But promise me, Clark, that you will come back home to me.*” My arms envelop her, and I lean down and kiss her cheek. “*I will, Mom.*” The memory fades. I wipe a tear off my cheek and close my eyes tightly. Please, stop it, other Clark. Show me something happy, won’t you?

“Y-yes, I-I’ll be there, um, in about a minute, um, if that’s okay?” Stuttering, babbling idiot again.

“Yes, of course. Okay,” she agrees. “I’ll get the tea going.”

“Okay. S-see you in a minute. Good-bye then.” Awkward, stuttering, babbling idiot.

I hear her hang up on her end first, and I slowly pull the phone away from my ear and exhale sharply. I stare at the phone for a second and then stand, using the table for support. I’m terrified. But I don’t have any time to waste, so I spin into the suit and take off toward Kansas, my mind

racing. Should I show up as Superman, or change back to my regular clothes first? Regular clothes, definitely. And should I bring flowers or some other gift? Flowers might be nice. But I'm not sure. After all, there is no instruction manual or standard etiquette for how one should act when one meets one's dead mother's doppelganger from another universe for the first time.

Below me, I recognize the city of Wichita, Kansas, and I quickly make a decision, dropping down in an alley behind a small strip mall off Central Avenue. I change back into my regular clothes and jog around the front of the building, where there is a small flower shop. A moment later, I'm back up in the sky, a modest bouquet of yellow roses and pink Asiatic lilies tucked safely under my arm.

I slow as I approach the Kent farm and hover in the air above the farmhouse as memories of my own childhood flood my mind. My mom taking me to pick apples from the orchard at the top of the hill. My dad giving me a ride on his shoulders as we trudge out into the muddy pasture to fix a broken fence post. Both of them rushing out of the house when I fall off the roof of the barn, only to find me unharmed. And then them sitting me down at the kitchen table later that day and explaining to me that I cannot ever, under any circumstances, tell anyone about my developing strength or other abilities. I had only been nine years old at the time. And I lost them to a car accident a short six months later.

I shake my head to clear my thoughts and spin into my normal clothes as I land in front of the farmhouse. The bright yellow siding and white trim appear freshly painted, and the front porch is decorated with crisp, colorful flowers and brightly painted, handmade wind chimes, which clink and jingle in the breeze I create as I land. I swallow nervously and step up onto the porch. The old floorboards creak underneath my feet, and, although I'm not deliberately listening in, I hear Martha's pacing stop. I shift the bouquet of flowers to my left hand and knock gently on the door. My hand is shaking, and I clench my fist and shove my free hand into my pocket as her footsteps approach the door from inside the house. The door handle turns slowly, hesitantly, and I lower my eyes to the ground briefly and force a confident smile onto my face. Fake it till you make it, right? I'm still terrified.

Martha Kent peeks around from the other side of the door, her troubled blue eyes meeting mine. She is beautiful, like my mother was. Her straw-colored hair is pulled back into a messy bun, and her glasses sit slightly askew on her nose. Her dark green apron is dusted with bits of flour and apple peels. She covers her mouth with a shaky hand and steps toward me. I don't move. I can't. Martha stops just in front of me, her sad, teary eyes still glued to mine. She reaches up as though to touch my

cheek, but then abruptly pulls her hand away and shakes her head as tears fall. I drop my gaze to the floor as I feel all the air sucked out of my lungs.

"I-I'm sorry, m-maybe this wasn't a good idea, Mrs. Kent. I-I'll just g-go now," I stutter, backing up a step.

"No, wait — don't leave," she says, her voice shaky but clear. I raise my eyes back up to meet hers. She still stands in the doorway, one hand now on her cheek and the other holding the door open. She sighs wistfully. "You just...you look exactly like my boy. It's hard to believe you're not really him. Please, don't leave. Come inside, and we can talk."

I nod weakly and follow her inside. The door closes behind me, and I venture up a glance around the room as Martha pads ahead of me into the kitchen. The room smells of apple pie and cookies, both of which sit in serving dishes on the dining room table. I am again inundated with memories of my childhood, and I stop suddenly in the foyer. It is so similar, yet completely different. The furniture is newer, and like the outside of the home, the walls are freshly painted albeit a light olive green. Abstract paintings hang on the walls, along with framed family photos. I am drawn to a photograph of the three of them — Martha, Jonathan, and Clark — hanging on the wall over the fireplace. Clark stands between Martha and Jonathan, one arm around each of them, and they all smile at the camera. His love for them jumps out of the photograph, and I feel it as though I were there at that moment. I blink back a tear and turn toward the kitchen.

Martha is standing with a teapot in her hands watching me. Tears stain her cheeks, and she quickly reaches up and wipes them away.

"Mint," she explains, holding up the teapot. "It was one of his favorites."

"Mine too," I say softly.

She pours the hot liquid into two coffee mugs and then carries them over to the table. I realize I'm still holding the bouquet of flowers, and I swallow nervously and step over to the table to meet her.

"I, uh, brought these for you."

I offer the flowers to her. A small smile grows on her face as she reaches out and takes the bouquet. She brings the flowers to her nose and breathes in deeply, her eyes closing.

"I love lilies. Thank you, Clark, that was very thoughtful of you."

She seems to be holding something back, but she smiles again and moves to the kitchen, where she finds a vase to put the flowers in. A moment later, she is back at the table, and the flowers are displayed in a simple glass vase on the counter.

“You have a lovely home, Mrs. Kent,” I say politely as we both sit. I take a sip of my tea, and the fragrant liquid is instantly comforting.

From the other side of the table, Martha seems to hold her breath for a moment. She sips her tea and then sets the cup down deliberately.

“Thank you. Didn’t you...grow up here?” Her voice trails off, but I understand her confusion.

“Um, yes, I did, until I was 10.” My voice is quiet. I don’t like to talk about this. I guess there’s a lot of things I don’t like to talk about. But this definitely ranks up near the top of my list. Along with the fact that I’m an alien.

“Um, my — my parents, they died, when I was 10. I haven’t seen this house, or their house I mean, since then.”

I hold my tea cup carefully in my hands and force myself to look up at her. Martha Kent’s eyes brim again with tears. I keep talking so I don’t also start crying.

“I like the brick you used for the fireplace. Our home had stone instead of brick, although I recall Dad always saying he wanted to replace it with brick, and the kitchen — the kitchen was a little different too. The fridge was over by the other wall, and the cabinets were made of oak, not walnut. Did you remodel recently?” Yep, Lois, you’re right. I babble when I’m nervous. Oh well. If it keeps us both from sobbing like little babies, I’m all for it.

Martha doesn’t answer. Instead, she reaches out and places her hand on top of mine.

“Oh, sweetie,” she whispers. “Lois didn’t tell me... I’m so sorry.” Her hand feels warm, comforting. I close my eyes.

“It was a long time ago,” I say. My standard response. I can hear her heart beating faster. “But I’m okay now. I mean, I miss them, and —”

“Clark.” She squeezes my hand, and I raise my eyes. Her expression is one of pure kindness and compassion, and I smile weakly at her. “We’re both just a mess, aren’t we? I think we should have some pie. What would you say?”

I laugh softly.

“Yeah, yes, that sounds great, Mrs. Kent. Thank you.”

“Please, call me Martha, dear.” She busies herself with serving us each a generous slice of fresh apple pie. And as she places a piece in front of me, she says, “You know, Clark, your parents would have been very proud of the man you’ve grown up to be.”

My breath catches in my throat. “Th-thank you, Mrs. Kent — Martha. I-I always try to live as they taught me. To be honest and kind and to work hard and to help. They were very good people.”

She shakes her head slightly. “You sound so much like him,” she admits.

Her hand trembles as she takes a bite of her pie. I look down to my own plate and take a small bite. The pie is both sweet and tart, just like I remember my mom’s apple pie.

“Did you use apples from the orchard on the hill?” She nods as she takes another bite of her pie, and I smile. “My mom used to make apple pies for Patty’s Bakery in town this time of year. She’d bake maybe a dozen or so every day, and the house smelled like apple pie all the time. It was my favorite time of year, I think.”

“Patty’s...” She seems to think hard for a moment. “Oh, right, Patty Cramer. She used to have a bakery in town, but they closed their doors almost 20 years ago when Patty’s husband passed away. And I like baking, but not enough to make a dozen pies a day!”

I savor the next bite and smile again. “It was a lot of work. She would have me help her haul apples down from the orchard. And core and peel them. And they would taste just like this...”

I take another bite, and we eat in silence for a few more minutes. When we both finish, I stand and take her plate, and I then quickly wash and dry the dishes, despite her protests. When I finish, I settle back at the table across from her, and she sighs.

“I do wish Jonathan were here,” she admits, her eyes wandering toward the kitchen window, which has a clear view of the long driveway leading up to the farmhouse. “He’s as stubborn as an elephant, that man.”

I lower my eyes for a moment as I consider my words. “I hope that I get to meet him soon,” I say quietly, glancing briefly up to her before dropping my gaze again. “But I understand that it’s a lot to take in. And I understand how it might seem like I’m here to ‘replace’ your son, which is definitely not my intention.”

She takes a long sip of her tea and again stares out the window. Her voice is soft as she speaks now.

“Jonathan was the only one of us who was quite vehemently against Clark leaving in the first place,” she explains, a tremor rattling the mug in her hand. She looks back at me again, regret and pain filling her eyes. “Lois and I, of course we didn’t want him to go. But we understood his need to help. Thousands of innocent people were going to die... He couldn’t say no.”

I nod and try to stay present as I listen; images of Kael’s sword ripping through enemy soldiers, blood spilt on the rocky ground, and mass graves flood my mind. I close my eyes to block the images, but the message is clear. Despite his efforts, hundreds had still died. And many at his own hands. A strong surge of emotion, of self-hatred, fills me, though I know the emotion is his, not mine. I clear my throat and blink several times.

“Clark, what’s wrong? Is Superman needed somewhere?” she asks, her voice filled with concern. I shake my head.

“No, sorry, I was just imagining that...it must have been a very tough decision for him. Especially if Mr. Kent didn’t support it.” She seems to know I’m not telling the whole truth, and I sense a hint of disappointment. I quickly lower my eyes. “I’m sorry,” I add quietly. “I wish I could just bring him back for all of you.”

“None of this is your fault, Clark. And as painful as all this is, I’m glad you’re here,” she states reassuringly. Her hand again reaches out to pat mine from across the table, and I look up at her and smile gratefully. “You’ve already done so much good, just in one day. I’ve been watching the news... Superman has been busy.”

“It has been —”

I stop suddenly as I hear a truck rattling down the road adjacent to the farm. I lower my glasses, and the walls of the house dissolve from my visual field. I watch as an old red pickup truck turns toward the house, a man I recognize as Jonathan Kent driving. He doesn’t look happy.

“Mr. Kent is coming. I should probably go, I guess.” I stand abruptly. But Martha shakes her head.

“No, honey. You are my guest. He knows I planned to ask you over. If he is back already, then he wants to see you as well.”

I am not comfortable with this, but the confidence and defiance in her voice stops me from leaving. She stands and moves to the kitchen briefly, returning a moment later with the teapot. She refills each of our mugs. I close my eyes as I hear Jonathan Kent mumbling unintelligibly to himself. He shuts off the truck and gathers his things... He is quite angry.

I really want to leave.

I feel a gentle hand on my shoulder, and I open my eyes and turn my head slightly to look down at Martha. She has a knowing smile on her face.

“Just let me talk to him first. Okay?”

I nod mutely and stuff my hands into my pockets as heavy, insistent footsteps approach from outside the house. Martha moves around me and toward the front door as Jonathan Kent enters the room. I keep my eyes lowered, but I feel his anger and grief. The door shuts loudly, and I flinch involuntarily at the noise.

“Jonathan, I’m glad you’re back. I’d like you to meet —”

“Martha, this man needs to leave our home right now,” Jonathan interrupts, his voice shaking with rage. This is worse than I thought. I look up sharply, and his eyes bore into me, forcing me to step backward.

“Jonathan, what —”

“This so-called story of his is trash,” Jonathan scoffs, pushing a copy of the *Daily Planet*’s special edition paper into Martha’s hands. “He fabricated everything in that article to make a name of himself — he used our son’s death to sell papers. I don’t want him anywhere near us.”

“Wh-what?” I manage, narrowing my eyes in confusion. “Mr. Kent, sir, I didn’t —”

“Don’t lie to me, boy!” Jonathan snaps, stepping closer to me. Behind him, Martha glances down at the newspaper in her hands, the large block letters on the top of the page popping out. SUPERMAN RETURNS: Exclusive Interview And Look At Life On New Krypton, by Clark Kent. I take a shallow breath and shake my head. Jonathan continues. “I read that whole article. There’s no way you could possibly have known all of that. Elaborate scheme you’re running here. I want you gone. Now.”

“B-but, s-sir, I-I —”

“B-b-but nothing,” he mocks. “Gone. Now.” He stands only a few feet from me now. His face is red with fury, and I can hear his heart beating rapidly and unsteadily in his chest.

“Jonathan, please, calm down. Give him a chance to explain,” Martha says firmly, moving between me and her husband. She places a hand on his chest and pushes back against him. An angry scowl crosses his face, but he concedes. Martha turns back to me. “Clark, honey, can you explain this to us? How did you write this article?”

“I-I u-used the j-journals — his journals. He — he kept v-very d-detailed journals of everything that happened a-and everything he learned,” I explain, unable to control my stuttering now. I lower my eyes to the ground and step backwards again. “They — the Kryptonians — Zara and Ching — they g-gave Lois the journals, and she gave them to me to use to write the article. Mr. Kent, Mrs. Kent, I promise, everything in that article is true, except that h-he didn’t — except that —”

“Okay, Clark, it’s okay. I believe you, sweetie,” Martha assures me.

I raise my eyes to meet hers. She has a strained smile on her face. One hand clutches the newspaper, and the other remains pressing firmly on Jonathan’s chest. The anger hasn’t left his eyes, but he no longer looks murderous. I hold his gaze for a moment and swallow nervously.

“I’m really sorry for the — for the misunderstanding, Mr. Kent,” I say quietly. “I...I’ll get going now.” I cautiously step toward the front door. Martha doesn’t protest this time and instead pushes Jonathan back a few steps to give me room to leave. I stop at the door, and my shoulders hunch as I mumble, “Thank you for the hospitality, Mrs. Kent. It was great to meet you both. I’m sorry — I...I’ll just... Um, good night.”

I don't wait for a response. I can hear Martha's tears falling and Jonathan's fists clenching, and I know I cannot stay another minute longer. I open the door, step outside, and take off into the sky, spinning into the suit as I ascend.

Chapter 11

I fly and fly, with no real direction, confusion and pain driving me. I find myself in Germany, where I stop an out-of-control bus from careening into a group of tourists. Next, I'm in the South African city of Cape Town, where I put out an apartment fire. I stop the Sayano-Shushenskaya Dam from breaking in Khakassia, Russia and rescue three hikers from an avalanche in the Swiss Alps. I go and go, moving from one emergency to the next. Almost as though I must prove that my intentions are honest.

Eventually, as the Sun is just beginning to rise over the Atlantic Ocean, I find myself back in Metropolis. I stagger into the apartment. His apartment. Not mine, I remind myself. It is still dark, not yet illuminated by the growing light of day, and without bothering to change, I fall into bed. The clock on the nightstand reads 6:02 a.m. I close my eyes, but all I see is Jonathan Kent's angry expression. Lois's words echo in my head. "... *grief does funny things to people.*"

I pull the cape around myself and fall into an exhausted sleep. My dreams are tinged red, filled with explosions and screams and lifeless bodies and blood. I hear words in a strange language, but I understand. "*He must die, Kal. That is the only way.*" My own voice argues in vain, "*There has to be another option. We have to break this cycle of bloodshed. There needs to be peace.*" Another voice booms through the dark corridor, "*Killing him is the only way to bring peace, Lord Kal-El.*" I feel myself spiraling down a dark tunnel. Hands reach at me from the darkness. Faces I cannot see crying for help. It starts to rain, but the rain is thick, viscous, and dark red. Blood. So much blood. I can't breathe, and I claw frantically at my throat.

A loud knock at the door wakes me, and I sit up abruptly and suck in a deep breath. Sweat drips down my face, and images from the dream linger in my mind. I feel myself trembling. The knock comes again, even louder, and I glance at the clock on the nightstand as I rub the sleep out of my eyes. 6:58 a.m. Who would be here so early? I stand shakily and spin into regular clothes as I jog through the living room, straightening my glasses. I immediately recognize Lois's heartbeat, regular but fast, and I steady myself with another deep breath as I reach out and open the door.

She stands stiffly, her hand outstretched to knock again, and she quickly pulls her hand away as her eyes meet

mine. Her concerned expression fades, and her lips part slightly in a smile.

"Good morning, Clark!" she says cheerfully, and she pushes past me into the apartment. In a daze, I close the door and turn around. She is already halfway through the living room. I shake my head and start down the stairs after her.

"Good morning, Lois. It's, uh, pretty early. I, uh..." My voice trails off. She's at the cupboard now, pulling out two plates. A white paper bag sits on the counter with some colorful block letters on the side. Food? Isn't it a bit early for food? I screw my eyes shut for a moment. "Wh-what's up?"

"Did you have a Bobby Bigmouth's Bagels and Buns in your universe?"

"No, I don't —"

"Oh, you haven't lived until you've had Bobby's breakfast bagels," she interrupts. I stop in front of the kitchen table and rest my hands on the back of a chair. My brain still feels fuzzy, but I recognize her anxious mannerisms. "Here, try it. Eggs and bacon and cheddar. And the bagels are fresh." She places one of the plates at the table in front of me. It does look good. I eye her suspiciously, and a thought crosses my mind.

"Martha called you, didn't she?"

Her eyes meet mine, and I have my answer. I drop my head to my chest and scoot back the chair to sit. Lois copies me, sitting across from me. She places her hands on the table.

"Are you okay?" she asks quietly.

I don't answer right away. The meeting with Martha and Jonathan Kent replays in my mind, and I feel Jonathan's anger, cold and unforgiving. His grief had fueled his rage. I suddenly feel a profound sadness of my own, and I close my eyes again. There will be no changing how he looks at me. He may realize I have honest intentions, but his pain runs too deep. His love for his son will not allow him to accept me.

"No," I answer honestly. I exhale sharply and look up at her. She is watching me carefully, her head tilted slightly. Her hair is down today, and it falls well below her shoulders in long dark curls. *Beautiful.* "But I will be. Jonathan...he is just grieving, and he took his anger out on me." My voice is nearly a whisper. She nods and drops her eyes to her bagel.

"He's always been a bit quick to judge and a little hot-headed," Lois admits. She picks up her bagel and takes a big bite. "But he will come around."

She sounds so certain that I don't want to argue with her. Instead, I just nod and take a bite of my bagel. The flavors are perfectly balanced, and the bagel is chewy and warm.

“It’s good, right?” she asks. She stands and moves to the counter, where she starts a pot of coffee.

“Very good. Thank you,” I reply.

She turns to smile at me, and as my eyes meet hers, I immediately feel better. My stomach flutters, and I swallow hard as I look back to my plate. She’s not mine, I remind myself again. But I feel a strong surge of love toward this amazingly thoughtful woman, and I wonder how I’m going to stay indifferent to these feelings. Maybe they are his feelings. I’ve felt other emotions of his, so it isn’t too much of a stretch. In any case, a distraction would be good right about now.

“Um, did you want to go into work tomorrow, or is it too soon still? Perry said I could be on leave as long as I needed, so I figured it’s up to you.”

“Oh, um...” She hesitates, then turns back to pour us each a cup of coffee. Her hand trembles slightly as she sets a cup of the steaming black liquid in front of me. “Yeah, that is probably a good idea.” She sits heavily in her chair and holds her cup up to her lips. It is too hot to drink, but she blows on it absently, her eyes staring at the table.

“Only if you’re ready,” I say. I take a long sip of my own coffee. The familiar taste is comforting.

“It would be nice to have a distraction,” she admits, echoing my earlier thoughts. “But...” She pauses and sets down her cup, meeting my eyes with a serious expression. I nod in understanding before she even continues.

“I know I’m not him, Lois. However you want to approach our, uh, public relationship is completely up to you.” I hope this appeases her, but she just looks more uncertain. She swallows another bite of her bagel and then wraps her arms around herself protectively.

“He was very physical in our relationship,” she explains quietly, her eyes closed as she remembers. “He’d hold my hand or have his hand on my waist or around my shoulders. And he’d hug and kiss me all the time. He always said he wanted me to feel loved and special, regardless of where we were or who was around.”

A flash of light and warmth surrounds me, and I’m suddenly in the newsroom of the Daily Planet, standing behind her at her desk. She types a story, her fingers flying over the keyboard, and I lean over and point to the screen. “*It should read ‘A spokesperson for the FBI’ here.*” She swats me playfully on the arm and continues typing. “*Don’t edit my copy, Kent, you know better.*” My hands venture to her shoulders, and I lean over and kiss her cheek. “*Okay,*” I say huskily. I kiss her again. “*But you know when I do edit your copy, we usually get out of here a lot quicker. And there’s a few things I can think of that I’d much rather be doing right now.*” My hand gently grazes her neck, brushing a stray lock of hair back. I hear her heart beat faster. She moves the cursor on the screen

back to the sentence I’d pointed out and quickly fixes the error. “*Mmm, better now,*” I whisper. My hands rub her shoulders suggestively, and I straighten up and clear my throat.

My eyes flutter open back in the apartment, and she’s staring at me with a strange expression on her face. I can still feel my lips on her skin. I swallow as I adjust my glasses.

“Where did you go just now?” she asks suspiciously. “You completely spaced out for a second there.”

“Sorry, I just, um, remembered, um...” I mumble, and my voice trails off. I shove another bite of bagel and egg into my mouth, giving myself a moment to think. God, I hate this lying. But I can’t very well tell her that I’m somehow having flashbacks of memories that are obviously of her and *her* Clark. I shift uneasily in my seat. “I just...It’s nothing. Sorry.”

I smile sheepishly at her, and although I can tell she is not convinced, she doesn’t push. Her eyes drop to her coffee cup.

“Anyways, um, I’m sure we can get away with a little hand holding here and there,” she suggests quietly. She quickly adds, “As two friends supporting each other, that is.”

“Of course,” I agree. I feel a need to reassure her. “Lois, I hope you know that I don’t expect —”

“No, I know, Clark. It’s just...” She pauses and exhales sharply. Her hand reaches up and tucks her hair back behind her ear. “I sometimes forget that you’re not him,” she admits. Her cheeks turn slightly red. “I look at you and see him, and I realize it would be very easy to just pretend you are him. But that wouldn’t be fair to either of us. And I know you understand that.”

“I do.” I nod with conviction, even as the feel of her skin under my fingers lingers.

“Superman was busy last night,” she says, changing the subject. “When did you get home?”

Home. Interesting word choice. Is this my home? I still think of it as his apartment. I’m not sure that I’m ready to treat it as mine. I almost feel his presence with me, and the frequent visions certainly don’t help.

“Yeah, after Kansas...I just needed to keep busy. I didn’t get back until about 6 a.m., actually,” I admit, giving her half a smile as I take the final bite of my bagel. She grimaces.

“Oh wow, I’m sorry. Did I wake you up? I should have waited until later.”

“It’s okay. I really can’t sleep in past seven anyway. No matter when I go to bed.” She finishes her last bite as well, and I stand, collect the plates from the table, and move to the sink to rinse them off. She follows me and then leans back against the counter and sips her coffee as I work. “Do

you have any plans for today?” I ask casually as I dry my hands.

“I was thinking of meeting my parents for lunch, actually,” she says without enthusiasm. “They are both in town for a medical conference, and I haven’t seen them in a while.”

“A medical conference?” I step over to the table and pick up my coffee cup, but don’t sit.

“Yeah. Mother is a nurse practitioner, and Daddy is a neurosurgeon. They’re divorced, but they still work together,” she explains with a frown. “They…Daddy had an affair many years ago, and when Mother found out, well… Let’s just say it was quite unpleasant. Mother started drinking, and Daddy moved out. They divorced when I was 15. I don’t know how they manage to continue working together, but they do.”

Her voice is detached, indifferent, and she takes another sip of her coffee.

“That sounds rough,” I say. I have to resist the urge to wrap my arms around her and pull her into a comforting embrace. “Do they generally get along now?”

“Yeah. In fact, Lucy — my sister — she told me they have started dating again.” She shakes her head in disbelief. “I can’t picture it. To me, once that type of trust is broken, I’m afraid there would be no going back. But, if they are happy, then I’m happy for them.”

I nod and sip my coffee again.

“Oh, uh, do they know…about Superman?”

I don’t know why I didn’t think of the question sooner. But she immediately shakes her head.

“No. No one else knows besides me and the Kents,” she replies. “But they will have read the paper by now.” She pauses uncertainly and holds my gaze for a moment. She’s shown so much incredible strength in the last couple days that I forget how vulnerable she can be; her eyes betray that vulnerability now.

“Would you like me to come with you to lunch?” I propose quietly, lowering my eyes to my coffee cup.

I hear her heart rate increase slightly, and she shifts uncomfortably from one foot to the other. Before she can respond, sounds of a police siren echo in my head as my superhearing activates.

“All units respond. Burglary in progress at Metropolis Supermall. Suspect is armed and considered dangerous. Last seen heading out of Mason’s Jewelers and toward the food court. One victim has been shot. Requesting an ambulance.”

Lois watches me knowingly as I stand and set down my coffee cup.

“Think about it,” I say quickly. I step back from the table and spin into the familiar blue, red, and yellow suit.

“There’s an incident at the mall. I’ll be back in just a few minutes.”

She nods. “Be careful.”

I smile and take off out the back door. I can get used to this, I decide. Sounds of more gunshots, however, sober my thoughts, and I pick up speed as I head toward the mall. No time to waste. Superman has a job to do.

Chapter 12

Five hours later, Lois pulls her Jeep into an empty parking spot along the curb outside Tuscan Grille, a small Italian restaurant across from the Metropolis Convention Center. I swallow and straighten my tie as she turns the car off and grabs her purse from the back seat. Her eyes dart to the front of the restaurant, where an older couple stands chatting idly. The man is tall, with gray hair and a thick mustache, and the woman is about Lois’s height, but with lighter hair. The man places his arm around the woman’s shoulders and gives her a quick peck on the cheek.

“Is that them?” I ask hesitantly.

“Yep,” Lois answers. She shakes her head slightly. “I see it, but I don’t believe it. They haven’t looked that friendly in probably 15 years.”

“Oh, here, let me.” I jump out of the car and jog around to open her door. She eyes me with a funny half-smile and takes my outstretched hand.

“Such a gentleman, Mr. Kent,” she says with a laugh. She allows me to help her out of the Jeep, and I close the door behind her. She keeps a hold of my hand in hers. I know it is for show. And for support. But my skin burns warm where we touch. I wonder if she feels it too.

“Just doing the right thing,” I reply tightly. She looks up at me and smiles. A comfortable, friendly smile. Her eyes betray her though, with a hint of something else buried in their depths. I squeeze her hand reassuringly and flash her a big smile. Just one friend helping another friend. “Shall we?”

She nods, and we walk together up the steps in front of the restaurant.

“Sam and Ellen, or Dr. Lane and Ms. Lane?” I whisper quickly as we ascend the stairs. I feel her tense slightly.

“Um, whichever you prefer. Clark actually only met them once before, and it…wasn’t a wonderful experience for any of us.” She stops and turns toward me awkwardly, frowning. “I should have —”

“Lois! You made it! We were starting to worry.” Ellen Lane’s voice carries from ahead of us, and Lois turns sharply toward the voice, pasting a fake smile on her face.

“Mother! Daddy!”

She releases my hand and hurries ahead of me. My shoulders tighten, and I reach up and adjust my glasses anxiously. Given my experience with the Kents the day

before, I really wish I knew what to expect with her parents. Oh well. Resigned, I trot up the remaining couple of stairs and pause uneasily a couple feet back as she hugs first her mother and then her father. Sam Lane is an imposing figure — tall and authoritative; his gruff expression shifts to me, and I nod and extend my hand.

“Dr. Lane. Good to see you again, sir,” I say formally. Politeness usually wins me points. Without hesitation, Sam reaches out and takes my hand firmly, and I easily reciprocate, adjusting my grip strength to meet his.

“Clark,” he says simply.

His eyes momentarily meet mine and then shift back to Lois and Ellen, and I get a strong sense of mistrust. I swallow hard. Lois’s arm is looped through her mother’s, and they step toward us. Ellen then reaches out and gives me a stiff hug.

“Clark, welcome home. What a trip you had, huh? I read your article this morning. Incredible, really.” She is more talkative than Sam, but the interaction is equally as forced.

“It was quite an experience,” I agree.

Lois moves back to my side and takes my hand again. Her warm touch is comforting, and I glance at her next to me and smile. Her deep brown eyes shift as they study mine. *I’ll be okay, Lois. Will you?* I squeeze her hand supportively and give her a tiny nod to reassure her that I can deal with whatever happens. She bites her lip and looks back to her parents.

“Well, I don’t know about you all, but I’m starved. Should we go inside?”

Sam nods emphatically, loops his arm through Ellen’s, and leads the way into the restaurant. Despite the busy hour and the proximity to the crowded medical conference, we are seated right away, and I follow behind Lois, her hand still clasping mine, as we wind our way to an intimate, small table for four near the back of the restaurant. I step ahead and pull Lois’s chair out for her and then offer to help her take her coat off. She smiles a thank you at me and shrugs her coat off her shoulders. We both sit. Sam Lane watches me almost suspiciously, and I give him a tight smile and lower my eyes to the menu. Standard Italian fare.

The waiter, an older Italian gentleman with a heavy accent, takes our drink orders. Sam and Ellen both order Zinfandel, and Lois surprises me by ordering a Pinot Grigio. I stick to tea, and even that elicits a sideways glance from Sam.

“Designated driver,” I say with a weak smile. The truth is, I have never had so much as a sip of alcohol in my life. The car wreck that killed my parents involved a drunk driver, and although I doubt alcohol would even affect me, I have never had any desire to find out. But of course I

don’t feel like sharing that information. Sam just shakes his head and looks back down at his menu. Lois reaches over from under the table and gives my knee a squeeze.

“So, Daddy, how long are you two in town? Lucy said until Wednesday,” Lois says. She shifts in her seat and tucks a stray lock of hair behind her ear. I glance back down to the menu.

“Yes, until Wednesday morning,” Ellen answers. With a hint of pride in her voice, she adds, “Your father wanted to stay longer, but his assistant rescheduled a neuroendoscopy procedure for Thursday morning.”

“The conference is over Tuesday, and then we’re meeting Lucy for dinner on Tuesday night before we leave,” Sam adds. He nods cordially to the waiter, who brings our drinks, and then takes a long sip of his wine. “Clark, I’m interested in something you wrote about in your article, actually.”

I look up from my menu and straighten my glasses.

“What’s that, sir?”

“You mentioned the Kryptonian technology that uses nanoparticles to repair damaged tissue,” he explains, rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

“Yessir. But it’s not only nanoparticles, sir — it’s a very advanced type of nanotechnology, where each individual particle and its location in the body can be controlled by the technician.” I hope I’m explaining this correctly. The other Clark’s notes had been thorough, including drawings and diagrams, but the technology is quite beyond anything we currently have on Earth.

“Could it be used — do they use it to target and eradicate cancer or other types of malignant cells?” he presses, his eyes boring into mine. “And can the particles cross over the blood-brain barrier?”

“From my understanding, sir, cancer is not a problem on New Krypton,” I reply, taking a quick sip of my tea. “...although I’m not sure if they eradicated it or if it was just never a disease that affected Kryptonians. However, yes, the nanoparticles they use can cross through the blood-brain barrier. In fact, I watched a procedure in which the physician repaired a traumatic brain injury, including damaged neurons within the brain and nerve cells within the spinal cord, simply by injecting these programmed nanotech particles into the patient’s bloodstream. It was completely non-invasive, and the patient recovered fully within about 10 minutes.” I surprise myself with how easily I talk about the details from the other Clark’s journals as though I were there sharing his experiences.

Sam’s expression is at first skeptical and then shifts to something more hostile.

“I don’t suppose you thought to bring some back with you,” he says, scowling.

Yep, apparently, I've done some great disservice to the people of Earth. I suppress a sigh.

"No, sir, unfortunately that was not possible."

"Of course not," he scoffs.

"Daddy, really, how was Clark supposed to —"

"I'm just saying, Lois, they have all this incredible technology, and it's right there at his fingertips, and what did he bring back with him? Words and stories. Nothing concrete. Nothing tangible." Sam takes another sip of his wine and shakes his head slightly.

"Daddy —"

"No, Lois, it's okay. It's actually a fair argument," I interrupt. I steel my nerves a bit and meet Sam's eyes, forcing myself not to recoil at the resentment he holds for me — or rather for the other Clark, I remind myself. Not me. "However, sir, if you had also seen the other applications of this technology, you would understand why we here on Earth are not ready to have such power."

Sam eyes me doubtfully. "Go on."

I nod and continue. "It's true that their nanoparticles had amazing medical applications, but they also used this technology to build incredibly dangerous weapons. Bombs, drones, guns — all unlike anything we have here. And as easily as they could program the nanoparticles to repair and heal, they could also program them to kill and destroy, almost like a biological weapon." I pause. I'd left a lot of details from the other Clark's notebooks out of the article. Including these details. I lower my voice slightly. "One of the main weapons the Kryptonians used in battle resembled a simple double-edged sword. But they would coat the blade in a layer of pre-programmed nanoparticles, which would cause irreparable damage to the tissues surrounding the wound the sword created."

Sam doesn't respond right away. Beside me, Lois is very quiet, and I can almost feel her trembling. I want to kick myself. She doesn't need to know all of this. I'd left the information out of the article for a reason.

"I see, well then..." Sam frowns.

"The technology is incredible, sir, it's true," I add.

"However, the responsibility to use it for good — maybe we aren't ready for that yet. The Kryptonians are a far more advanced people than us, and yet..." I allow myself to trail off rather than finish the statement. I think Sam understands my point. I reach over under the table and take Lois's hand in mine. She is indeed shaking, and she looks up at me, tears in the corners of her eyes. However, she manages a tight smile and then pulls her hand away to take a sip of her wine. "So, you see, Dr. Lane, sir —"

I twist my head abruptly as my superhearing kicks in. Screams and crunching metal and frantic cries for help flood my mind. I quickly focus my hearing and locate the problem — an out-of-control bus speeding down 6th Street

a few blocks away. Pedestrians and bus passengers are in immediate danger. Panicked, I glance at Lois. She recognizes my expression, but her eyes widen and then dart to her father. I'm no good at finding excuses to run off; I haven't had to use them. I could always just leave, and no one would question me. But that obviously won't work here.

"Uh, I think I left my — my wallet in the car. Yeah, um, I-I'll be right back," I stammer, standing up quickly. I make the mistake of looking at Sam before I head out. His eyes show disdain and disbelief, and he shakes his head. Lois, however, nods to me.

"Just hurry," she says with a weak smile.

I'm thoroughly confused, but I nod and take off at a quick jog toward the front of the restaurant. Screams echo in my head. In these precious seconds lost, the bus has run through several stop lights, resulting in additional traffic accidents. I rush down the street until I reach an acceptably deserted alleyway and then launch up into the sky as I spin into the suit. Within another second, I reach the bus, apply appropriate pressure to the front grill, and gradually slow the bus to a stop. The passengers inside erupt in a chorus of cheers, and the bus driver claps his hands together and bows his head to me while saying, "Thank you Superman, thank God!" I quickly scan the passengers; no one is injured, and I speak briefly with the police officers arriving on the scene. Then, I shoot back up into the sky and toward the restaurant.

As I land and change back into my dress suit and slacks, my keen hearing picks up the conversation going on at our table, and I stop suddenly, my hand frozen on my tie. "...you let him do this to you again." Ellen Lane's voice is agitated, angry. Sam pipes in, "*I told you that man was no good for you, Lois, but you wouldn't listen. He can't even stick around through a simple lunch.*" "How can you trust he'll be there when you need him? Believe me, Lois, I know a cheater when I see one. No offense, Sam," Ellen adds. Lois's heartbeat is erratic and fast. "*He just left his wallet in the car. Really, he'll be right back,*" she argues. But I hear defeat in her voice. "*That's what he said last time too. And then he was gone for an entire hour! And, if you remember, he then had the gall to come to me later that day and ask my permission to propose to you!*" Sam Lane is also furious, although he manages to keep his voice low to avoid attracting attention. "*Daddy, I —*" Lois stops herself, and I hear the waiter ask if they are ready to order.

At least now I know why Sam Lane doesn't like me — er, him — well, now me too. The other Clark must have gotten called away on Superman duties and not made it back quickly, which the Lanes interpreted as a lack of respect for their daughter. My jaw tightens. I guess having

a secret identity is not always easier or better. I pull my wallet out of my pocket for good measure, jog up the steps to the restaurant, open the door, and hurry to the back of the restaurant. Holding the wallet up triumphantly, I smile and nod at the Lanes and take my seat next to Lois.

“Sorry about that,” I apologize quickly, stuffing my wallet back into my pocket and then picking up the menu. “Is it my turn to order?” I look up at Sam and Ellen, who both glower at me, and then to the waiter, who nods tentatively. I easily order in fluent Italian. “Eccellente, prendo il pollo al pesto, per favore. Grazie.”

The waiter looks surprised for a second and then smiles and replies, “Ah, tu parli italiano. Il pollo al pesto è una buona scelta, signore.”

I hand him my menu, and he turns and leaves the table. Silence follows. Next to me, Lois is tense. I can almost feel her shaking with guilt and sorrow. I realize she’s worried about me again. True, I do feel a little powerless in this situation; Sam and Ellen Lane have already made up their minds about Clark Kent. However, I hate that she’s upset, and I wish there was something I could do to help her feel better. Maybe I can try to make amends with her father, somehow.

I swallow and adjust my glasses in a familiar gesture of uncertainty. Raising my eyes, I see he is watching me with irritation as he sips his wine. My jaw clenches, but I hold his gaze. Would he appreciate boldness, or think me arrogant? I maintain eye contact for another moment. I recall an article from the other Clark’s portfolio reporting on increased rates of neurodegenerative diseases in the homeless population. Maybe if I can speak to something he is interested in, I could smooth things out a bit. I continue to hold his gaze.

“Dr. Lane, a quick question, if possible, for a follow-up article that I’m planning on a story I did last year,” I start. His scowl grows, but he nods slightly. “Maybe it’s out of your area of expertise, I’m not sure. Do you perform surgeries on patients with neurodegenerative diseases, particularly Alzheimer’s disease and Parkinson’s disease?”

“Actually, I do. I’m presenting tomorrow morning on a clinical trial we recently completed on the use of MRI-guided focused ultrasound neurosurgery in patients with Parkinson’s disease.” He is obviously surprised and curious, and he leans forward a bit at the table. Perfect.

“Excellent. Maybe you can help me then,” I say as I sit back a bit in my chair. Next to me, Lois visibly relaxes and shifts in her chair a bit to watch me as I speak. “In an article last year, I wrote about the increasing prevalence of Parkinson’s disease in the homeless population. Obviously, there are difficulties with properly treating these patients, who are less likely to seek out medical care. The APDA has outreach programs for homeless populations, but

follow-up and compliance rates are low. Would you have any comments or advice on how to increase treatment compliance and whether surgical options could be effective if implemented for homeless individuals?”

“Interesting ideas, Clark. Let me think,” Sam replies, rubbing his chin.

I sneak a glance at Lois, who smiles at me tentatively, her eyebrows raised. I shrug slightly and smile back. Maybe this lunch is salvageable still. I sip my tea and listen intently as Sam begins a lengthy response to my complicated question.

Chapter 13

Miles out to sea, the cruise ship ahead of me lurches sideways as water seeps in through the 10-foot crack in the hull. Passengers cry and huddle together in the pouring rain as they pile onto lifeboats on either side of the vessel. I fly by the bridge and wave to the captain, who breathes a sigh of relief, and I then dive down into the rough waters toward the broken hull. The blaring alarms are silenced as the captain’s voice announces over the loudspeaker, “*Please hold tight everyone, Superman is here!*” And there is a collective calming of the passengers from aboard the ship.

I reach the crack and survey the damage, which is extensive. I place my hands against the sharp, rough metal of the hull and flatten out the edges of the crack. I then focus my heat vision to weld the metal back together, creating a strong new seam. Water boils around me as I work, bubbles forming and rising up to the surface. I double check the seam; it seems to be holding strong. The storm above, however, is intensifying, and I worry the ship and its hundreds of passengers are still in danger. I fly back up to the surface. Despite its size, the cruise ship is being tossed around in the huge waves, and the crews are now hurriedly ushering the passengers back into the interior of the ship, out of the rain, wind, and lightning. I fly back to the bridge and land lightly on the deck outside. The captain motions me in as he and his co-captain work to try to keep the ship on course.

“Captain, good evening, sir,” I say formally, stepping in the room with my arms crossed over my chest.

“Superman, you have no idea how glad we are to see you,” he responds, leaving the control panels and reaching out to shake my hand.

I reciprocate the gesture with a nod and then look out toward the storm ahead.

“I sealed the crack in the hull. However, I’m quite concerned about this storm,” I explain. As if to illustrate my point, a bolt of lightning strikes the open ocean out in front of us, followed seconds later by a deafening crack of thunder. The ship again lurches as another huge wave hits,

this one sending sprays of salt water onto the deck below us. “Can I assist you to your next port, so the damage to the ship can be looked at, and the water in the hull can be drained?”

“You can do that? Yes, please,” he responds quickly. He looks back to his co-captain for a moment, who nods vigorously, and then to me again. “We were headed to Boston as our next port of call; however, Metropolis is much closer, just a few miles.”

“Metropolis it is then,” I agree. “I’ll make the trip as smooth as I can. However, if you can make an announcement that all of the passengers please take a seat, if possible, I would appreciate it.”

“Good idea, Superman. Right away.” He picks up a phone and dials a number. A second later, his voice can be heard over the loudspeaker. “Good evening again, everyone...”

I nod, turn toward the doorway, and launch myself back out into the storm. Pounding rain, lightning, and strong winds continue to rock the ship. As I dive back down into the frigid waters, I scan the ship’s frame and quickly locate the strongest part of the hull. I carefully place my hands on the bottom of the ship and press upwards slowly, monitoring the surrounding parts of the ship and frame to ensure it holds. The ship creaks and groans, but does not break, and I continue pushing upwards until I am holding the ship, still mostly level, but up over my head and just a few feet above the crashing waves. I fly relatively slowly and bank left in a wide arc until I am heading back toward Metropolis. I carefully focus my hearing into the ship; the passengers and crew are unusually quiet as the captain continues announcing instructions and updates over the loudspeaker.

“We are heading southwest now at about 60 knots, and we should arrive to port in Metropolis within only a couple minutes. Thank you everyone for your cooperation. Please continue to stay seated until we have reached the port. Thank you again.”

The port comes into view, and I slow as I bring the huge ship closer to land. “*Superman, if you can hear me, we are cleared to dock at Pier 3,*” the captain says from the bridge. I scan the port and see an emergency crew waving me down from Pier 3. The wind and waves have calmed a bit, so I gradually turn toward Pier 3 and lower the ship down into the water. Several minutes later, after I’ve carefully followed the captain’s instructions, the ship is safely docked, and I emerge from under the water to applause of passengers gathered on the deck and media, spectators, and emergency crews assembled at the pier. I nod briefly and wave, then head back to the bridge to check in with the captain.

“Superman,” he greets, rushing over to me to shake my hand again. “On behalf of myself and the entire crew, thank you.”

“You’re welcome, sir,” I reply politely.

I nod to him and the co-captain, who is on a phone call, and I head out, flying up and over the brightly lit city. Everything is quiet for a Sunday evening in Metropolis, and I find myself drifting a bit aimlessly high up above the city, focusing my hearing on the many sounds of people moving about their lives. I fly up a bit higher and allow my hearing to extend out farther. To New York, Washington D.C., Dallas, San Francisco, Tokyo, London, Sydney, Moscow, Istanbul, Baghdad. The world is loud. As loud as mine was when I first became Superman.

“They have forgotten hope,” a voice echoes in my head. *His* voice, I realize.

I feel him there with me — quite an odd sensation, and too difficult to describe. As I stare down at the city, I almost see another image, similar yet different, of another night from another pair of super eyes. I sense the protectiveness he felt toward this city, this Earth. The feeling of his presence soon fades, however, and I’m alone, still floating aimlessly hundreds of feet in the air.

I shift my focus again to outside Metropolis. The heavy warfare in the Middle East bothers me, and I focus on gunfire and explosions coming from Aleppo, a highly populated city in Syria. Screams of panicked civilians reach my ears. I hesitate. Interfering with political and military fighting has always been a tricky topic for me. But civilians and children are in danger, and that’s unacceptable, regardless of the military conflict.

My decision made, I race off around the globe on my next super feat for the evening. At least if I keep myself busy, I won’t have time to worry about going to listen to Sam Lane speak at the medical conference tomorrow morning and then heading to work at the Daily Planet with Lois in the afternoon. I increase my speed more as another explosion rocks the city, accompanied by more screaming and confusion. And I hope I can do a little bit of good — bring some hope back to this desperate world that he so loved.

I feel him with me again, and this time, his presence is surrounded by a bright light and warmth.

“Help them all,” he tells me. *“Help them all.”*

Chapter 14

“I still can’t believe Daddy invited you to his presentation this morning,” Lois says as she pulls the Jeep into the parking garage below the Daily Planet. She maneuvers skillfully into an empty spot near the elevators and smiles at me broadly. My heart does a flip-flop; I love to see her smiling. “I mean, you managed to smooth out

six months of animosity in just a few minutes. That was quite a feat, you know. Did you learn anything that might help you to write that story?”

“Not too much. It was all quite technical and detailed,” I answer. I unfasten my seatbelt and hop out to open the door for her. She shakes her head slightly, but allows me to help her out of the car. “I did get to speak with a representative from the APDA afterwards, and she had some good ideas,” I explain, closing the door behind her. “I’ll follow up after I run the idea by Perry later.”

As I follow Lois to the elevators, her shoulders tense, and she crosses her arms over her chest. I stand a few feet back to give her space as she stops and presses the ‘up’ button. A moment later, the elevator arrives; however, she doesn’t move to get on, and it closes and starts back up. I hear her take several short, shallow breaths, and her hand trembles as she once again presses the ‘up’ button. I reach out and place a gentle hand on her shoulder.

“Lois, we can wait still, you know, if you’re not ready. Perry will understand,” I suggest, my voice quiet.

She turns to me, and I see she is still managing to hold back her tears. But only barely. The elevator dings again, and the doors open. Quickly, maybe before she can change her mind, she grasps my hand and tugs me after her into the elevator.

“And last night — the cruise ship and then Aleppo,” she says, changing the subject quickly. “That fighting in the Middle East started just after...well, you know, about three months ago.” She falters and leans into me slightly. I squeeze her hand reassuringly. She continues. “It’s gotten progressively worse. And Russia has taken the side of the rebels. They may have been behind the attacks on Aleppo last night.”

I close my eyes for a moment, trying not to relive the devastation I’d seen the night before. Thousands of civilians were killed or lost their homes and families and had nowhere to go. I felt like I’d been able to do very little except stop some incoming attacks and move the injured out of the area; there had already been too much destruction by the time I’d arrived. After I had stopped several missiles from hitting their targets, I flew in and spoke to the leader of the rebel army at the front line of fighting and convinced them to respect a ceasefire so civilians could get out of the area. Being fluent in Arabic certainly did help. For several hours, I then continued to help transport injured victims and terrified civilians to safety. By the time I’d arrived back in Metropolis, I’d had to shower, change, and get to the medical conference, where I’d listened to Sam Lane speak about the clinical trials of his neurosurgical technique in patients with Parkinson’s disease. Even for Superman, the last twenty-four hours have been exhausting.

“I think they are still respecting the ceasefire I... requested...last night,” I explain quietly. “I hope it lasts. But it’s a complex situation over there. Maybe too complex for Superman to fix. I don’t know.”

The elevator doors open to the bustling newsroom, and we step out together, her hand gripping mine securely. She leans into me as the Monday midmorning hustle of the newsroom comes to a grinding halt; all eyes shift to us, and I find myself hesitating as my own insecurities suddenly hit me.

Everyone look at the alien. He’s not one of us, and he never will be. He thinks he’s helping, flying around in brightly colored tights. Everyone laugh at the alien.

“Clark?” Lois’s voice tugs at me, and I shake myself as I look at her sharply. She seems to have regained her confidence as I’ve lost mine. “Jimmy is coming. Jimmy Olsen. Are you ready to meet him?”

“Yes.” I nod quickly and shift my gaze around the room again. Several colleagues wave and smile. A few shout, “Clark! Welcome back!” or “Hey, Clark! Good to see you!” I smile tightly. A young man whom I recognize as Jimmy Olsen, dressed in dark blue jeans and a gray and red T-shirt, jogs up the ramp toward the elevators.

“CK! Oh, this is the best day ever!”

His huge smile is something I’ve seen only once before, when I visited the Daily Planet in the other Lois’s universe and needed that Jimmy’s help with some research. In my world, Mr. Olsen, Editor-in-Chief, definitely does not smile like that — at least not to me. Lois squeezes my hand and then steps away as Jimmy grabs me in a big bear hug. I return his hug, patting him on the back amicably, and he steps back. My tension eases a bit. No one is staring at me thinking I don’t belong, nervously worrying about my heat vision, wondering if I’m going to call in my alien army at any moment. They all see me as Clark Kent — mild-mannered reporter, Pulitzer-winning writer, colleague, friend, and fiancé to Lois Lane.

“Jimmy, good to see you,” I say, smiling back at him. I pat him on the shoulder and move back closer to Lois.

“I can’t believe it, CK. I —”

“Jimmy! Don’t smother the man, give him some space.” Perry White’s voice booms from the other side of the newsroom, and we all look over in unison. Perry stands in the doorway to his office, grinning from ear to ear. He forces a gruff tone, although he’s still smiling. “And where’re those photographs of Superman helping with that cruise ship last night? We need those for the afternoon edition.”

“Right on it, Chief!” Jimmy answers. He turns back to me and shrugs. “Some things never change, huh, CK? We should get together when you’re free! Drinks on me.” He

smiles again and heads off toward the darkroom, waving as he goes.

From back across the newsroom, Perry motions at us. “Clark, get on over here, son, and let’s chat a bit,” he suggests, and he retreats into his office.

Next to me, Lois starts forward. However, I don’t move yet. From a few feet ahead of me, she turns back toward me. Our eyes meet, and her weak smile chases away a bit of my uncertainty and gives me strength.

“Are you coming?” she asks gently.

I nod mutely and follow her. As I did for her earlier, she offers me her hand, and I accept.

“Sorry,” I whisper as we walk, hand in hand, down the ramp into the bullpen. “It’s all a little overwhelming.”

She lets out a sharp breath. “I know what you mean. Well, maybe. I mean... What do you mean?” She stops half way down the ramp and turns to look up at me, her hand still clasped in mine.

I look around and smile tightly as another of my new colleagues greets me with a nod and wave. My eyes meet Lois’s again, and I reach up with my free hand and adjust my glasses.

“People are nice,” I say simply, my mouth twitching into a half-smile. “I’m not used to that.”

“Oh, right,” she mumbles, dropping her eyes momentarily. She shifts her purse up higher onto her shoulder and blinks several times. I imagine she is thinking of him and his interactions with their colleagues. It is clear he was well liked. She looks back up at me and smiles weakly. “Well, you’re a nice guy. People should be nice to you. Come on.” She pats me on the chest, turns, and starts walking again, dragging me behind her.

We continue through the bullpen to Perry’s office, and she leads me in and then releases my hand and shuts the door behind us. Perry White sits behind his desk, which is scattered with papers and file folders, and holds a large colorful coffee mug with the words “Elvis Presley – Indianapolis – 1977” in his right hand. He sets the coffee down and smiles up at us. He looks almost exactly as I’ve known him, minus a few pounds and plus a small scar above his lip.

“Please, sit,” he says, motioning to the chairs in front of his desk. “Oh, son, well, I’m so happy you’re back, I could just kiss you. But I won’t, of course. I’ll leave that to, uh, your little fiancée here,” he teases, smiling knowingly at Lois and then at me.

I feel Lois tense up next to me, and I quickly chuckle at his joke to maintain our façade. I place my hand over hers where it rests on the arm rest of her chair and turn to smile at her. She forces a smile back at me. Ugh, this is too awkward. I lean over with the pretext of kissing her on the cheek, but instead whisper a quick “Sorry” into her ear. As

I straighten back up, her eyes meet mine, and I know she is okay. She blinks a few times and turns back to face Perry, who seems to have missed our super stealthy interaction.

“Clark, son, that story of yours — well, the suits upstairs were quite happy, and our circulation numbers have never been better. I’m also hearing that you’re being considered for another Pulitzer nomination, son.”

“Oh, really, wow, I...”

My voice trails off. I’m speechless, really. Although I feel that story may have been the best piece I’ve ever written, I find myself hoping that I don’t actually get the nomination. After all, I didn’t really do anything but write about *his* experiences.

Lois seems to feel the same.

“Really, Perry, another nomination?” she asks, abruptly pushing herself up to stand. Her hand slips out of mine. “I mean, the story was great. No offense, Clark. But are they just handing out Pulitzers nowadays? What about that story I did last month on overdose deaths and excessive opioid prescription rates in veterans?”

“Now, Lois, honey, we talked about this last week,” Perry says, dropping his chin to look at her over the top of his glasses. “Your story was groundbreaking, but it’s just a start. To be Pulitzer material, you need a solid follow-up. In fact, why don’t you two work together on it — let Clark get back into the groove of things and give you the best chance of getting that Pulitzer.”

“You think I can’t work alone, Perry? You think I *need* a partner?”

I bite my lip anxiously as I glance sideways at her. Her face is set hard in a scowl, and Perry even seems to recoil slightly from the intensity of her stare.

“I, uh, think it would be more for my benefit than anything, Lois,” I mumble quietly, rubbing the back of my neck. “I could use some help getting settled again.”

“I know that. I just don’t like the implication. Perry, you know better,” she snaps irritably. She glowers at him and then grabs my hand and pulls me up. Annoyed, she adds, “Come on, Clark. Let’s go get me a Pulitzer.”

Chapter 15

We quickly get set up in a free conference room, where Lois spreads out all of her research and starts getting me up to speed on her story. With the privacy of the conference room, I am able to use my superspeed to read through all of the documentation she has in a matter of seconds. She’s done incredible work, and I am amazed at the dots she was able to connect from various facets of the investigation. I continue looking over her data and research as she retreats to get us refills of coffee.

“Did you notice this?” I ask as she returns with two mugs of the steaming black liquid.

I point to several lines of data in a printout listing prescription rates from various hospitals around the country. She leans over my shoulder, sets down my coffee, and narrows her eyes slightly as she reads the text and numbers on the page.

“The opioid prescription rates from these three hospitals are abnormally low — I’m talking about 10% the national average — but the overdose-related death rates in veterans in the areas surrounding the hospitals are some of the highest in the country.”

Her hand reaches out over my shoulder, and she traces a finger down the page, pausing at each of the three hospitals I’d marked with asterisks.

“You’re right,” she murmurs. “Hmmm. So, either they are somehow fudging the numbers they are sending to the DEA or —”

“Or the veterans dying at and near these hospitals are getting their prescriptions elsewhere?” I finish, twisting my head to look at her questioningly. To my surprise, she nods enthusiastically.

“Right, Clark, good.”

She straightens up and starts pacing the room, and I can almost see the wheels in her head turning. I watch her for a moment, noting the way her eyes shine and her fingers twitch as she bites her lip in concentration. Her hair is pulled back in a neat bun today, and her perfectly fitted mauve dress suit accentuates her curves. The material of her white blouse stretches across her chest, drawing my gaze into dangerous territory, and I pull my eyes away, back to the data.

I clear my throat and again study the list in front of me. My investigative reporter skills are quite rusty, but I notice another detail.

“All three hospitals are VA hospitals,” I note. “And all are located within a 50-mile radius of Metropolis.”

Lois stops her pacing and steps back toward me. She grabs the paper out of my hand and stares at it again, her eyes wide.

“How had I not noticed that before? Good catch, Clark.” She hurries to the door and pushes it open, scanning the newsroom. “Jimmy!”

The young researcher snaps his head up from his desk and jumps to his feet. Lois waves him in and then scoots back over to the table, setting down the paper and running her finger down the list again. A moment later, the conference room door opens, and Jimmy Olsen peeks his head in.

“What’s up, Lois?” He steps fully into the room and smiles widely at me. I nod back.

“Jimmy, we need a list of all the pharmacists, doctors, nurses, and other staff members at these three hospitals, ASAP,” she says, shoving the list at him and pointing to

the three marked hospitals. Jimmy looks briefly down at the paper and then nods.

“You got it, Lois, CK, right away!” He smiles again and dashes out of the room and back to his desk.

Lois turns to me, a huge smile brightening her face. The room seems to light up around her. I allow myself a small smile as well, but I lower my eyes quickly as I feel an overwhelming urge to hug her. *Control yourself, Kent.*

“It’s nearly 2. We should grab a bite to eat while he’s getting the list for us,” Lois says, grabbing her coat off the back of one of the chairs. I glance up at her, and she’s watching me thoughtfully. She tilts her head slightly. “You haven’t heard any uh, you know, calls for help, since I picked you up from the medical conference this morning.” Although it’s almost phrased as a question, she issues it more as a statement. I nod.

“No, it’s been quiet,” I agree, and then I grimace. “We probably just jinxed it, you know.”

She laughs, and my heart skips a beat again.

“You’re right. Sorry,” she giggles. Her expression changes then, however, and she exhales deeply and turns toward the door. “He used to say something similar.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue, and before I can stop myself, I echo the words he seems to have inserted into my head. “Don’t jinx it now.” I freeze as she spins around to face me, all the color draining from her face.

“H-how...?” She backs up a step, and her hands wring together nervously. “How did you know that?”

I shake my head slowly, my eyes not leaving hers. My mind races. Why had I said that out loud? I certainly hadn’t meant to. I feel his presence with me now, and I almost can’t stop myself from moving toward her and enveloping her in a hug. But I manage to hold my ground. I let out a shaky breath.

“I-I don’t know, Lois. I’m — I’m sorry, it just — I don’t know,” I stammer, and I drop my eyes to the floor. She doesn’t move, but I hear her heart racing, and her breathing is quick and shallow. After a moment, she seems to steady herself. I look back up, and her questioning eyes meet mine. “Maybe I read it in one of his journals?” I offer, although I know that’s not true.

She just nods weakly and steps toward the door.

“There’s a good burger place around the corner,” she says quietly. “Come on.”

I stand hastily and grab my coat as I follow her out of the conference room and toward the elevators. No holding hands this time, and I stay back several feet, giving her the space I know she needs.

About half way up the ramp to the elevators, I feel his presence suddenly grow stronger, and I almost stumble as a sharp pain stabs through my chest. I grab the railing as a glistening black blade presses into my chest and a dry,

harsh wind sweeps dust into my eyes. I'm vaguely aware of Lois suddenly at my side, one hand on my shoulder, and her voice whispers in my ear, "Clark, are you okay?" I nod my head emphatically and straighten back up, but the pain persists, and I see the blade pierce deeper into my chest as the images from this sort of dual vision continue to disorient me. Self-hatred, guilt, and anger fill me, and I close my eyes against the unfamiliar feelings. *Kal, please, stop!* I've never tried communicating with him...or whatever this is...so directly before, but it seems to work; I feel his presence fade abruptly, and the vision of his death dissipates, along with the chest pain and harmful emotions.

Lois is still standing close to me, her hand on my arm. I reach up with a shaky hand and adjust my glasses as I steady my breathing.

"S-sorry about that. I-I'm fine," I stutter, forcing a fake smile on my face.

She sees right through it, but glances quickly around the newsroom and apparently decides not to make a scene in the middle of such a crowded area. She loops her arm into mine and guides me up the ramp the rest of the way without another word. She presses the button to the elevator, and we wait. Her arm remains looped through mine, and her hand clasps mine tightly. I'm glad for the support, but I'm also still bewildered and confused. And honestly, I'm a little scared at the intensity of the vision. I wish I knew why I keep having these visions and experiencing his emotions. This time had been different — I'd remained aware of my current location and surroundings rather than being fully transported into his memory. But that had made it more disorienting.

The elevator doors open with a ding, and she leads me into the small, confined space, which is thankfully otherwise unoccupied. Once inside, she releases my hand and presses the button to take us to the first floor. She then turns and faces me, her eyes studying me uneasily.

"I'm sorry," I repeat, my voice a bit steadier this time.

"What happened there? You looked like..." She pauses and lowers her voice, although we are alone. "...like there was kryptonite around or something."

I shake my head and drop my eyes. "No, it wasn't anything like that. Um —"

The elevator stops abruptly on the second floor, and an older gentleman carrying a stack of this morning's edition of the *Daily Planet* enters, nodding to each of us. My eyes meet Lois's, and I frown and shrug. She steps back next to me, and we ride the rest of the way down in silence. The lobby is crowded, and we push through to exit onto the street. I follow as Lois leads the way down the street toward the burger joint. Ahead of me a few steps, Lois stops and motions to a small restaurant. The placard outside reads *Burger Bistro* and lists the day's specials. A

few outdoor tables are set but empty because of the chilly afternoon.

"Here we are," she says.

I nod and glance over the top of my glasses inside. The restaurant is not busy; several tables are open, and the atmosphere is quiet, unrushed. I reach ahead and open the door for her, and she pauses to look at me before giving me a half smile and stepping into the restaurant ahead of me. A sign just inside the door indicates we should seat ourselves, so I follow Lois to a table near the windows overlooking the street. She sits before I get the chance to help her with her chair, and she gives me a crooked grin this time. At least she's not still upset at me for repeating her Clark's words earlier, I suppose. I grin back and take my own seat across from her as she hands me a menu.

I quickly scan the single-page menu. A waitress greets us and takes our drink orders, promising to return in a few minutes. Across from me, Lois sets her menu down and stares blankly out the window. Her fingers absently tap on the table, and she sighs almost longingly. I wonder what she is thinking.

I lower my eyes back to the menu. Various specialty burgers and fries. Some salads, sandwiches, and a soup of the day. Ice cream and shakes. I find that nothing sounds particularly appetizing with my current mood, but I decide to try their Cobb salad and tomato basil soup, and I set my menu back into the rack at the end of the table, then follow Lois's gaze outside. The day is chilly, breezy, and overcast, remnants of the previous night's storm. Pedestrians hurry along the sidewalk, bundled in their winter coats, though it's not yet winter. I momentarily focus my hearing out a few miles, listening for any disruptions; however, all is still quiet. I turn back to Lois. Her eyes shift restlessly as she stares outside.

"Hey, um..."

I intend to start into an explanation, made up or otherwise, for my behavior on the way out of the Planet. However, I'm interrupted by the waitress, who returns with our drinks and asks to take our order. Lois orders first — a standard type cheeseburger and chili cheese fries — and I then order my salad and soup. She gives me an inquisitive look, but says nothing, and takes a long sip of her soda as the waitress leaves.

"Lois, I —"

And I try again, but this time am stopped by the sound of gunshots from a few blocks away. My head turns in the direction of the sound, and I listen intently. Police officers are being fired upon by a suspect trying to escape from a jewelry store. One police officer has been shot, and the suspect seems to be heavily armed. I glance back to Lois, who is watching me expectantly.

“Sorry, jewelry store robbery a couple blocks away,” I explain, my voice low. “I’ll be right back.”

She nods. “Be careful.”

With as often as she’s said that, I’d have half expected that her words would sound rote, empty by now; however, there is a clear intention and genuineness to her voice, and I smile briefly at her before standing and rushing out of the restaurant. Down the street a couple buildings, I find a nice deserted alleyway, and I spin into the suit and jump into the air. An instant later, I disarm the suspect, deposit him and his firearm in the custody of the police, and rush the injured policeman to the hospital. Fortunately, his injuries appear to not be life-threatening, and he thanks me as they roll him through the Emergency Room doors on a gurney. I nod a response and take off back to the restaurant.

Lois smiles at me through the window as I jog back down the street, straightening my tie, and I quickly enter the restaurant and settle back into my seat just as our food arrives.

“Everything good?” she asks casually as she scoops up a bite of her chili cheese fries.

I settle into my seat and nod. Keeping my voice low, I explain, “One officer was shot, but he should be okay. Superman got him to the hospital quickly.”

“Good,” she replies.

We fall into a comfortable silence as we eat. The salad is surprisingly tasty, with fresh ingredients and an obviously homemade tangy herb ranch dressing. Half-way through her burger, Lois clears her throat and raises her eyes to mine somewhat hesitantly.

“So, um, earlier, at the Planet, on the ramp — what happened?” The concern in her eyes betrays the calmness of her voice.

I drop my eyes to the table for a moment as I contemplate how to explain the incident. My odd connection to and interaction with her dead fiancé are not easy to describe, however, since I don’t really understand it myself. Although I strongly dislike dishonesty, I look back up at her with a carefully constructed expression of confusion on my face.

“I’m not really sure what happened, to be honest...”
Ugh, bad choice of words, Kent, come on, now. “I suddenly felt a strong pressure in my chest — ” *Okay, better, not entirely a lie* — “but it was gone as quickly as it came.”
Also not a lie.

She seems to believe me, but is equally as confused as I am pretending to be.

“Weird,” she replies, taking another bite of her burger. She contemplates my words. “But you’re okay now? Have you felt that same sensation before?”

“I’m fine now, yes,” I say, pushing the food around on my plate distractedly. “And no, I haven’t felt that same

kind of pressure before. It was a bit disturbing.” Again, not a lie. Well, not exactly.

“Hmm, I hope it’s not something weird about, uh, interdimensional travel, or something?” She lowers her voice even more and adds, “H.G. Wells would have told you about something like that, right?”

“No, no, I’m sure it’s nothing like that,” I answer dismissively. “I’m not worried about it, really. I think actually I could just be pretty tired. I haven’t slept much in the last few days. And even for me, that’s rough.”

This part is actually true. Well, kind of. I *am* tired, and I haven’t slept more than four hours in the last three days.

“Oh, right,” she says. A thin lock of her hair escapes from her bun and falls down to frame her face. She reaches up and tucks it behind her ear.

“Sorry, I hope you’re not worrying about me, Lois. Please, you don’t need any extra stress right now. I’m fine, really,” I promise, setting my fork down.

She nods half-heartedly and pushes her plate away. The waitress comes and sets the check down on the edge of the table, and I reach over and pick it up while pulling out my wallet. However, her hand covers mine briefly, and she takes the check with a smile.

“You paid yesterday when we went out with my parents. It’s my turn this time,” she explains.

I want to argue with her, but before I can, she stands and makes her way up to the hostess desk to pay, giving me a wry smile over her shoulder as she pulls her wallet out of her purse. I shake my head and stuff my wallet back into my pocket. At that moment, my cell phone rings, and I quickly take it out of my other pocket. The screen lights up with the name Jimmy Olsen, and I answer eagerly.

“Jimmy, hey, what’s up?” I stand up from the table, grab both of our coats, and start toward the front of the restaurant to meet Lois.

“CK, oh, man, I’m still happy to hear your voice, man!” he exclaims, just a little too loud for my sensitive ears. I pull the phone away from my ear a few inches as he continues. “Just calling to let you know I got those lists for you. I crosschecked them, and there’s some interesting overlap in the pharmacy department. I’m taking off for an assignment for Perry, so I’m leaving the lists on the table in the conference room for you guys.”

“Great, that’s great, Jimmy. Thank you,” I say, motioning with a thumbs up to Lois. She nods and turns back to the hostess, who hands her a receipt to sign.

“No problem! I’ll see you back at the Planet later,” he replies.

“Right, thanks again.”

I hang up the phone just as Lois finishes up. I help her to put on her coat, and then we head back out of the restaurant and down the street. A slight drizzle has started,

and the breeze picks up. Lois shivers and pulls her coat around herself tighter as we walk at a brisk pace, and I explain to her what Jimmy told me on the phone.

As we enter the lobby to the Planet, my superhearing kicks on, and my head twists abruptly toward the sound, which comes from a television in a sports bar across the street. The normal broadcast has been interrupted, and the newscaster announces, in a solemn voice, *“Breaking news — We are getting reports that space debris from a Chinese satellite has hit the International Space Station. The damage is extensive, and the power supply from the solar panels on the station has been disrupted. Without power, air circulation and temperature controls may be compromised, among other complications. All astronauts aboard the space station are in immediate danger.”* Instinctively, I look up, through the walls of the building, out into space. Pushing my vision to its limits, I quickly locate and scan the damage to the space station. I feel Lois’s hand on my shoulder, but I’m too focused to hear her words. One entire end of the space station is damaged, and several of the solar panels that collect the Sun’s energy appear to have been separated from the space station and are drifting away. The astronauts are all gathered in one section of the space station, looking grim. I shake away a feeling of uncertainty that washes over me and glance down at Lois.

“I have to go. I’ll be back as soon as I can, but it might be a while,” I say quickly.

“Okay, what —”

The television in the lobby of the Planet switches to the same news broadcast, and the newscasters are now discussing how long the astronauts likely have before they can no longer breathe or until they freeze to death. Lois turns slowly toward the television, then looks back to me.

“What are you waiting for? Go!”

The insistence in her voice shakes me out of my hesitation, and I nod and spin around, jogging quickly back out the revolving doors of the lobby. I’ve never done anything like this before, and I really have no idea what I’m going to do, but I know I have to try. I rush around the side of the Planet and launch up into the sky as I change into the suit. My eyes scan ahead of me, locking on the space station, and I take a deep breath and I speed up as much as I dare.

Within seconds, I am hovering near the broken solar panels, surveying the damage. Two of the panels have fully detached from the space station, and three others are snapped at the base, but still attached. I know I have no time to lose, and I immediately get started on repairs — first by reattaching the detached panels and then straightening and repairing the snapped panels. The work is slow, and though I work with conviction, I remain

uncertain. However, as I am working to weld the first of the snapped panels back to its base, I hear the relief in the voices of the astronauts inside the space station as the power from the first two reattached solar panels comes back online. I briefly stop my welding and twist my head slightly toward where I’d seen the astronauts as I’d flown up. A man a bit older than me waves enthusiastically from the window and gives me a thumbs up. He speaks directly to me, though he seems unsure of whether I can hear him.

“Superman, we have the two solar panels back online, thanks to you. Please do exactly what you did with those first two panels, if possible, to get the remaining three back online as well.”

I nod deliberately and then return to my work. I absently wonder just how long I can go without breathing, and I keep an ear tuned to the inside of the space station for updates and any more instructions. But all I hear now is joy, relief, and gratitude, spoken in several different languages. I smile as I weld another section back into place, and I feel an incredible sense of purpose and fulfillment.

This is why.

This is why I am here.

I move on to the next solar panel and continue my work.

Chapter 16

Tuesday morning. Fall weather returns with slightly warmer temperatures and a breeze that lifts red and yellow leaves from the trees of the park. I run at a pace any elite marathoner would be proud of, my old Nikes squeaking against the wet sidewalk with each stride. I take my usual path through the park, but then add in an extra loop as I enjoy the fresh air and lack of attention. I am just another runner today. No one stares and whispers. In fact, most wave or nod cordially and continue on their way.

After my second loop, I veer back toward my apartment. Sure, I’ll call it mine. And I expand my senses out to the city. I hear sounds of a relatively normal commute and people starting their day. No huge emergencies requiring super help. No gunshots, bank alarms, or police sirens even. A quiet morning, again.

I jog up the steps to my apartment and pull my keys out of the pocket of my running shorts, allowing myself a smile. Another day of this new reality of mine, and it already feels great.

Inside, the sunlight filters through the windows and brightens the room. I flip on the television and hear the newscasters discussing Superman’s rescue and repairs of the International Space Station the previous afternoon. Officials from each of the countries hosting astronauts on the space station have issued formal messages of gratitude

to the superhero, and the newscasters read the messages out loud. I sit heavily on the couch and listen for several minutes.

Never — not once since becoming Superman nearly two years ago in my own world — have I ever had world leaders issue statements of thanks for anything I'd done. And I'd done a lot of work internationally. I wipe away tears and stand abruptly as I turn off the television. This world is so different from mine.

I rush through a quick shower, get dressed, and head out the door to meet Lois for breakfast. I smile as I walk briskly down the street. I could definitely get used to this.

Chapter 17

Content warning: This chapter contains gun violence, specifically a school shooting. Please know that this was approached with as much care as possible and done with the intent to show how Superman is affected.

The week passes relatively uneventfully, and I get settled into a comfortable routine. I run each morning and do patrols of the city and surrounding areas. I then meet Lois for breakfast — usually at Bobby Bigmouth's Bagels and Buns — and we head into work. In the evenings, I do another patrol and often end up overseas, addressing emergencies on the opposite side of the world. In particular, I continue to monitor the situation in Aleppo, and I'm pleasantly surprised and relieved when the tentative "ceasefire" I'd negotiated continues to hold. I usually get home by 2:00 or 3:00 a.m. and manage several hours of sleep to reset.

Lois's story comes together as we uncover a group of multiple pharmacists working out of three VA hospitals near Metropolis to procure and resell opioids to the vulnerable veteran population, many of whom are homeless and have major medical issues. Friday morning's paper carries the story with our first shared by-line in huge type on the front page — VA Pharmacists Arrested In Opioid Drug-Related Deaths, by Lois Lane and Clark Kent.

Mid-morning on Friday, Lois and I arrive at the newsroom to cheers and an interesting mix of party decorations, including a large banner hanging over the entrance to the conference room with the words "Congratulations Lane and Kent!" painted in red, blue, and yellow block letters. I smile at Lois as she takes my hand and leads me down into the loud, boisterous bullpen. Perry approaches, a silver and blue sparking party hat on his head, and hands us each a glass of champagne.

"To Lois Lane and Clark Kent!" he declares, raising his own glass. "Best team in town! Congratulations, you two! I smell a Pulitzer, Lois!" His toast is echoed by our colleagues around the room. Lois laughs and takes a long

sip of her champagne. I smile and nod thanks to everyone as they approach and shake our hands. Many are wearing hats like Perry's and toss confetti on us.

Lois seems to enjoy the attention, and she is quite at ease as she shakes hands, jokes with our coworkers, and ushers me around the newsroom. We eventually arrive at her desk, and she turns to me and notices I still hold my full glass of champagne. She leans over toward me and takes my glass.

"You don't drink, do you?" she whispers into my ear.

I shake my head. "No, I don't." But I don't offer her more. No reason to ruin the mood.

"Ah, well, more for me," she laughs. She straightens up, smiling brightly, and drinks my whole glass of champagne in one long sip. "Jimmy!"

She pats me gently on the shoulder and then hurries over to Jimmy's desk, where he sits working at his computer, his silver party hat slightly crooked on his head.

I watch her for a few minutes as she thanks Jimmy for his help earlier in the week and then proceeds to question whether his computer expertise would allow him to hack into the DEA to help with our follow-up story. He looks up at me with wide eyes and then back to her, shaking his head vigorously, and she laughs, throwing her head back. Her long, silky curls fall around her face as she smiles at him and assures him that she is joking. She glances over at me, her dark eyes twinkling with humor, and laughs again. An uninhibited, joyous laugh like I haven't heard from her before.

Another of her protective walls has crumbled.

Or she's slightly tipsy from drinking two glasses of champagne. I can't tear my eyes away.

Beautiful. She is incredibly beautiful.

I smile tightly as I try in vain to push away my growing feelings for her. Yep, I admit it. She is beautiful, brilliant, funny, and kind, and I'm definitely falling in love with her. These are not his feelings. I'm 100% sure they are 100% mine. In fact, I haven't felt his presence or had any more visions since Monday.

She dazzles me with another smile before turning and heading back up the ramp toward the coffee machine. My eyes follow her, and I jump with surprise as Perry's hand pats my shoulder. I hadn't heard him approach.

"She's a firecracker, that one, Clark. You're a lucky man." Perry chuckles and pats me on the shoulder again, then heads off toward Jimmy's desk. "Jimmy! Where are those photos of Superman saving that school bus from going over the South Street Bridge yesterday? I need them ten minutes ago!"

Jimmy squeaks a quick, "On it, Chief!" He then jumps up from his chair and jogs toward the dark room.

My gaze drifts back to Lois, who now pours a cup of coffee while she chats idly with Marcy Burns, the travel editor. They lean in close together, whisper conspiratorially, and then look in my direction and laugh again. Lois's eyes meet mine, and she flashes me another blissful smile.

As I grin back at her, a sudden sense of unease hits me. My smile fades into a frown as I focus my hearing outside the building and to the surrounding area. My eyes widen as I hear rapid-fire gunshots, screams, and sirens. A lot of them. I meet Lois's eyes very briefly, and she nods to me, acknowledging that I need to leave. I turn and head hastily toward the stairwell, tugging at my tie. Thankfully, no one seems to notice me. I push open the door to the stairwell, scan ahead to be sure I'm alone, change into the suit, and launch into flight.

My stomach lurches as I exit the stairwell onto the roof and then take off into the sky.

Children.

I'm hearing the screams of very young children.

I extend my senses as I fly north as fast as possible and locate the source of the disruption — a single shooter at an elementary school about 100 miles outside of Metropolis, in a town called Briarwood.

I push my speed faster as bullets from the young man's AR-15 assault rifle approach a group of first graders huddled in the corner of their classroom. Without slowing, I crash right through the window of the classroom and reach out to stop the bullets from hitting the terrified children or their brave teacher, who has covered as many children as she can with her body to shield them from the attack. My jaw set tight, I halt abruptly in front of the stream of bullets and catch them before they can bounce off of me.

The gunman cannot be more than 15 years old, and he recoils as he sees me, the wild rage in his eyes turning to surprise. He stops firing and drops his gun on the ground, raising his arms up in the air in surrender. It's a good thing he is young and looks terrified, because I am angry. I have no time to hesitate, however, and I quickly confiscate his gun and lift him unceremoniously by one arm. I fly him and the gun outside to where a barricade of police cars is growing, and I drop him with the nearest police officer and then rush back into the same classroom.

The teacher is now standing, tears streaming down her face, as the children gather around her and all hug each other as they cry.

"Ms. Garland, are you and your students okay?" I ask quietly, noting her name on the placard on her desk.

All of the students turn and look at me in unison, but do not leave their teacher's side. The young woman twists her head toward me and nods. Her bespectacled eyes are

filled with terror, and she drops into a kneeling position and extends her arms out to embrace as many of her students as possible.

"Good. Please everyone stay here until you are instructed to otherwise by the police, okay?" I say more formally. All of the kids murmur "Yes, Superman" and continue to cry and hug their teacher.

I nod and exit the room into the hallway, my shoulders tensing as I hear more cries, screams, and confusion. The gunman had already worked his way through a large portion of the school before I'd arrived, and a quick scan identifies too many lifeless bodies.

Well, really, even one is too many.

But there are seven, including five children under eight years old and two faculty members. Many more are injured and need immediate transport to the hospital.

I close my eyes for a millisecond, burying the devastating pain I feel at this loss of precious life, and then I get to work. The most critically injured are moved first, carefully flown to the nearest emergency room, which is five miles away. I count sixteen critically injured, several of whom may not make it through surgery, and another ten with minor to moderate injuries. With each trip, I grow more hardened; more effort is required to hide my grief. As I finish my final trip, emergency crews at the school begin to evacuate all the survivors and start the heart-breaking task of identifying the victims.

I land lightly next to the police chief, who glowers at the gunman through the closed window of the police car. His face is tight with emotion, and he turns toward me as I step closer.

"Sir, I have transported all of the injured to Briarwood Hospital," I explain, my voice low and taut. "Is there anything else you need assistance with here?"

He doesn't answer right away, but his gaze instead drifts off toward the entrance to the school, where a line of school buses waits and groups of parents, teachers, and students linger. Finally, he shakes his head and drops his gaze to the ground.

"You never think something like this can happen in your town, I'll tell you," he says. He runs a shaky hand through his hair. "This is a quiet town, Superman. Nothing ever happens here. And now, this." He motions to the confusion in front of him and then turns back to the gunman sitting in the back of the police car as he continues. "And I know this kid. Brian Stricker. My wife teaches English at the high school, and he's in her class. His father is on my bowling team. I don't even understand any of this."

I swallow hard as I listen, knowing this man will be grieving for his town for months, if not years, to come. Hell, I will be grieving as well. This is the first time I've

dealt with a school shooting, even with all my time as Superman on my world. They did happen on my world, though relatively infrequently, but I was never close enough to hear or fast enough to respond.

I feel sick to my stomach as I notice splotches of blood on the ‘S’ symbol on my chest. My jaw tightens again, and I take a deep breath to steady myself.

The police chief steps away from the police car and crosses his arms over his chest. He seems to remember then that I’d asked him a question, and he turns to me.

“Sorry, Superman. No, I don’t think we need any more assistance from you,” he replies. His eyes shift back to the school. “But thank you. Without you, the situation would have been even worse. Our officers were still several minutes out from arriving, and we had no armed personnel at the school.”

I can’t find any words to respond. I just nod briefly. He holds my gaze for a moment before his walkie-talkie squawks, calling him back to work. He gives me a tight smile and takes off at a brisk walk toward the school’s entrance. I take another deep breath and slowly rise up into the air. After one last glance over my shoulder at the scene below, I head up into the sky and toward my apartment. Tears threaten, but I hold them back through sheer force of will.

A few seconds later, I land on my balcony and push open the door. I stumble and don’t bother to stop myself from falling to the ground. On my hands and knees, I crawl into the corner of the room, bury my head in my knees, and wrap my cape around me, trying to block out images of bloody, lifeless, tiny bodies. And I allow myself to cry.

I don’t hear the knock at the front door or the door opening and closing a moment later. I don’t even hear her rapid, regular heartbeat or footsteps as she approaches. But as my body shakes with anguish, I feel her hand on my arm and then her body settling up against mine and her arm wrapping around my shoulders. Her quiet voice murmurs indistinguishable words into my ear, and she leans against me as I continue to cry.

Thank you, Lois. Thank you. I can’t speak to tell her this. Not now. Not yet. But she knows.

Chapter 18

Slowly, I regain control over my emotions, the immediate pain and grief easing. Her presence next to me provides a comfort I’ve never known before, and I open my eyes and turn my head in her direction. She lifts her head from my shoulder and gives me a weak smile that doesn’t quite reach her eyes. Leaning on me slightly, she shifts her feet underneath herself and stands, then offers me her hand. Another simple gesture that fills me with gratitude.

I take her hand and push myself up off the ground. My legs feel oddly stiff, and my knees tremble. I frown as I glance down at the suit. The ‘S’ is darkened by dried blood, and several other streaks mar the blue fabric on my arms, chest, and legs. Blood stains my hands as well, and my heart races as I turn my palms up, unable to pull my eyes away.

A young boy with stunning blue eyes stares up at me, his face red from crying, and he screams as I lift him gently; I feel a slippery wetness on his back where the bullet pierced through his side, and I carefully shift him in my embrace to prepare for the flight to the hospital.

A hand on my arm drags me back to the present, and I look up sharply at Lois’s deep brown eyes, which watch me with concern.

“Let me help you,” she offers quietly. I just look at her for a moment, allowing her to anchor me to the present. However, I realize she’s waiting for me to respond, and I blink several times and nod. “You can shower and clean up, and I’ll take care of the suit. Okay?”

Her voice is kind and gentle. She’s done this before. With him.

A tightness grows in my chest as he makes his presence known again, somehow. Flashes of memories that are not mine obstruct my vision — a red cape wrapping around the broken body of a three-year-old girl who did not survive a car wreck; a panicked rush around a crowded ballroom in the split second before an explosion rocks the building, and a devastating realization that he is too slow; flames licking angrily at dark red boots that refuse to burn as shaking hands reach out to lift a lifeless woman from the blackened rubble of an apartment fire; dirty river water draining from a once-bright yellow school bus as it is lifted from silt, his jaw set tight as he blocks the grief of knowing twenty-one children will not be returning to their families that afternoon. I stagger with the weight of the memories and screw my eyes shut. He gifts me one final image — Lois, her kind, knowing, beautiful smile, waiting for him after each incident with a comforting hug, gentle words, and a shoulder perfect for crying on.

Then his presence fades rapidly, and I feel her hand on my arm again. I inhale sharply and manage to nod in response to her question. Her hand slips into mine, and I almost pull away; the blood on my hands feels dirty, and I don’t want her smooth, warm skin tarnished by it. However, her grip is strong and assured, and she leads me toward the bathroom, where she stops just outside the door. Wordlessly, I step into the bathroom, remove the stained suit, and hand it out to her around the edge of the door. I’m not modest; after all, I fly around in public wearing spandex tights that are, well, quite tight. But I keep my naked body well hidden behind the bathroom door.

“Take your time, okay?” she suggests, her hand briefly brushing against mine as she takes the suit from me. My eyes meet hers, and I nod.

“Thank you, Lois.” My voice rasps in my throat. The words are not sufficient to communicate the magnitude of what she has given me. But they are all I have right now. She tips her head and then turns away toward the kitchen to go wash the suit.

I close the door carefully and move to turn on the water in the shower. My reflection in the mirror catches my eye, and I halt abruptly, my gaze drawn to my chest. Centered under where the iconic ‘S’ symbol would be, my skin appears discolored by blood that had seeped through the suit. I reach up and touch the spot, and stabbing pain flares through me — a detached, distant pain that is not mine. I jerk my hand away, and the discomfort vanishes. My lower lip trembles as I touch the discoloration again. I hear far-off wind, battle cries, and a muffled grunt of pain.

I can't die here. No, no, no. Lois, I love you...

His thoughts, I know.

I feel an urgent need to get clean as soon as possible, and I turn on the water and step into the shower immediately. Ice cold water splashes on my chest, washing away the blood. I close my eyes and stand under the steady stream for several minutes as the water heats. Finally, I pull myself out of the daze I'm in and wash myself thoroughly. Soap and hot water rinse away the blood on my hands, chest, and arms.

I wish it would wash away the images that won't leave my head.

I finish, turn off the water, and grab a towel from the rack as I step out of the shower. I dry myself off quickly and wrap the towel securely around my waist, then exit the bathroom into the bedroom to find some clean clothes. I absently choose a charcoal suit and slacks with a light blue dress shirt and gray striped tie from the closet, and I turn back toward the bathroom to get dressed.

Lois is standing in the doorway, her eyes wide as she stares at me. I freeze. Her eyes seem to drag up from my chest to my face, and her cheeks turn bright red as she waves her hands toward the kitchen.

“I, uh, was just coming to check on you, and I see that you're, uh, fine, very fine, yep, so I'll just go make some tea, maybe. Tea sounds good, right?” Her voice is slightly higher than normal, and her gaze has again drifted down a bit lower. She looks up sharply as she seems to remember that my face is *above* my neck.

“Yes, tea would be great,” I reply with a small half smile. “Thank you. I'll just get dressed now.”

As I step toward the bathroom, I hear her turn and mutter unintelligibly to herself. A moment later, sounds of tea being prepared reach my ears as I pull on my briefs and

pants. Her voice is clearer now, and she still mutters to herself. This time I can hear her words perfectly.

“He's not my Clark, he's not my Clark... God, he looks so much like...”

Guilt forces me to stop eavesdropping. Of course she would be comparing me to him. They probably had a very active love life. So she's probably very familiar with...all of me...

I slip my arms into the sleeves of my shirt and then rest my hands on the sink. I feel selfish; I've leaned on her too much, when she is still grieving the loss of her fiancé. I raise my eyes to the mirror, and as I stare at myself, I resolve to be stronger.

With shaky hands, I button up my shirt and then deftly knot my tie.

No, his tie. And his apartment. And his suit. His story, his life.

This is all so confusing.

Am I still me? Or am I him?

His thoughts invade my head randomly, and I cannot even always differentiate my feelings from his. I lower my head briefly to my chest and take a deep breath as I exit the bathroom.

Lois sits at the table facing the bedroom, and she looks up at me as I emerge around the corner, a tentative smile on her face.

“Hey, you look a little bit better now,” she says, standing and moving to the counter, where the teapot sits. Her earlier embarrassment is gone, and her color has returned to normal.

“I feel a little bit better,” I admit. My feet feel like lead, but I force them to move into the kitchen as I pull on my suit jacket. She hands me a mug filled with Oolong tea and then pours herself a cup as well. “Thank you. And...” I hesitate, exhaling sharply, and I shake my head slightly. I've never been very articulate. There's so much I want to say to her. But the best I can do is, “Thank you, so much, for coming here for me. I-I've never had...”

My voice trails off. I can't even finish my sentence. I lean back against the counter, my chin dropped to my chest as I fight the grief I feel from the morning's events. I silently scold myself; I had just promised to be stronger than this.

She seems to sense my struggle, and she settles against the counter next to me, sips her tea, and then shifts to face me. I turn my head toward her, and our eyes meet. The dark depth of her gaze pulls me in, and I feel an intense longing. I immediately close my eyes.

“You've never had anyone to help you on days like today,” she finishes for me.

“Right.”

I take a sip of my tea.

“Do you want to talk about it?” she asks quietly.

I suspect she knows my answer already. But I shake my head.

“No. Not yet.”

She nods slightly and once again leans back on the counter. Images flicker in my head — the gunman carelessly firing his assault rifle, the bullets streaking through the air in slow motion, the terrified faces of the children huddled together in the corner, the window shattering as I flew through...barely fast enough. Almost not fast enough. And for the seven victims...not fast enough. My stomach turns, and all the air seems to be squeezed out of my chest. I close my eyes again to steady myself.

“Did he — did he usually talk to you about...?”

The question hangs in the air for a moment. I hear her heart rate increase just a fraction.

“Sometimes he would,” she answers hesitantly.

“Although if he did want to talk about it, he’d usually be the one doing the talking... I’d just listen. Just be there for him. Other times it was too painful, like I’m sure today would have been.”

I swallow hard. I’ve seen a lot as Superman. Death and destruction caused by natural disasters — the tsunami in Japan being the most recent example — are hard enough to deal with; however, death caused by the actions of other human beings is so senseless and evil. Particularly when the victims are children...innocent children who should have their whole lives ahead of them.

“And in those cases, what would you do?”

My voice barely raises above a whisper. Lois again wavers for a second before answering. But when she does, her voice is steady and strong.

“Help him and be there, like I did for you just now. And usually this would help too.”

She sets down her tea and steps toward me, then reaches out, wraps her arms around my waist, and holds me tightly. Her head rests lightly on my chest, and I can smell her strawberry-scented shampoo. I hesitate only for a moment before returning the embrace, my arms enveloping her. A comforting warmth spreads through my body, and I feel more at home and loved than I’ve felt since before my parents died. A long, shaky breath escapes my lips, and I close my eyes.

“This does help,” I murmur softly into her hair. Her presence and strength seem to give me life. She holds me for several minutes, an unmoving steadiness about her. Finally, I pull away, and she smiles at me as she slowly releases me from the embrace.

“If you ever need this — a shoulder to cry on, a hug, a talk — and I haven’t anticipated it, please don’t hesitate to ask,” she offers. Her eyes glisten with unshed tears. “Your

job is harder than I know you will admit, and I’m here to support you when you need it.”

A wave of some emotion I can’t identify washes over me as some of the weight I carry on my shoulders at all times is lifted away. I nod as my head drops to my chest.

“Th-thank you, Lois,” I breathe. The only words I can manage right now.

Her hands, which had lingered on my chest, press against me, and I raise my eyes to meet hers. A quiet strength radiates from her. Her face relaxes into a comfortable smile, and she pats me on the chest.

“We should get going if we’re going to make that press conference at the Mayor’s office,” she says casually. She glances at the clock on the wall and grimaces, then looks back at me almost sheepishly. “Actually, we may need to cheat if we’re going to get there on time. Do you mind?”

I almost laugh. But I’m not there yet.

“Of course not, no problem,” I say instead, and I step back from her and spin into a clean Superman suit.

She nods absently and grabs her purse from the table, her shoulders stiffening. My expression tightens as I watch her attempt to relax; she takes a deep breath and closes her eyes for a moment. When she opens them again, I see both her vulnerability and her strength. I understand suddenly how much she loved flying with him... So this simple request, which has taken her an entire week to make, is a huge step in her healing process.

I offer her my hand and a gentle smile, and I hope she knows that I understand her hesitation. With another deliberate exhale, she takes my outstretched hand and allows me to carefully lift her into my arms. Her body relaxes into me, and I tighten my arms around her as I take off out the open door to the balcony.

And we fly together for the first time.

Chapter 19

“Jimmy, don’t question it, just enjoy!” Lois laughs and sips her wine. Her eyes sparkle with amusement as she watches Jimmy Olsen take another bite of steak. She glances at me with a sly smile.

“Seriously, CK, where did you learn how to cook like this?” he asks, shaking his head as he savors the tender meat. He chuckles and sets down his fork. “Remember when you two had Perry and me over for dinner a few months back, Lois, and CK almost burned down your apartment trying to help you cook that roast?”

“I do indeed remember that,” Lois answers, her fingers tapping against the side of her now empty wine glass. I lift the wine bottle to ask if she wants a refill, but she waves me off. “No thanks, I think I’ve had plenty of wine.”

“Jimmy, refill?”

I hold up the bottle as an offering. Jimmy obliges, pushing his wine glass toward me, and I carefully top off his glass, emptying the last of the wine. I stand and move into the kitchen as the amicable banter continues. Lois begins teasing Jimmy about his latest crush on a copy editor named Melinda, and Jimmy digs into a second portion of roasted potatoes. I pour myself a cup of coffee and settle against the counter, watching them interact.

We're now three weeks in. I have friends. Good friends. A steady, productive job at the Daily Planet. Colleagues who respect me both as a person and a reporter. And a second job that fills the world with hope and courage while fulfilling my need to help.

Tonight is a sort of test, really, because tomorrow... well, tomorrow, the Kents are visiting. I haven't spoken with them since the first weekend I was here, when Jonathan kicked me out of their home and accused me of trying to take advantage of his son's death. But Lois and Martha have been working to smooth things over for me with Jonathan, and he finally agreed to see me again. We decided that Lois's apartment would be more neutral territory, and Lois decided that I should cook for them.

So, me being me, I spent two days trying to pick a dish. I finally chose herb-marinated chicken with linguini and asparagus. And then Lois suggested that I 'practice' cooking in her kitchen to get familiar with it, and so we invited Jimmy over for steak, roasted potatoes, and steamed broccoli. I think she just wanted me to cook for her again, since we'd definitely been eating too much take out. However, this has turned out to be another good test, actually, and I can say now that I think we've officially succeeded in the 'swap' — that is, my insertion into *his* life.

There have been a few hiccups, for sure. Last week, Jimmy was the first one to notice that I'm right-handed; apparently, the other Clark always made a big deal out of being left-handed. That was fun to try to explain away. Uh, yeah, something about Krypton's red sun having weird effects on my physiology...? Lois had come up with that one. However, everything else has been fairly simple, I realize. Any faux pas have been easily blamed on my 'bad memory' — another thing the other Clark was well known for — or absent mindedness from my long trip. Several times, I've overheard colleagues asking Lois when we are rescheduling our wedding. And I always cringe. But she never misses a beat and replies that we're still working on it.

Superman has been busy as well. In the three weeks since I've been on this world, Superman has done more than I'd done on my world for the past three months; this world was — and still is — a mess. But I see major improvements. The conflict in the Middle East remains on

hold, with both sides agreeing to sit down in Moscow in a few days for peace talks, which will be mediated by Superman. Tensions of nuclear war have eased substantially. And crime rates in Metropolis and other major cities worldwide have plummeted to below where they were four months ago, before the other Clark left for New Krypton. Lois assures me almost every day that the work I'm doing is uplifting her world.

Despite my protests, I was indeed nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in Feature Writing for my lengthy article on Superman's return from New Krypton. More importantly, Lois and I were jointly nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in Investigative Journalism for the series we wrote on opioid-related deaths in veterans during our first two weeks working together. The award ceremony is scheduled for a month from now in New York City. And Lois already booked us both hotel rooms, planned our driving route, and picked out what she's going to wear. I had laughed as I explained to her that on my world, Pulitzers were given for each calendar year, with nominations announced mid-January for writing published in the previous year. Here, apparently, nominations are announced mid-October for writing published during the prior 12-month period. So both my article and our series of articles had been published right before the deadline. Perry argued that this was optimal since the work we'd done would be quite fresh in the judge's minds. Overall, I've found all of this to be a bit overwhelming. I've never been recognized for my writing accomplishments before. And now two Pulitzer nominations in only three weeks. It feels good...but is still overwhelming.

I shift my coffee to my other hand as Lois brushes her hair back out of her face and laughs at another of Jimmy's terrible jokes. Jimmy smiles and finishes off his wine. He glances over at me.

"No alcohol for you, huh, CK? You used to drink more than all of us combined and never even get buzzed."

I chuckle and shake my head. I've gotten this question several times. Apparently, my doppelganger was well known for partaking in alcoholic beverages at every opportunity. From Lois, I've also learned that he tended to eat like an uninhibited teenager — burgers and fries had been his go-to, which explained the funny look she'd given me when I'd ordered a salad at Burger Bistro that first day we'd worked together at the Planet.

"Nope, Jimmy, not anymore. Coffee, water, or tea for me." I smile nonchalantly and lift my coffee mug for good measure. "Will you be staying for dessert? Chocolate cheesecake with fresh strawberry topping, at Lois's request."

“Homemade?” He raises his eyebrows at me, and I nod with a half-smile. “Oh, man, CK, I really want some, but I’m already stuffed, and it’s getting late.”

“How about I send you home with a piece?” Lois suggests, standing up from the table and navigating around me into the kitchen. She opens up the refrigerator and takes out the dessert. Her eyes light up, and she licks her lips in anticipation as she sets the cheesecake on the counter. “Although on second thought, maybe I’ll just send both of you boys home now and keep it all for myself.”

“Not a chance. You will share the chocolate, Ms. Lane,” I laugh.

I set down my coffee mug to help her portion out a piece for Jimmy to take with him. I pull a plastic container out of her cupboard as she cuts a generously sized slice of the cheesecake. She then transfers the slice to the container, and I close the lid. Jimmy is now standing, watching us with interest, as Lois begins cutting us each a piece. I turn and hand Jimmy the dessert to take with him, and he peers in through the transparent plastic.

“This looks so good, CK. Thanks man,” he says. “And Lois, thank you for having me over. And for the advice with Melinda.” His cheeks turn red slightly as he smiles at Lois and then at me. “I just...aww, well you know, I just want what you two have, you know?”

And here it is. The hardest part of all of this so far. The ‘happy couple’ act.

Lois sets down the knife she’s using and wraps an arm around my waist; my arm loops around her shoulder as though it is the most natural thing in the world. My heart does a flip-flop in my chest. God, how I wish this was real. I hear her heart racing, and I wonder if she’s feeling even just a tiny bit of what I am.

“You’ll find the right woman, Jim,” I assure him. Lois rests her free hand on my chest, and I glance sideways at her and smile. “And when you do, you’ll know it.”

“Or you’ll be like me,” Lois says, a mischievous glint in her eye. “And deny and fight your feelings much too long. You remember when Clark first came to work at the Planet?”

“Totally. It was brutal. CK, I don’t know how you did it.”

Jimmy shakes his head, and I just laugh. I’ve heard this before too. Apparently, Lois had been pretty hard on her Clark when he’d first come to work at the Planet. It had taken him over a year of persistence and growing their friendship until she’d admitted her feelings for him. Of course, the fact that she’d fallen head over heels in love with Superman hadn’t helped Clark’s plight.

“Hey, Jim, let me give you a ride home?” I ask, partially to change the topic and partially because he sways

slightly on his feet as he pulls his coat on. “Lois, can I borrow your car?”

“Nah, CK, I’m fine. I only had two glasses of wine. Or was it three?”

Lois pulls her keys out of her pocket and hands them to me.

“It was four, Jimmy,” she says with a laugh. “Just let him drive you.”

I pat Jimmy on the back amicably and steer him toward the door.

“I’ll be back in a few minutes. Don’t eat my cheesecake,” I joke playfully, glancing back over my shoulder at Lois and wagging my finger at her.

“Better hurry. I make no promises,” Lois replies. She picks up her plate and takes a quick bite. Her eyes close, and a small sound of pleasure escapes her lips. “Mmm, wow. Nope, no promises.”

She opens her eyes again and smiles broadly at me. Her tongue flicks out the side of her mouth to clean up a small bit of chocolate, and I inhale sharply. Does she know what she’s doing to me? Probably not, or she wouldn’t do it.

A flicker of an emotion that is not mine edges into my consciousness, but I force it back. *Not now, Kal.*

“Come on, Jim.”

Fifteen minutes later, I let myself back into her apartment. My piece of cheesecake sits untouched on the table — thank you, Lois — but the kitchen and living room are otherwise unoccupied. With practiced ease, I focus my hearing and locate her in the bathroom; the shower is running, and she is getting undressed. The sound of her bra unsnapping and her almost imperceptible sigh of relief as she removes the piece of clothing sends a shiver through me, and I immediately scold myself, turn off my superhearing, and head into the kitchen.

Don’t be a creep, Kent. Give her privacy.

I make quick work of my cheesecake and then begin washing the dishes and cleaning up. As I put the final dish into the dishwasher, I hear her pad lightly into the room, and her freshly clean scent fills my nostrils. I smile as I turn around, drying my hands on the dishtowel.

I try not to stare, but she is gorgeous. She has changed out of her work clothes in favor of a simple pair of sweat pants and a plain gray T-shirt, and her hair, still wet from her shower, is beginning to curl at the ends as it dries. She wears no makeup now, and her natural beauty takes my breath away. I prefer her like this, really.

I swallow and reset myself. We are alone now, and ‘happy couple’ pretend time is over. I force a smile again as our eyes meet.

“Thank you for not eating my dessert,” I say teasingly.

“Well, I decided if I did eat it, I’d have to run an extra mile tomorrow morning,” she responds with a grin. “And I just really don’t want to do that.”

I fold the dishtowel and set it back in its place on the counter as my smile grows. “I guess I need to work on the recipe more then, if it’s not even worth an extra mile. And I will convince you to add that extra loop around the park soon.”

“You’re so weird, Clark.” She laughs and brushes a stray lock of hair back behind her ear. “I don’t know anyone who runs for fun. You certainly don’t need to.”

“It just helps me feel...a little more normal, I guess,” I admit, ducking my head as I speak. I love that she has started joining me on my run most mornings. But she still teases me about it constantly. Which I also love.

“I know.” Her voice has taken on a gentler note now, and I look up at her sharply. Her expression is unreadable, but she tenses slightly and pulls her eyes away from mine.

“Well, uh, it’s getting late,” I say, stuffing my hands into my pockets. “I should probably get out there and do my patrols.”

She nods, but doesn’t say anything right away. Her arms cross over her chest, and she moves toward the kitchen, where I’m still standing. I stay perfectly still as she walks up to me and settles her hands on my chest. Her fingers work their way up to straighten my tie, and she swallows almost nervously.

“Be careful,” she whispers.

I hear her sadness. And her loneliness. She misses him so much. She acts so strong all the time that it is easy to forget how much she’s lost. A tugging in my gut compels me to wrap my arms around her, and I pull her into a hug. A hug that promises a little bit more than just friendship. His presence is strong right now, and I try, but cannot force him out. She melts into me, shaking slightly as she buries her head into my chest. I allow one hand to gently rub her back, and I rest my head on top of hers.

“Lois, I don’t tell you this enough, but you are an incredible woman. You’ve shown so much strength through all of this.”

My voice is quiet, muffled in her hair, but she hears me, and a low sob escapes her as she clings to my shirt. In my mind, a razor sharp, anxious voice that sounds so much like my own growls, “*Why is she crying? I hate to see her sad. Please, Lois, don’t cry.*”

Without my consent, my own voice echoes his words, “Please, Lois, don’t cry.”

She nods into me, and her body gradually stops shaking. “I’m sorry,” she mumbles, wiping her tears away with one hand.

“Don’t apologize. I’m glad to be here for you,” I say, tightening my arms around her. She doesn’t pull away.

Instead, she moves her arms around my waist and returns my embrace.

Words I cannot say are right on the tip of my tongue. They are my words, but also his. *I love you, Lois.* I bury my head into her hair to keep myself from blurting out these four forbidden words. Or maybe to keep him from somehow forcing the words out of my mouth.

Tentatively, I suggest, “You know, Superman could take the night off, if you need a friend to stick around tonight. I don’t want to leave you when you’re upset.”

“No,” she replies almost immediately. I tense slightly, worried I’ve overstepped. But she quickly clarifies, “I appreciate the offer, but with the progress Superman has been making abroad, and with the upcoming peace talks, I don’t think it would be wise for Superman to take a night off.”

I nod reluctantly. “You’re probably right. But your well-being is more important to me than anything else. If you need me, please just call, and I’ll be here.”

I loosen my arms from around her, and she pulls back and looks up at me. Her eyes are slightly puffy from crying, and her cheeks are wet from her tears. I cannot stop myself; maybe it is me or maybe it is him, I don’t know. My hands reach up to her cheeks and wipe away the tears, my thumbs gently brushing against her soft, pale skin. She closes her eyes but doesn’t move away.

I want to kiss her; her lips are full and inviting. But I don’t.

I smile at her and lower my hands, and she steps back, giving me room to spin into the suit. As my spin slows to a stop, the red cape billowing in the breeze I’ve created, she forces a smile on her face. She’s trying to be brave for me. So I can go and do my job and not worry about her. I lower my eyes briefly.

“I’ll see you first thing tomorrow morning. Have another piece of cheesecake, and we’ll go six miles instead of five,” I joke with a wink.

“No chance. I might have the cheesecake anyways, though. Still only five miles.” Her smile looks slightly less forced now. I grin back at her and nod.

“Sleep well, Lois.”

I reach out and touch her cheek lightly, and she closes her eyes and leans into me. Then I pull away and head toward the window.

I take off slowly into the dark night sky, turning my senses outward. All is quiet in Metropolis. I bank to the east and soar out over the Atlantic Ocean, my sensitive ears picking up sounds of daily life in Europe and beyond. A traffic accident could use my attention in Athens, and a forest fire is growing in Costa del Sol. The tenuous peace in the Middle East region seems to be holding; I hear no

sounds of explosions, gunfire, or missile strikes. I hurry to Athens first.

As the Sun peaks up over the horizon, I feel the warmth of its radiation filling me with power, and I hear his voice again. Stronger this time. And more insistent. I stop mid-flight, hovering over the Mediterranean Sea.

“Is she okay? Tell me she is okay. She should not be crying.”

I shake my head, wondering how he does this, even in death. We’ve had conversations like this before, although not quite this clear or demanding. I’m never sure if I should just ignore him, ignore whatever this is, or continue to interact with the voice in my head. And sometimes I wonder if I’m just crazy. In any case, I am compelled to assure him.

She is okay. She is strong, I tell him, and I feel his sense of relief. Then, his presence fades again, and I am alone.

I gaze ahead. Three cars and a bus filled with tourists have crashed and are blocking the road, and one passenger is stuck inside his vehicle. I push all other thoughts out of my mind and speed through the air toward the disturbance. Time to get to work.

Chapter 20

We run side by side down the winding forested path, occasionally switching to single-track when the trail gets too narrow. Next to me, she pushes herself to keep a brisk pace, and we race through the woods and back out onto the sidewalk path in record time. I glance sideways at her. Her cheeks are red with effort, and a thin sheen of sweat glistens on her forehead, despite the chill of the early fall morning. The Sun shines brightly overhead, no clouds obstructing its light, and a layer of steam rises off the top of the pond as we pass. I usually stop here to enjoy the scenery for a moment, but today, I feel her need to keep going, so I follow dutifully as she pushes herself even faster. Soon, we cross back over the street, and the final stretch of sidewalk to my apartment comes into view. She reaches over and taps my arm playfully, then smiles at me and pushes herself into a sprint for the last hundred meters or so. I laugh and easily keep up with her, matching her stride for stride.

“You...you cheat, you know,” she exhales as she slows to a walk, breathing heavily. I stop next to her, and we walk up the stairs to my apartment side by side.

“I don’t know that I’d call it cheating,” I counter, reaching into the pocket of my running shorts to pull out my keys. She laughs next to me. At least I think it’s a laugh. I suppose it could be a wheeze.

“You...you’re not even winded...after all of that. It’s not fair.” She pats me on the chest teasingly as I unlock the door, and I grin at her.

“I’m also not sweaty and flushed,” I add, reaching over to brush a stray lock of her damp hair back behind her ear.

“See, not fair. You cheat.”

I shake my head and chuckle as I open the door and lead the way into the dimly lit apartment. She follows me inside and then veers off into the bathroom to shower and change, while I start a pot of coffee — a routine that has slowly grown on us over the last couple weeks since she began joining me on my morning run. I deliberately focus my hearing out to the city around us, but it is quiet for a Saturday morning. Instead, I force myself to focus on the steady drip of the coffee into the pot in front of me, and I carefully avoid allowing my hearing to pick up other, more enticing sounds, like the little noises she makes when she’s in the shower, the sound of her hands sliding over her skin as she washes herself and of warm water hitting her face and back and neck. I scold myself for even thinking these thoughts, and I let out a heavy sigh as I get to work preparing a small breakfast for her — eggs, toast, bacon, and fresh strawberries.

Several minutes later, I set her plate at the table as she exits from my bedroom, toweling her long dark hair dry. Her thin blue cotton T-shirt and jeans accentuate the curves of her figure, and I feel my pulse quicken at the sight of her. I force a smile on my face to hide my reaction.

“Hungry?” My voice catches slightly in my throat, and she smiles at me.

“Always,” she says as she saunters over to the table, eyeing the breakfast with keen interest. She pulls out her chair and sits lightly, hanging the folded towel on the back of the chair behind her. “You spoil me, Mr. Kent. A girl could get used to this, you know.”

“I aim to please.” I set my plate down across from her and add our two cups of coffee to the table before joining her. “I enjoy having someone to share my cooking with. It’s much better than eating alone.”

“Well, as the primary beneficiary in this culinary relationship, I will agree with you on that.” She smiles at me and takes a big bite of eggs.

I grin as I spread even layers of butter and strawberry jam on a piece of toast. My thoughts drift for a moment back to when I was a kid, when my mother would spread the butter and jam on toasted homemade bread for me before school. I picture her, in her clean white apron, her hair pulled back in a bun — except that one errant curl that always fell down around the side of her face. My dad would come in from outside, since he had always already been up for hours working on chores around the farm, and he would hug and kiss her, and she’d scold him for getting

her dirty, all the while laughing and loving the attention. Then, she'd usher me off to the school bus with a hug and kiss of my own.

I take a bite of the toast. I should make homemade bread to go with lunch today, I decide. I haven't baked fresh bread in a while. I'll have to get started right away since the process is time consuming. My eyes land on Lois. She is chewing slowly and studying me with a half-smile on her face, her beautiful dark eyes inquisitive.

"What are you thinking about?" she asks as she reaches out and lifts her coffee mug to her lips.

I lower my eyes for a moment before responding. "My mom used to make me toast in the mornings before school. She'd always have freshly baked bread ready. I was thinking I might make a loaf for lunch with the Kents this afternoon."

"Oh." Her voice is quiet. She hadn't expected that, I suppose.

"But I —"

A news broadcast from the neighbor's radio distracts me, and I swing my head toward the sound abruptly, focusing my hearing. My stomach lurches. Not today, of all days.

"What is it?" she says with a hint of urgency. She can sense from my reaction that it's not good.

"Huge earthquake in Los Angeles," I answer quickly. I'm already standing and pushing back from the table, and I spin quickly into the suit. "Sorry, I have to go. It's — it's sounding really bad. I-I hope I'll be back on time for the Kents..."

I meet her gaze, and she nods an understanding. Rescue efforts for disasters like this are not fast work.

"They will understand if you're late. Or if we have to order pizza."

She gives me a half-hearted smile, which I don't return. I step toward the door to the balcony.

"I'm sorry, Lois," I repeat, and I hurry out the window and up into the sky.

My keen hearing picks up the sound of her soft voice with her worried reminder. "Be careful." And I rush on, due west, toward California, where the Sun still hasn't risen. I listen ahead to the sounds of sirens, crumbling infrastructure, and cries for help.

More speed, I need to be faster. I'm always too slow.

I growl in frustration and push myself harder. Almost instantaneously, I'm there, hovering thousands of feet up over the now burning city, and in slow motion below me, the interchange between US Route 101 and State Route 110 is in the process of collapsing. Cars filled with passengers on their very early morning commute plummet as tons of concrete crumples and begins to fall. With a speed I've never known before, I fly down to vehicles

stuck at the lowest layer of the interchange and lift several cars at once, moving them hundreds of feet out of the way to safety. The scene continues to unfold, but I'm moving so fast now that everything almost appears frozen to me. I clear all the vehicles on the lowest level, then move up and up and up, clearing cars and trucks from each of the four levels of the interchange. Only after everyone is safe, do I slow down and allow the collapse to continue as I return to normal speed. My chest is heaving with the effort.

There you go, Lois, I'm finally winded now, I think.

However, I'm not joking or smiling. My hearing picks up more sounds of other buildings falling, bridges collapsing, and heartbeats stopping.

I turn toward the most devastated part of the city, near downtown, where emergency crews are arriving at Los Angeles Children's Hospital. My face pales and I waver in the air as I realize a large portion of the building has crumbled. *No, not more children...* I can't breathe for a moment as my chest constricts. I then blink to steady myself.

Don't waste time. Move. Now.

And I push myself forward, toward the hospital, and start the awful work of searching for survivors among a sea of broken bodies. Small, lifeless, broken bodies. I tighten my jaw and hold back the tears.

Don't waste time. Move. Now.

Chapter 21

Five hours later my dusty boots land heavily on the balcony of my apartment, and I slowly make my way inside. The home is quiet; all the lights are off, and the dishes from breakfast are cleaned and put away. Light from the early afternoon Sun brightens the bedroom as I step down from the balcony, but my mood is grim, my thoughts numb, and my body tired. I stumble into the bathroom and speed through a quick shower to wash away the grime, dust, and blood... And then I get dressed. One thousand two hundred fifty-seven. That's the number of lifeless bodies I pulled out of the rubble. They are saying the official death count is now over nineteen hundred. The earthquake is one of the most devastating in recent history.

I know I saved hundreds of lives. I moved faster than I ever had before, and I remained absolutely focused the whole time. But when I close my eyes, I don't see the faces of the survivors. I see those of the unfortunate victims who did not make it.

I was fast.

But not fast enough.

Although it should be the last thing on my mind, I glance at the clock and realize I might still have time to cook before the Kents arrive at Lois's at 1:00 p.m. We

won't be having freshly baked bread, though. The negative thought etches itself into my brain, and I shake my head violently, trying to push it out. I move back to the bathroom and check my appearance in the mirror. A shaky hand runs through my hair, which is still slightly damp from my shower, and then straightens my glasses. I look presentable. If I can rid my eyes of their haunted expression. With effort, I take a deep breath and carefully fix a neutral expression on my face. Better. A little.

A minute later, I knock lightly on the window to Lois's apartment. She is in the kitchen, organizing the ingredients for the lunch I'm supposed to make, and she looks up sharply toward the sound and then hurries over to let me in.

"Thanks," I say quietly, and I drop down into the room from the window sill and spin out of the suit and into my more casual attire — a black long-sleeved shirt and gray slacks. I immediately start toward the kitchen, shoving my hands in my pockets. "Sorry I'm so late. I think I still have time to get everything cooked if I hurry and maybe use, you know, a little super help. But I definitely won't have time to bake bread. I was thinking of baking fresh bread — I mentioned that this morning, I think. It would take too much time, and I don't really have that right now. I —"

Her arms wrap around me from behind, and her voice, gentle and reassuring, murmurs, "Shhh, now. No rush, Clark."

I turn in her embrace, but don't reciprocate this time. I can't. Or I won't be able to stop myself from crying. I need her to understand.

"Sorry, Lois, I-I just need to g-get cooking," I manage, carefully extricating myself from her arms.

I turn back to the kitchen. The oven is already preheating at 350°F, and she's set the chicken out in a dish, ready to cook when the oven temperature is ready. The ingredients for the homemade pasta are sitting out, and the asparagus has been rinsed and is drying on a platter. She'd thought of everything. I swallow hard and spin back around to face her.

"The Kents are running a bit late, so you have a little over a half hour still," she explains. She steps back up to me. "Clark, we can postpone if you need to. They would really understand."

She reaches out to me again, and this time, I allow her to comfort me. Her hands rub my back lightly, and I rest my head on top of hers. Somehow, I avoid crying.

"I don't want to cancel," I admit, my tentative words muffled in her hair.

"Okay. Then just tell me what I can do to help." She pulls away from the embrace and raises her eyes to meet mine.

"You've already done so much with just getting the Kents to agree to see me again," I say quietly. I attempt a smile, but maybe it resembles more of a grimace. "Unless you know how to make homemade linguini noodles?"

"I do not," she responds, returning my smile. "But I learn pretty quickly."

"All right then." I step away from her and turn back to the counter, where everything is neatly organized. "First, let's get this chicken in the oven, and then, we'll make some pasta."

She nods and moves out of my way a bit as I put the chicken into the preheated oven. We then work together to mix the ingredients for the pasta, knead the dough, cut the pasta into thin strips, and lay it flat in preparation for cooking. We chat idly, mostly about how to make pasta, and I tell her little tidbits about my travels to Italy. I find the process oddly therapeutic, and by the time the pasta is ready to cook, my mood has improved substantially. Lois moves a pot of water to the stove and turns on the heat, and I check the chicken and put the asparagus into the oven to roast.

A knock at the door and sounds of muffled whispers from the hallway send my heart racing, however, and I freeze, holding the hot dish of chicken fresh from the oven in my hands. From behind me, Lois doesn't miss a beat. She removes her apron and pats me on the shoulder.

"I'll get the door," she says. Her eyes meet mine, and she smiles at me reassuringly. "Don't worry one bit, okay?"

I nod wordlessly and set the chicken dish down on the counter. The water will take a few minutes to boil, and the asparagus needs to cook for about eight to ten minutes, so I have a few minutes before I need to do anything else. I rest my hands momentarily on the counter and take a deep breath to steady myself. I hear sounds of the deadbolts being unlocked and the door opening. I turn around as I hear sniffing and quiet murmuring. The Kents step just inside the apartment, setting down their luggage next to the door, and as I watch, the three of them embrace, the two women burying their heads into each other's shoulders and Jonathan wrapping his arms around both of them. I lower my eyes; this is their first in-person interaction since learning he will not be coming home to them — and I am an intruder. My fingers grip the counter behind me as I feel their sadness and grief.

And his presence, which has been absent all day, seems to awaken inside of me. I raise my eyes to the scene in front of me again, and a strong sense of guilt and self-loathing floods my mind. His emotions are almost overpowering and are accompanied by a tightness in my chest. I close my eyes and attempt to shut my mind to his presence.

“Thank you both for coming,” Lois says.

I look up at them from across the room. Jonathan now stands with his hands stuffed in his pockets, his troubled gaze fixed on Lois, as though he cannot yet acknowledge that I’m in the room. Martha and Lois hold hands still, but Martha’s eyes dart to me, and she offers me a kind smile through her tears.

“Clark,” she starts, releasing Lois and moving across the room toward the kitchen. I push myself away from the counter as she reaches out to give me a hug. My eyes close, and my shoulders tense as her arms envelop me in a gentle embrace. A deep sigh escapes me — it’s both of us this time — him and me, and I shudder as I allow myself to feel the comfort from her touch. Martha holds me a little tighter, and her motherly, caring voice whispers in my ear, “It’s good to see you again, honey.”

“You too,” I breathe.

She smells like apples, and a brief, happy memory that is not mine pops into my head. I walk leisurely next to her in the apple orchard at the top of the hill, a backpack slung over one shoulder. She grabs an apple from the nearest tree, brings it to her nose, and inhales deeply, her eyes closed. A smile grows on her face, and she looks at me, her eyes filled with love. She hands the apple to me and then reaches out and takes my free hand in hers. “*I love you, Clark. I’m so proud of you.*” “*I love you too, Mom.*” As I pull her into an embrace, the vision fades, and I open my eyes slowly as she loosens her hold.

A weak smile grows on my lips, and I hold her gaze for a moment before swallowing nervously and shifting my eyes to Jonathan Kent, who has stepped up behind his wife and now stands stiffly, his eyes trained on me.

“Th-thank you for c-coming, Mr. Kent, I —”

“No need to thank me,” he interrupts, his voice gruff but also concerned. “In fact, I owe you an apology, Clark.” I hear his heart pounding unevenly in his chest, but he doesn’t waver. “I unfairly accused you of being dishonest when we met last. I’m sorry for that. I was grieving for my boy, and I... I took it out on you. And that was inappropriate.”

He reaches out to shake my hand, and I return the gesture. His hands are calloused and rough, but there is a gentleness about his grip that reminds me suddenly of my own father.

I try to form words, but none will come. Instead, I just drop my eyes and nod as we shake hands.

“Clark, this all smells wonderful, dear. Fresh pasta, my goodness.”

From the kitchen, Martha’s voice breaks the silence, and I release Jonathan’s hand and turn abruptly toward her. The water is now boiling rapidly in the pot on the stove, ready for me to add the noodles, and the timer on the oven

is about to go off, signaling that the asparagus should be finished cooking. Lois has shut the front door and is now moving to set the table with plates and utensils. I step back over to the stove.

“Thank you, Martha. Lois helped me quite a bit since I was, um, in California for most of the morning. I — it’s, um, maybe another five to ten minutes, and we should be able to eat.” I recognize my tendency to babble yet again, but no one comments on it.

I pull the asparagus out of the oven — it is perfectly cooked and smells tasty — and then I carefully drop the pasta into the boiling water. As the noodles cook, Martha and Lois finish setting the table, Jonathan moves their luggage into Lois’s extra bedroom, and I prepare the creamy garlic parmesan sauce for the pasta. Lois then makes coffee and tea, selecting an aromatic jasmine green tea that has obviously been imported from China. Ten minutes later, we settle at the table and begin eating heaps of pasta, chicken, and asparagus.

Lois keeps a steady conversation going. She describes the story we are currently working on together — an exposé on the New York billionaire and so-called philanthropist Lex Luthor. Lois uncovered some evidence of Luthor’s backdoor dealings with Intergang, a Metropolis-based crime organization, and as part of our ongoing investigation, we’d secured the first in-person interview with Luthor since he became a billionaire, scheduled for Wednesday next week.

“Sounds like it will be a busy week, with the peace talks in Moscow as well,” Martha mentions, glancing across the table at me as I shove a bite of pasta in my mouth. She chews another bite of chicken, her curious eyes watching me. I nod absently and lower my gaze to my plate for a moment.

“I’m due in Moscow in about ten hours, actually,” I explain. I take a quick sip of my tea to wash down the pasta and then continue. “I’m pretty optimistic that we can negotiate a permanent ceasefire. Both sides want to come together, so I hope I can help. Although, I-I’m not sure...” My voice trails off as everyone stares at me. I smile tightly and drop my eyes to my plate again.

Lois reaches over and places her hand over mine in a comforting gesture. It’s actually the first time she’s touched me since the Kents arrived; I almost get the impression she’s been avoiding touching me to prevent upsetting them. As usual, her touch strengthens me, and I raise my eyes to meet hers. She smiles encouragingly at me.

“I know you’re going to be successful, Clark,” she assures me, squeezing my hand gently. I smile weakly in response.

“It’s a complex situation that has developed, and Russia is...playing an odd role. They backed the rebels, but are now offering to host the peace talks. I’m not sure yet what their motives are,” I clarify. *And, I’ve never helped to negotiate a peace treaty before, so I really have no idea what I’m doing*, I think to myself. Martha, however, seems to almost read my thoughts.

“Just trust yourself, Clark, and follow your instincts.” She spears the final piece of her chicken with her fork and pops it into her mouth. “And,” she adds with a hint of a smile, “please give me the recipe for this chicken — it’s to die for! So tender and flavorful. Am I tasting rosemary and thyme?”

Before I can answer, Jonathan pipes in from across the table. “Rosemary, thyme, marjoram, and a hint of sage. And marinated with buttermilk.” There is a twinkle in his eye, and I smile as I nod in response.

“Correct,” I say. “My mom used to make this chicken when I was a kid. She grew all the herbs fresh in her garden. I’d be happy to share the recipe.”

“And the pasta, he learned to make that when he traveled in Italy.”

Lois removes her hand from mine and cleans the last bit of asparagus from her plate. The loss of her touch brings a sense of emptiness to my chest, and I distract myself by standing to clear the table.

“Did you do a lot of traveling, Clark?” Martha asks, nodding a thank you to me as I take her plate and utensils. Lois starts to stand to help me, but I shake my head at her and smile.

“Yes, I, um — I graduated from high school when I was sixteen, and then that summer, I found out I could fly. I traveled quite extensively for the next two years before I went to college. I never really stayed in one place for very long, but I visited as many different places as I could.”

I place all the dirty dishes in the sink and turn back to the table with the pot of coffee. Jonathan holds up his mug, requesting a refill, and I oblige as I continue.

“I stayed at a hostel in Italy, and the owner was an older woman named Bettina. On Friday nights, she would cook fresh pasta for everyone. I helped her out with chores to pay for my stay, and she taught me to cook pasta. The creamy garlic sauce was her recipe as well.”

I refill Lois’s coffee as well and get Martha and myself fresh tea before sitting back at the table.

“He also made this amazing chocolate cheesecake yesterday,” Lois adds with a smile. “If you all are not too full from lunch, that is.”

She sips her coffee slowly, and I settle into my chair and watch as the three of them resume discussing current events, life at the farm, and the Kents’ plans for their anniversary the next month. I remain mostly quiet during

their conversation. I learn much about the Kents from just listening, and my respect for them grows even more. They are humble, kind, compassionate, thoughtful people, and they loved their son fiercely. They love Lois just as much.

At about 3:00 p.m., I move to the fridge and take out the leftover cheesecake. I serve everyone a slice and am about to sit back down when my superhearing kicks in. I turn my head sharply toward the sounds of sirens and gunshots from miles away on the other side of the city. I quickly identify the problem.

“Uh, there’s a, uh — I’ll be back in just a few minutes. Excuse me. Sorry.”

I spin into the suit as I take off out the window and then speed across the sky, my senses extending ahead of me. I see two police cruisers chasing a red Ford Mustang through the crowded streets of downtown Metropolis. The two passengers in the Mustang each hold a handgun, and the man in the passenger’s seat periodically reaches out the window and fires a shot back at the police cruisers following them. A duffle bag stuffed with cash sits in the back seat. Bank robbery gone wrong, I surmise.

The Mustang swerves to avoid hitting a pedestrian, and the driver mutters a curse and makes a hard left through a busy intersection. The police follow. I shake my head and slow down as I approach. I learned a long time ago that the first step is always to disarm all suspects, so I dip down at superspeed, grab each of the guns, and squeeze them into a single ball of metal, which I nonchalantly toss into the back seat of the moving vehicle. I then fly in front of the car and easily bring it to a stop. The police cruisers skid to a halt behind the Mustang, and the officers hop out, their weapons drawn. The two men inside the vehicle stare at me wide-eyed, and the driver, in one final attempt to get away, slams his foot down onto the accelerator.

“Really?” I say, raising my eyebrows at him as I cross my arms over my chest. When the car cannot physically push me out of the way, the driver curses under his breath and puts the car in park. Both men lift their hands over their heads, and the approaching policemen each pull out a set of handcuffs.

“Whew, thank you, Superman. That was getting dangerous there.” The police officer nearest to me tilts his head toward me as he hauls the suspect toward his cruiser.

“You’re welcome, Officer Dunham,” I reply courteously, noting the officer’s name tag. I stick around for just another moment to be sure the police have everything under control before launching back into the air toward Lois’s apartment.

I slow as I approach and step quietly through the window, my cape billowing out behind me. The three occupants of the apartment silently watch me enter. With a frown, I realize Lois and Martha have moved their chairs

closer to each other, and their eyes glisten with unshed tears. I shift my gaze to Jonathan, but he stares blankly at his empty dessert plate, his fingers absently tapping the table. I quickly spin out of the suit and then adjust my glasses as I move back to take my seat at the table.

“I’m really sorry I had to leave. There was a —”

“It’s okay, Clark,” Lois cuts in, attempting a smile at me as she squeezes Martha’s hand.

Lois’s cheesecake is half-eaten, her fork forgotten at the edge of her plate, and Martha’s dessert remains untouched. I nod weakly at her and shift uncomfortably in my seat.

“Was everything okay?” Lois asks softly, her eyes meeting mine.

“Y-yes. No one w-was injured,” I stammer. My throat feels dry, and my hand trembles slightly as I take an unenthusiastic bite of my cheesecake.

“Good,” Lois says. Her hand rests on top of Martha’s, and the older woman, who had been gazing aimlessly into her tea, reaches up and wipes away a tear before looking over toward me. I can’t meet her eyes.

“I’m sorry, Martha, Mr. Kent... I didn’t mean to upset anyone.”

This time, it is Jonathan who speaks up, his low voice unexpectedly kind and supportive.

“Actually, Clark, we were all just discussing how relieved we are that you are here — ” He hesitates and takes a deep breath as he reaches over and takes Martha’s other hand in his. “...to step in for our boy. You’re doing so much good for this city, for the world. We’re all...we’re all proud of you.”

My breath catches in my throat. Does he really mean that? I look up at Jonathan warily. His eyes meet mine, and he nods slightly at me. My mouth opens to respond, but I can’t speak right away. I swallow hard and lower my eyes.

“Th-thank you, s-sir. That means a lot to me.”

The next few minutes are quiet. Jonathan Kent excuses himself from the table and heads toward the guest bedroom, and Lois finishes her cheesecake and then helps me as we work together on the dishes. Martha manages to take a few bites of her dessert, but remains quiet and withdrawn.

A voice that is not mine echoes in the back of my mind. “*I love you, Mom.*” And I finish the dishes up at a pace slightly faster than normal and then take a seat next to her, where Lois had been sitting. There are still tears in her eyes, and as she looks up at me, one falls silently down her cheek. My heart hurts for her.

“Martha, I — ” His voice in my head directs my words, and I relinquish some of my control to him to allow his help. “He wrote about you in his journals... I — he loved you *so* much. Your support and encouragement helped him

grow into the man he became, and he was grateful every day for everything you and Mr. Kent did for him. Everything that he did was because of you.”

My words don’t have quite the effect that I want; instead, she lets out a sob and stands up abruptly, pulling me with her. Her arms wrap around my waist, and I immediately return the embrace. My chin rests on top of her head, and my eyes close as I hold her to steady her shaking...and my own. His presence, which had been very strong a moment before, fades rapidly as an intense aching grows in the center of my chest. I ignore it. From behind me, Lois’s hand touches my back, and then her arms wrap around me and Martha. A moment later, we are joined by Jonathan, and the four of us embrace.

I shouldn’t be here. It should be him here. Not me. But I allow myself to comfort and be comforted. And it feels good.

“M-my mom used to say, ‘A good hug can — ’”

“— heal the soul,” Martha finishes for me. Everyone pulls back slightly from the embrace, although we don’t separate completely, and her tear-filled eyes gaze into mine for a moment. The hug was as healing for her as it was for me. Lois’s hand remains on my back, and Jonathan shifts so his arm is around his wife’s shoulders. I swallow sadly and nod.

“I should probably be going. I need to prepare for Moscow and do my patrols a bit earlier than normal,” I say reluctantly. Next to me, Lois’s hand slides gently from my back to my shoulder. “Thank you — all of you — for welcoming me here.”

I reach out to shake Jonathan’s hand again and then give Martha and Lois brief hugs before heading toward the front door. I’ll make a much less dramatic exit this time. Martha and Jonathan retreat into their bedroom, and Lois follows me to the door. She steps out into the hallway with me, and we turn to face each other. Her anxious eyes shift uneasily as she studies me, and she lifts one hand to my face, brushing her hand along my cheek. I inhale sharply as my skin tingles where she touches me, but I otherwise remain perfectly still. She then stretches up and plants a soft kiss on my cheek. My eyes close involuntarily, and I let out the breath I’ve been holding.

“Clark,” she says quietly, her hand pulling away from my cheek.

I open my eyes to meet hers, and I feel pulled toward her, his presence growing strong again. I resist, my shoulders tensing, and my lips part as though to speak, but I say nothing.

“Be careful,” she whispers. A troubled expression crosses her face briefly, and she replaces it quickly with a tight smile. “And believe in yourself. They will respect confidence and clarity. Let me know how it goes.”

“Thank you, Lois.”

I should clarify. *Thank you for bringing the Kents to see me. Thank you for your support and friendship. Thank you for helping me deal with the very difficult rescues I’ve encountered in the last few weeks. Thank you for believing in me like no one else ever has before. Thank you, Lois.*

But I don’t say anything else. Just like always, though, she knows. Her smile confirms it. And her beautiful dark eyes again draw me in. I step away before I do something I’ll regret later.

“If I’m home on time tomorrow morning, I’ll text you. Otherwise, you can do an extra loop around the park for me.” I wink at her with a crooked smile.

“Ha, not a chance, Kent!” She laughs and backs up a step into her apartment. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

I nod. “Tomorrow.”

With one final sad smile, she turns and retreats, closing the door behind her. I walk slowly toward the stairs, and my hand ventures up to where her lips touched my cheek. *She meant nothing by it*, I tell myself. I know this. It was just a friendly gesture of support. We are friends. That is all.

I reach the door to the stairwell, push it open, and jog up the steps to the roof. I then spin into the suit and launch myself up into the sky. A few laps around the world should ease my nerves a bit. Then I have several hours for patrolling before I’ll head to Moscow.

Moscow. I’m quite familiar with the city. I lived there for two months when I was seventeen. I learned to speak Russian and Ukrainian during my stay, and I studied the modern history of the country before moving on to my next stop at a remote village in northwest Mongolia. But I feel anxious as I consider how to approach the negotiations. The ceasefire in Aleppo and the surrounding region has held, true; however, if I mess this up, they could resume fighting, and many more innocent civilians could die.

I fly at superspeed due west, the Sun shining strongly at my back, and a now familiar voice echoes in my head. I try to ignore it. I should ignore it. After all, he is dead. I saw his death — I felt it. But I hear him now, as clearly as though he were standing right next to me.

“Save my world for me. Stop this war. Please.”

I will do my best, Kal. I will do my best.

Chapter 22

“Yessir. That is correct. The treaty outlines all of these points we just reviewed, and both sides have the full support of myself, the United Nations, and NATO.”

I stand tall at the front of the large, brightly lit conference room, my arms crossed over my chest. My iconic blue, red, and yellow suit contrasts starkly with the

muted colors worn by the other men in the room, effectively drawing their attention toward me.

Representatives from the Syrian government and the rebel forces as well as Russian officials nod as they flip through the folders in front of them, reviewing the terms of the peace treaty prepared by the UN General Assembly.

I sneak a quick glance at the clock on the wall. My jaw tightens as I fight exhaustion — not physical exhaustion, but mental exhaustion. For the last five hours, I’ve been communicating with these powerful, stubborn leaders, sometimes switching among three languages and constantly having to carefully measure each word I say, manage my facial expressions, and hold myself with complete confidence and poise. And I’m tired. But I hear murmurs of approval throughout the room. The leader of the rebel group stands, his gaze shifting around the room. His dark eyes land on me, and he holds his head high as he speaks in heavily accented, but clear, English.

“Mr. Superman, on behalf of my people and what we stand for, I thank you for mediating for us,” he says. He takes a deep breath and lifts a pen into his hand. “I will be the first to sign this accord. This shall usher in a new era of peace to Syria, which we hope will continue to spread throughout the world.”

He scoots his chair back out of the way and moves to the front of the room, where the master document sits on the table in front of the President of the UN General Assembly. He signs his name on the document and then nods to me and returns to his seat.

“Thank you, sir.”

I carefully maintain a straight face as his first step is followed by the Syrian and Russian Ministers of Defense, who each also stand and sign the document. All three men then shake hands, first with each other and the President of the UN General Assembly and then with myself. I thank them again in their respective languages, and they begin to exit the room. After a few more minutes of discussion, peppered with many words of gratitude from UN representatives, I am escorted out of the room as well and down the wide corridors of the Russian Parliament building toward the entrance.

As we step out into the bright mid-afternoon sunlight, crowds of people gathered outside the Parliament building chant “Мир, а не война” — “peace, not war.” Hand-painted signs with similar slogans and phrases are scattered throughout the gathering, and I hear shouts of “Thank you, Superman!” in English, Russian, and Arabic. With a final nod to the men escorting me out and a wave to the crowd, I raise myself up into the air and fly off to the west, toward home.

I take a deep breath for the first time in several hours as I fly along at a leisurely pace across the Atlantic Ocean,

the Sun now at my back. I speed up slightly as the eastern seaboard of the US comes into view, my earlier exhaustion forgotten.

And a smile grows on my face as I realize I can still make my morning run with Lois.

This is looking to be a great week.

Chapter 23

And it is. Superman's work on the peace talks is very well received around the world, and I feel a renewed sense of hope from the people I help on my daily patrols. The Kents head home on Tuesday after we share another meal, this time at Lois's favorite Thai restaurant, and Lois and I interview Lex Luthor at his penthouse in New York on Wednesday. Thursday and Friday are relatively slow news days, allowing us to make progress on our investigation into Luthor and Intergang, and Superman gets a much-needed break from any major rescue efforts until Saturday morning, when a heavy rainstorm hits the region. I am forced to skip my run that morning to clear traffic accidents all along the east coast, which Lois doesn't mind, since she is not terribly fond of running in the pouring rain.

Mid-morning on Saturday, after I've worked several hours as Superman and the highways are now mostly clear, I land on the roof of the Daily Planet building and hurry down the stairwell to the third floor, spinning into my regular clothes. The rain still pounds down outside, and I am thankful I was able to avoid getting soaking wet on the short flight from my apartment. I push open the door to the newsroom and adjust my glasses as I scan the room for Lois. With a grimace, I see most of my colleagues, including Lois and Jimmy, exiting the conference room, and I recall Perry had scheduled an important staff meeting for that morning. Lois looks up from her conversation with Jimmy and smiles tightly at me.

"Kent, there you are!" Perry White's voice booms over the commotion from the crowd exiting the conference room, and I turn my head abruptly toward the sound as I jog down the ramp to the bullpen.

"Yessir. Sorry I'm late, sir, I —"

"Oh, no problem, Kent. Lois told me you were out covering the pile up on Highway 57 with that overturned 18-wheeler," Perry says, pushing his glasses up his nose.

He motions me toward his office, and I glance sideways at Lois as I follow. She shrugs at me and continues toward her desk, a folder in her hand. Although I certainly appreciate the secret identity thing, which I didn't have on my world, I do sometimes miss just having everyone understand why I randomly disappear or miss meetings and not having to worry about coordinating stories to explain my disappearances. I trail behind Perry and into his office. He shuts the door behind us and then

moves around to the other side of his desk and sits heavily. I notice for the first time that he looks exhausted — dark circles under his eyes suggest he hasn't slept well in several days.

"Mr. White, sir, is everything okay?"

He runs a hand through his thinning hair with a deep sigh.

"Well, son, that depends on your definition of 'okay.' Actually, well, you see, Alice, she, uh...well, she left me last night, Clark, and I, well, I'm not really sure what I'm going to do without her, son."

"Oh, wow, Mr. White, that's terrible, sir," I stammer, not really sure how to respond. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

Perry shakes his head and then takes off his glasses and rubs the bridge of his nose.

"Nah, son, I just have to figure out how to win her back, you know? I — I can't imagine my life without her." He gets a faraway look in his eye, and I remain silent as I let whatever memory he's reliving play out in his head. A moment later, he blinks several times, and deliberately replaces his lost, lonely expression with his more typical look of impatience and sternness. "Now, that's not why I needed to talk to you, Kent. So, now, look, son, I got a call this morning from a publisher friend of mine, and well, she made a pretty strong offer."

His words don't make much sense to me, and I hesitate, waiting for a better explanation. When it doesn't come, I swallow anxiously and ask, "Offer for what, sir?"

"Right, sorry. A book. They want you to write a longer and more detailed memoir of your journey to New Krypton with Superman."

He pulls a page out of his notebook and hands it across his desk to me. Confused, I take the page and then lower my eyes to his messy handwriting scribbled at the top of the page. My eyes widen in surprise.

"This has to be wrong. One million dollars? Mr. White, that's..."

"That's just the advance, Clark. They expect more than double that in royalties after publication, son."

He gives me a sort of crooked, knowing smile, but I shake my head. It's not right. I can't make money off the tragedy of his death. No chance. Money or not. Unless... I swallow hard and raise my eyes back to Perry.

"Sir, I-I have to speak to Lois about this. I...I have to — I mean, when do they need an answer, sir?"

"What's to think about, Clark? You'd make millions of dollars. You and Lois could be set. Son, don't underestimate the benefit of financial stability in a relationship, trust me on this one," he insists, settling back in his chair and watching me carefully. "Elvis once said —"

“Mr. White, thank you for this,” I interrupt him, holding up the page with the offer. I fold it up and stuff it into my pocket. I’ve heard several of his Elvis stories in the last month, and while I appreciate his concern, I’m really not in the mood for a lecture right now. “But I can’t make any decisions without consulting Lois first, sir.”

“Ah, well, you’re right about that, son. Okay. I’m sure they can wait a few days for an answer. Sharon — her name is Sharon Anderson. Her number is on that page.” He points toward my pocket. My hand still grips the paper, and I nod in acknowledgement. “Give her a call when you make your decision.”

“I will, sir,” I confirm. “Thank you, sir.”

I turn and exit the office, quickly scanning the room to locate Lois. She sits at her desk, typing furiously on her computer. Her head is tilted to hold the phone between her shoulder and ear, and she periodically nods and mumbles into the receiver. Although I’m not deliberately using my superhearing, I understand tidbits of her conversation — she is talking with her sister Lucy, and my name comes up, along with the words “please stop asking” and “none of your business.” I tense as her body language shifts from relaxed and joking to irritated; the tone of her voice changes, and her mouth tightens in a frown. Her eyes narrow, and she stops talking abruptly as she notices me watching her. She turns away from me, and I hear her mutter, “I gotta go. I’ll talk to you later.” She hangs up the phone as I approach her desk.

“Everything okay?” I ask casually.

She tucks her loose hair back behind her ears with stiff, rigid movements and ducks her head. Her heart hammers in chest, and her breathing is quick and uneven. I settle on the edge of her desk and try to stay calm as I await her response. Have I upset her in some way? My hands clasp nervously in my lap.

“Yeah, yes, everything is...” Her voice trails off, and she lowers her eyes to the desk, where her fingers fiddle absently with a paper clip. “We need to talk, Clark.”

“O-okay, sure, yeah, uh — ” I twist my head and peer over the top of my glasses through the wall to the conference room. It is empty. “The conference room is free.”

She nods, stands, and takes my hand as she weaves through the maze of desks toward the conference room. Her hand feels warm, her skin smooth and soft. Not distracting at all. Nope. I push away those thoughts as I follow obediently, my hand holding hers tightly, and we enter the conference room together. She releases my hand and closes the door behind us, then turns toward me stiffly.

“Clark, I don’t know how much longer I can keep this up,” she blurts out.

Her eyes brim with tears, and her lip quivers slightly. Confused, I reach out toward her and take her hands in mine. She is shaking now, and I gently pull her in closer to me.

“Keep up what, Lois? Tell me how I can help,” I say quietly.

She doesn’t answer right away; instead, she collapses into my chest, her arms reaching out and wrapping around my waist underneath my jacket. I return the embrace and rub her back with one hand as I murmur softly into her ear. However, she suddenly shakes her head and pushes me away.

“This, Clark. I...I can’t keep pretending that you’re him anymore. You look like him and act like him and feel like him and even smell like him. But you’re not — you’re not him, and I miss him so much. And, I just — I just...”

I stand perfectly still and listen to her. She’s started to pace the room, her hands motioning animatedly as she talks. I wonder what Lucy said to her that set her off. Then I realize that is the wrong way to look at it. She’s held herself with so much poise and confidence for the last month, but she is still hurting, still grieving.

I question, as I often have in the last four weeks, whether we’ve done the right thing by pretending to be a ‘happy couple.’ I wonder whether maybe she would be better off if we stage a ‘break up’ so she doesn’t have to be constantly reminded of what she can’t have by being forced to act like I am her loving, doting fiancé.

But I have been selfish; I crave her closeness too much. I mentally kick myself.

She stops abruptly, her back to me, and wraps her arms around herself almost protectively.

“Lois... I’m so sorry,” I say.

I feel a strong urge to comfort her, and I step toward her, my hands reaching out and gently touching her shoulders. When she doesn’t flinch away, I allow myself to move closer. My hands slide down her arms, and she turns toward me and once again buries her head in my chest. I embrace her and let her cry into me. She needs me as much as I need her, I think. But I can’t presume this is what she wants.

“I’ll do whatever you need, Lois. If...if you need me to move away, give you space, I...I can continue working as Superman without staying here as Clark. If — if that’s what you want and need. Just tell me.”

She raises her chin from my chest, and our eyes meet. Hers are slightly puffy and red from crying, but filled with sadness and longing. She shakes her head weakly, and a wave of relief washes over me.

“No...” Her voice is shaky, and I can feel her struggle as her eyes study mine. Finally, she closes her eyes and leans forward into me, her forehead resting on my cheek.

“No, you can’t leave. I need you to be here. I... It’s just so overwhelming at times.”

She lifts her eyes to mine again, and I see her confusion and uncertainty, mirroring my own feelings. I wish I could comfort her.

My hand reaches up of its own volition and cups her cheek, my thumb wiping away a stray tear. Then, inexplicably, an odd sensation fills my chest, and my vision blurs briefly as a bright light seems to momentarily engulf me. A painful ache spreads across my sternum, causing me to inhale sharply, and I feel his sudden presence, which is so strong that it nearly pushes me back a step.

Then, I panic silently and watch helplessly as I lose control over my actions.

My hands slide down her bare arms and back up again, stopping when they reach her shoulders. My right arm then lowers and curls around her waist, tugging her closer to me. There is a familiarity in how our bodies fit together — the curve of her breasts and hips, how my hand rests at the small of her back, how her knee edges between my legs. My left hand drifts back up to her face again, and I caress her cheek tenderly.

“Lois. My lovely Lois. God, I’ve missed you.”

His thoughts overpower my own, and I scream silently, *No, no, no!*

Her eyes widen as I lean in toward her and brush my lips against hers. Her lips are warm and inviting, and the sensation spreads through my body like a flame. *Incredible.* I almost allow myself to enjoy the experience of kissing her. However, my mind screams at me again. *No, no! What is happening?* I try again to pull away, but I cannot overcome his will. The kiss deepens, and I hear her moan as my tongue enters her mouth, tasting her. Coffee and chocolate. And something uniquely Lois.

God, this feels good. No. This is wrong. Kal, please stop!

Rather than listen to me, he grows stronger, and his feelings of love and longing amplify even more as the pain in my chest also increases. My hand on her cheek slides down her neck and shoulder before joining my other hand on her back, and her arms wrap up and around my neck as she moans again and threads her fingers through my hair.

Oh, God. In the history of kisses, there cannot have ever been another kiss that felt this good. My arms tighten more around her, pulling us even closer together. *But this is wrong. Kal! Clark! You’re not here — get out of my head!*

I finally feel a slight hesitation in him, and his hold over me falters just enough for me to regain control. Carefully, so I don’t hurt her, but decisively enough to avoid allowing him to overpower me again, I push myself

away from her and move to the other side of the room. I breathe heavily from the effort, and my chest still aches, the pain radiating from the center of my sternum...where that dangerous black blade had pierced into him in the visions I’d had. My hand clutches at my chest as the pain begins to subside, and I look up abruptly at her. Her eyes are wide, her lips full and red from the kiss.

God, that kiss.

I almost lose my control again, but I force him back somehow. I swallow hard and shake my head as she lifts her hand to her lips, an expression of disbelief and confusion in her eyes.

“Lois, God, I’m so sorry. I-I — that wasn’t me. I don’t know what — it wasn’t me,” I stammer. My right hand reaches up and shakily adjusts my glasses. Her mouth opens to speak, but no words come out, and she turns away from me for only a moment before spinning back around.

“No, it — it wasn’t you,” she repeats, her voice trembling. Her eyes study mine intensely, and I fight the urge to look away. She inhales sharply, and a tear slides slowly down her cheek. “It...it was...him. It was him, Clark. How was it him? Oh, God, what just happened?”

Her hands reach up and cover her face, and my jaw clenches as I turn away from her and run a rough hand through my hair.

“I-I don’t know, Lois. I —”

I stop suddenly as a crazy thought lodges itself in my mind. I swallow hard, close my eyes, and do something I’ve not ever tried before. I deliberately reach out to him. Almost immediately, I feel the same strong, aching pain in my chest as I had earlier, and bright, warm light surrounds me. I feel confusion, desperation, and fear.

And a strong, steady heartbeat.

My eyes fly open, and I spin back around to face her.

“L-Lois, w-w-what did they do w-with — with...his...body?” I can’t help my stutter now. She narrows her eyes at me for a moment, and I hear her heart rate increase substantially.

“What?” She trembles as she speaks, forcing the word out. She backs away from me a step.

“I’m sorry, Lois, I wouldn’t ask if it — if it w-wasn’t important. P-please, do you — do you know?”

She lowers her eyes to the floor, and I grimace. This isn’t fair to her. But if I’m right, she will understand. If I’m right, she will be made whole again. If I’m right, I will have to... No, actually, I don’t want to think about that right now. She takes a deep breath and crosses her arms over her chest.

“The Sun,” she answers, her voice quiet and unsteady. Her eyes do not meet mine. She turns away from me. “They took him to the Sun. I didn’t want...” She sighs and then clears her throat. “Last year, we had someone try to

make clones of Superman using a lock of hair he donated to a charity auction. I...I didn't want that to happen again, so I asked Zara to — to take his body to the Sun rather than bury it here.”

The Sun... Of course. That explains a lot — the bright light, the warmth, and of course, the healing of a supposedly unhealable wound.

I raise my eyes to the ceiling and look through the walls of the building, through the pouring rain and layers of clouds in the sky, across the open emptiness of space, toward the bright yellow star at the center of the solar system. Although I can't see as far as I need to, I sense him again; his mind is disoriented, particularly after his brief moment of controlling my body, and when he feels my presence, as I have been feeling his for these last four weeks, he sends out a strong, clear request.

“Please help me.”

I inhale sharply and take an abrupt step backwards as I close my eyes.

This is really happening.

God.

“Lois, I need you to meet me at your apartment in about fifteen minutes,” I say, unconsciously deepening my voice.

I open my eyes and look toward her. She has turned to face me, but she stares at her hands, which clench and open several times. She then lifts her sad, dark eyes to meet mine, and I silently plead with her to agree. She just nods mutely.

“Thank you. Although, if you want, I can just fly you there first and then, I'll —”

“No, I'll drive,” she interrupts curtly. Her eyes drop to the floor.

The walls are back up around her heart. I carefully control my reaction to her rejection. She doesn't understand. Hopefully, she will soon.

“Okay, sure, of course. Please drive carefully. I'll be back as soon as I can.”

I give her a weak smile, which she doesn't return, and then get moving. My mind races ahead of me, and I focus on the heartbeat in the Sun. *His* heartbeat. I shake my head and hurry toward the stairwell, ignoring the strange looks from my colleagues as I move at a pace slightly faster than a jog. No, she can't understand what is happening. Hell, I don't really understand it. But I can feel that it's real.

He's there. Waiting for me to help him.

And he's alive. Somehow. He's alive.

As I push open the door, I quickly scan the stairwell to ensure I'm alone and launch up the stairs as I spin into the suit. Then I burst out of the door to the roof and straight up into the sky, toward the Sun.

Chapter 24

I've known for a long time that the Sun is the source of my powers. But this. Wow. Nope, I never knew this.

Energy. Power. Strength. All building up inside of me. I feel more full of life than I've ever felt before. And the intensity grows the closer I get to the huge yellow star.

My vision abilities are also amplified, and I can scan ahead through the Sun's layers, although I am still millions of miles away. My focus narrows to the location of his heartbeat, still steady and strong, and I find him. His thin, pale body, curled up in a fetal position, floats in dense gasses measuring millions of degrees. He is still and unmoving in his unconsciousness, but as I reach out to him with my mind, he shifts slightly and groans. An intense pain fills my chest as he wakes, but I ignore the sensation and push myself faster toward him. Within only seconds, I close the final million miles between us, passing through the outer layers of the Sun, and stop next to him.

Intense light and heat surround us, and my skin starts to glow as I absorb the immense power. It feels incredible.

His eyes open briefly, but he doesn't seem to see me as much as he feels my presence. He turns slightly toward me and opens his mouth as if to speak, but then flinches and groans in pain again. I reach toward him and grasp his shoulder carefully, aware of my increased strength. A wave of pain flares through me, and I almost pull my hand away. It is then that I notice the angry red scar on his sternum, about four inches long and an inch thick. I swallow as I feel Lord Nor's sword pierce into my chest. I shake my head and try to block the vision. The pain pulses one more time and then subsides, and I exhale sharply.

Are you ready to go home? I direct my thoughts toward him. But he has drifted back into unconsciousness and does not respond. Uncertainty suddenly fills me, and I scan his injuries, revealing recently healed bones in his ribcage and sternum and regenerated heart muscle and lung tissue in his chest cavity. Despite the pain he feels, his injury appears fully healed.

Carefully extending my protective aura out around us, I remove my cape and wrap it around him. I then lift him into my arms and turn back toward Earth. With my newly enhanced senses, I can actually see as far as Metropolis, even from ninety-three million miles away.

Lois navigates her Jeep about three blocks from her apartment. I see her hands shaking on the steering wheel and a tear falling down her cheek, and I hear her ragged breath and incoherent mumbling as she blinks back more tears. She'll be home in a couple minutes, and I want to be there when she gets there. I reinforce the protective aura around him, knowing that as soon as we leave the Sun's radius, he will no longer be protected from the vacuum of space. And then I fly.

Miraculously, we cover the distance from the Sun to the outer atmosphere of Earth in less than a minute, and I realize with a start that we'd been traveling at several times the speed of light. Impossible, right? I'll have to revisit that fact later. My college physics professor would never believe it.

My doppelganger remains unconscious for the duration of the flight, for which I'm happy. It is bizarre enough to see him this close and to carry him through space. I glance down at him as I slow to re-enter the Earth's atmosphere. His face is nearly identical to mine, though his hair is shorter, almost in a military-style cut, and dark circles surround his eyes. And his skin is pale, his cheeks gaunt. Even in his unconscious state, I feel his confusion and distress, and I see the tension in his jaw.

I take a deep breath as we reach Metropolis. The rain has eased, at least momentarily. Lois pulls up to her building and stops the car abruptly. *Perfect timing*, I think, slowing further as I descend toward the unlocked window of her apartment.

I keep one ear focused on her as she exits her car and jogs up the stairs to the building, and I push open the window and land softly in the living room. My slight glow from my bath in the Sun brightens the dimly lit, quiet room, and I move toward the bedroom slowly, watching as his chest rises and falls unevenly with his first breaths of air in about a month. He coughs and then groans, but still doesn't wake. Behind me, the deadbolts to the front door unlock. I carry him down the hallway and into her bedroom, stepping lightly over her bathrobe and slippers, which lie on the ground at the foot of the bed. Keeping the cape carefully tucked around him, I set him gently on top of the lavender comforter covering the bed. I hear footsteps coming down the hallway, and I pull my arms out from under his unmoving body and push myself up to stand as a gasp breaks the silence.

I swallow hard and step sideways to give her room to see him. She stands in the doorway, both hands covering her mouth, and her eyes shift from him to me and then back to him again.

"He-he's — he's alive?" she asks shakily, taking a tentative step into the room.

"Yes," I answer simply.

I back up another step and motion to her to come closer. She tries to move toward him, but her knees give out. Immediately, I am by her side, my arm supporting her around her waist. I help her over to the bed and don't release her until she is sitting safely on the edge of the bed next to him. His breathing has stabilized now, and his lips are slightly parted as he sleeps. A trembling hand reaches out toward his forehead, but she pulls it back before touching him, and she turns to look at me.

"H-how, Clark? How is this possible?"

I just shake my head. I have no idea.

I mean, I *know* the Sun healed him. But even that shouldn't have been possible.

A tear slides down her cheek as she turns back to him and reaches out again. This time, she doesn't hesitate, and she softly caresses his forehead as he stirs slightly and grimaces. His movement causes the cape to shift downward a bit, revealing the scar on his chest.

"Oh, my God," she whispers, almost to herself. Instinctively, she reaches out toward the blemish, and my stomach lurches as I imagine the pain he'll feel when he wakes. Pain which I have felt myself.

"Lois, wait." My voice remains low, but firm, and I step a bit closer. "It's very painful for him still."

Her hand freezes above his chest, and she pulls it away and raises her eyes to mine, worry filling her expression. She nods and holds my gaze for another moment before turning back to him. Carefully, she leans over him and places a gentle kiss on his forehead. He seems to settle deeper into the mattress, and the tension in his jaw eases slightly, but he still doesn't wake. I lower my eyes and step back toward the doorway again. She speaks to him in a quiet voice, her fingers softly brushing his cheek.

"Clark, I've missed you so much. I love you. Please be okay."

He shifts on the bed, groaning slightly as he moves. But again, he just relaxes into the bed, mumbles to himself, and sighs as he sleeps.

"I'll go make some tea," I suggest quietly. Lois nods and snuffles, then twists to look at me, a weak but hopeful smile gracing her face. I smile tightly back at her.

"Thank you, Clark," she murmurs.

I tip my head to her in acknowledgement, and she smiles before turning back to him and lowering her lips to his forehead again.

I exit the room and walk lightly out to the kitchen, where I pull out her teapot and start the water boiling on the stove. While the water heats, I quickly spin out of the suit and back into my work clothes, minus my suit jacket, which I fold and hang over the back of one of the chairs at the table.

The glow of my skin has faded, but there is a slight redness to my hands still, and I turn them over a few times as I study this change. It doesn't hurt. In fact, I still feel the increase in my strength and senses. I absently wonder if the 'boost' the Sun provided me is permanent. Then my thoughts shift back to my current predicament, and I sigh as I settle with my back against the counter.

He's home. He's alive. And I'm very happy about that. It's incredible, in fact. But I selfishly can't help wondering where that leaves me...

I recall the visions I had where he fought against the enemy army, eventually reaching the top of the hill, where Lord Nor waited for him. Although I know he'd fought it at first, in the end, he'd given in to the inevitability of war and violence. He'd stopped trying to negotiate peace without loss of life. And he'd killed. Efficiently, swiftly, and without hesitation. I also remember his overpowering feelings of guilt, self-hatred, and self-loathing.

And because of this, I realize, he may never be Superman again.

The teapot whistles on the stove next to me, and I shift around to remove it from the heat as I shut off the burner. I add the tea leaves to steep and then look up toward the hallway as I hear Lois's footsteps approach. She emerges from the hallway, her arms crossed over her chest, and her eyes meet mine. A soft smile, one I haven't seen from her before, grows on her lips as she crosses the room toward me. I pull two mugs out of the cupboard and set them on the counter.

"He may sleep for a while," I say quietly, pulling a chair out for her at the table.

"This is unbelievable, Clark. I..."

She sits at the table and nods a quick thank you to me, then lowers her head into her hands for a moment.

I sit next to her and tentatively reach out to rub her back. She turns her head and smiles at me. Again, I see a genuineness in her expression that has been missing the whole time I've known her. I expect to feel sad with the realization that I haven't made her truly happy, despite my best efforts. However, seeing her smile now warms my heart.

"I've been feeling his presence for a while, actually," I admit. My hand stills on her back as she tenses slightly. I shake my head and add, "I'm sorry I didn't mention it, but I really thought I was just a bit crazy, and I didn't want to upset you... I read in his journals that Kryptonians could communicate telepathically, but I'd obviously never experienced it before."

"Ah, I guess that's true," she says. "I-I'm so glad you figured out what was going on." She pauses again and smiles, her hand reaching up to brush against her lips. "Wait, so, that kiss earlier... How was that him? Telepathy is one thing, but..."

Her voice trails off, and I feel my cheeks flush as the kiss replays in my mind now. The feel of her lips. The smoothness of her skin. The subtle taste of chocolate and coffee when my tongue explored her mouth. The perfect fit of our bodies. I duck my head.

"I've felt his presence most when strong emotions are involved," I start, feeling a need to explain everything to her. "I think he sensed that you were upset through his connection with me, and he sort of overpowered me. It

was...disturbing. I couldn't talk or move. I'm really sorry — I-I hope you didn't think —"

"No," she interrupts, moving her hand to cover mine. "It was definitely him. I know that's weird to say, but as soon as you touched me, I knew. I felt him too." Her eyes suddenly widen, and she blushes fiercely. "Did you — you said you couldn't move, but you felt everything, didn't you? Oh, God, Clark, I'm sorry!"

I drop my gaze to the table to avoid her eyes, and I nod weakly as I pull my hand away from her back. In an attempt to redirect the conversation, I add, "I think that effort was draining to him though. He is exhausted."

"You can feel that now?"

I nod. "Yes, if I try to. But I don't want to disturb him. He should rest."

I stand up and move to the counter, where the tea still steeps. I strain the tea leaves and pour us each a cup. It is the same mix of Oolong and chamomile that I prepared for her the first night we met. She is quiet as I set her mug down in front of her and then sit again, and we both sip our tea as the silence grows. After a few minutes, I raise my eyes to watch her. Her fingers are laced delicately around the mug, which she holds up to her lips. She blows on the hot liquid, then closes her eyes as she takes another small sip. I lower my eyes again.

"I, uh, should go back to my apartment — err...his... apartment..."

Oh, God, that's right... What am I going to do?

My voice falters, and I screw my eyes shut briefly as I consider the implications of him being home again. If he can't be Superman, but he can be Clark Kent, does that mean I have to be Superman only, all the time? Where can I live? How will I work to pay rent? I shake my head. Not now. I can't worry about all of this right now.

"Um, I mean... I'll go get him some clothes and things. I guess we have to talk about —"

She reaches over and places her hand on mine again, and I look up at her sharply. She has a kind, understanding smile on her lips. Her beautiful, full lips. The lips that kissed me earlier. I swallow hard.

"Clark," she murmurs, squeezing my hand. "Nothing changes right now, okay? It's your apartment — that's fine for you to say. We'll figure things out in time. Right now, there is no rush. Okay?"

She understands me, as always. She knows my mind is racing with questions. She knows I'm anxious about it all. And she knows how to reassure me. I nod in response.

"Clothes, though, yes — if you can get him some, that would be great. I think —"

"Breaking news! We are hearing now that a nuclear meltdown is imminent at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear

Power Plant in Fukushima, Japan, a region hit by strong storms earlier today.

I push my chair back and stand up abruptly. I know this disaster. It happened last year on my Earth. And I almost hadn't shut it down on time since I had no idea what to do. I step back from the table and spin into the capeless suit, frowning as I come to a stop. Lois raises her eyebrows at me.

"There's a nuclear meltdown about to happen in Japan. I'll be about an hour, maybe less. And I guess I need to stop and get a new cape first." I grimace as I turn in a circle. "I feel almost naked without the cape. It's kinda weird."

She laughs and stands up with me.

"A nuclear meltdown? Is that dangerous? For you, I mean."

The hint of concern in her voice surprises me.

"No, I've dealt with this before on my Earth," I explain. "At least this time, I'll know what to do. It was a bit stressful last time. I'd better hurry. I'll grab clothes for him and lunch when I come back. If that sounds good?"

She nods and steps closer to me. A long sigh escapes her lips, and she smiles at me again as she wraps her arms around my waist for a brief hug. My eyes close as I allow myself to feel her comforting touch again.

I hope this is not the last time.

God, please don't let this be the last time.

She pulls away and backs up a step.

"Be careful, Clark."

I give her a tight smile and nod, then launch off out her window, to my apartment to grab a new cape, and then half-way around the world to cool the overheating nuclear reactor core. As I land in Japan and head straight into the reactor building to freeze the fuel rods and prevent the meltdown, I feel him awaken, disoriented and in pain. The stabbing ache in my chest almost stops me in my tracks, but I manage to continue on with just a controlled grimace. A moment later, I sense she is with him, and his mind settles as the pain in my chest disappears abruptly.

I take a deep breath and blow freezing cold air over the primary containment unit for the fuel rods. Similar to what I had encountered last year on my Earth, I see that a crack has formed in the steel of the reactor vessel inside the containment unit, and I know I must work quickly to seal the crack while keeping the temperature low. Focusing carefully, I blow more freezing air on the containment unit while at the same time welding the steel of the cracked reactor vessel with my heat vision.

It is then that I hear his voice in my mind, much clearer than ever before.

"You brought me home to her. There are no words to express my gratitude. The best I can do for now is thank

you, Clark. I look forward to meeting you when you get back from Japan."

I don't falter as I weld. Timing is critical. However, I can multitask. I respond by projecting my thoughts directly to him.

You're welcome. And I look forward to meeting you as well.

And then I feel our connection close. He is conscious and aware enough to manage it now, I realize. Which hopefully means no more random bouts of intense chest pain for me.

I finish the weld and continue cooling the reactor core with my freezing breath. The alarms sounding throughout the facility stop as my efforts successfully lower the temperature of the fuel rods. I back away from the primary containment unit and inspect my work. A few more steps to finish before I can head back home. I clear my thoughts and refocus on my task. Almost done.

Chapter 25

An hour later, I knock lightly on the door to Lois's apartment. I hear rustling and quiet murmurs from the bedroom, and I blink a few times to tone down my senses. Even after my exertion with the nuclear reactor, my abilities are still all amplified, and I keep having to remind myself of my new 'baseline.' A moment later, the door knob turns, and Lois opens the door, a relaxed smile growing on her face as our eyes meet.

"Come on in," she says, motioning me inside. She closes the door behind me, and I follow her across the room toward the kitchen. All of the lights are now on in the room, and all the curtains have been opened to let as much sunlight in as possible. Smart. Despite the storm still threatening outside, some sunlight filters through from breaks in the clouds, casting rapidly changing shadows across the room.

"I've got lunch from Burger Bistro and some clothes and things for him," I explain, holding up a duffle bag in my right hand and a white paper takeout bag in my left hand. Her stomach growls at the smell of food, and she smiles sheepishly at me.

"You know me. I can always eat," she laughs. I set the food on the counter and then hand her the duffle bag. She seems to hesitate for only a moment before smiling at me and nodding a thank you. "I'll be back in a few minutes."

I occupy myself by portioning out the food. Cheeseburgers and fries for them, and a Cobb salad for me. I absently wonder if he feels up to eating as I turn toward the counter to get a new pot of tea started. Mint green tea this time, I think. I rifle through her cupboards and find stashes of Moroccan mint tea and Japanese green tea as the water heats on the stove. Perfect. The teapot whistles, and I

add the mixture of tea leaves to steep as tentative footsteps stop at the end of the hallway. I turn to see Lois standing and watching me. Her hands fiddle with my neatly folded cape, and she bites her lip as she gives me a sort of crooked half smile. She steps forward and sets the cape on a side table next to the couch.

“Can you help me get him out of bed?”

“Oh, of course,” I answer quickly.

She nods and then leads me back toward the bedroom. Like the living room, the bedroom is now brightly lit, with the curtains pulled back to let in as much natural light as possible. I stop in the doorway. Lois continues over to the bed, where her fiancé sits, now dressed in black sweat pants and a long-sleeved light gray cotton shirt. His shoulders are hunched over, and his eyes remain closed as she sits next to him and wraps an arm around his shoulders.

“Here we go. Are you ready?” she asks him gently.

She leans closer to him and kisses his temple lightly. He raises his eyes and straightens up a bit, his face tightening in a grimace. I’m glad he’s not projecting his thoughts to me now as I’m sure his level of pain is quite high. But he nods and looks up at me. His eyes widen as he studies me, and he shakes his head slightly.

“This is too weird,” he says in a voice that is identical to mine and yet somehow also distinct. “You’re me. But not me.”

“Tell me about it,” I reply, my tone light. I step closer to the bed and lower my eyes as he continues staring at me. I pull my hands out of my pockets and adjust my glasses as Lois clears her throat.

“I think if you just help him stand up, I can support him the rest of the way to the kitchen,” Lois suggests.

I know she’s trying to avoid making this feel as awkward as it does. I simply nod and move to his side. Carefully, though I’m sure it’s going to hurt no matter how careful I am, I slide my arm under his and around his back. Together, Lois and I lift him up to his feet. He grunts in pain, and I feel a brief hint of discomfort in my chest before it quickly disappears again.

“Sorry,” he mutters under his breath.

“Don’t worry about it,” I assure him.

He is standing, but unstable, so I continue to support him as we take a step toward the doorway.

Hmmm, I wonder... If he can cause me to feel his pain, even inadvertently, maybe I can help him feel how I feel — at least temporarily. We take another slow step forward, and I concentrate to focus on my own strength and well-being. Then I project this all to him, similar to how I had reached out to him earlier while he was still in the Sun. Immediately, I sense his breathing ease, and he lets out a long sigh.

“Oh, wow, that’s... I didn’t know you could do that,” he breathes.

“Me neither,” I agree.

I keep this connection open with him as we move down the hallway and out to the kitchen. His steps are stronger and more confident. I feel Lois’s confusion, but I figure I’ll let him explain. Or I’ll at least wait until we’re seated so I don’t accidentally lose focus and cause his pain to return without warning.

Together, the three of us take the final steps to reach the table, and I help him sit slowly into the nearest chair. As I move away from him, the depth of the connection I’d established is lost, and I hear him inhale sharply. Lois sits next to him and takes his hand, a look of concern flashing in her eyes.

“Clark?” Her voice trembles slightly.

“S-sorry,” I apologize, taking another step back. “It’s hard to —”

“It’s fine,” he says stiffly. He opens his eyes and smiles tightly at Lois sitting next to him. “He learns quickly, this guy.”

She glances up at me, but I just frown. I’d planned to warn him before dropping the connection, but maybe we had to be in contact for it to work. We’ll have to talk about it more later. I turn away from the table and move to the counter to finish preparing the tea.

“You boys know I have no idea what just happened there,” Lois scolds, a hint of a laugh in her voice.

Clark lets out another deep but carefully controlled breath, and I hear him shift in his seat slightly as I strain the tea leaves and pour the hot, fragrant liquid into three clean mugs.

“Sorry, hon. He figured out how to take my pain away temporarily,” he explains.

I set their tea in front of them and place my cup on the other side of the table, across from Lois. I feel her eyes on me, and I look up at her briefly.

“Oh, that — that’s great. Good, Clark,” she praises, flashing me a bright smile. I want to smile back, I really do, but I’m still reeling from guilt. I just nod and then turn back to the counter to get their food.

“I’ve never known anyone to use a telepathic connection to do that before. I didn’t know it was possible,” he adds. “Thank you again.”

“I’m just sorry it was so temporary,” I admit. I pick up their plates, piled with fries and cheeseburgers, and turn back around toward them.

“Even just that short respite... I’m very grateful.”

I nod at him as I set his plate in front of him. His eyes widen in appreciation, and he immediately reaches out and snatches a french fry from the plate. Lois laughs at his enthusiasm as the fry disappears into his mouth.

“And I’m very grateful for this food. Oh, you have no idea how much I missed real food. Everything on New Krypton was so bland. No flavor, no texture.”

Lois laughs again, a beautiful, wonderful sound that makes me smile, and she rests her hand on his back as he picks up the burger with shaky hands and takes a big bite. I settle in my seat with my salad and sip my tea as I watch the two of them. She is more relaxed and comfortable than I’ve ever seen her. And he is...well, just like me. But more confident and articulate. I can feel a darkness buried inside of him, however, even without tapping into our telepathic connection, and I wonder how he is able to hide it so well from her.

His eyes settle on me for a brief moment before he turns back to Lois and smiles again at her. Almost like a warning. Like he’s telling me not to go there. I swallow hard and take another sip of my tea.

“Mostly, I’m grateful that you brought me back, Clark,” he says, his voice low. He gulps down another bite of his burger and then reaches over and takes Lois’s hand in his.

“You mean more than just physically flying you back from the Sun,” Lois guesses, glancing from her Clark to me and back again.

“Yeah,” he confirms. He ducks his head for a moment as his eyes close. With a deep breath, he looks up at me and adds, “I think you being here, and near her, anchored me somehow. Our connection anchored my mind so that my body could heal. With my injury...it should not have been possible.”

His eyes meet mine, and that same dark, wary expression flashes so briefly across his face that I almost miss it. He turns to Lois and brings her hand up to his lips. I lower my eyes to my salad and take a small bite, but my appetite is gone.

“When did you first regain consciousness?” I ask carefully.

I have my suspicions, but since I’ve had visions of his memories since before I even came to this universe, I’m not sure. And I think that maybe this connection he and I share may have started even before he died...somehow. I glance up at him.

He is staring at me now, confusion coloring his face. He opens his mouth as though to say something, but then closes it again and tilts his head a little sideways. He looks at Lois and then back at me.

“You’re right-handed?”

I laugh for the first time in many hours.

“Yes, I am,” I say. “It’s a weird difference, I know.”

Across the table from me, Lois pops a french fry into her mouth and interjects, “He also doesn’t drink alcohol at all and prefers salads and veggies to burgers and fries.”

She chews a moment, then reaches over and pats Clark on the back with a smile. “And, he can cook.”

His eyes widen again, and he glances at me with a teasing smile. “Well, then, maybe I have some competition now that I’m back. It seems you have none of my character flaws, Clark!”

They both laugh together, and Lois leans over and kisses his cheek.

“Seriously, wait until you taste his chocolate cheesecake,” she jokes, turning to smile at me.

I grin at her in return and drop my eyes to my salad again. I take a bigger bite this time, and they each also continue eating. As I lift my fork again, a sudden alarm blares in my head, and I twist toward the sound — to the north. I set my fork back down on my plate as I listen to the police scanners and emergency crews.

Now normally, I wouldn’t be happy when lunch is interrupted by a call for help. In fact, normally I’d prefer to hear no calls for help at all — for everyone to be happy and healthy and safe. However, I’d be lying if I say I don’t feel some degree of relief at this interruption by my superhearing.

I quickly deduce that there’s a bomb threat at the Empire State Building in New York City. Fifty-six hostages have been taken to the 102nd floor observation deck, and the rest of the building is still being evacuated.

“I have to go. Sorry,” I say quickly, standing up from the table and stepping back to spin into the suit.

As my spin slows, I see Lois reach over and wrap her arm around Clark, who stares at his hands, his jaw tight. I can’t feel his emotions now; he has effectively shut me out. But I can see he’s strained. He slowly raises his eyes to meet mine, and I know with certainty that he also knows... That is, he knows that he will never wear this blue, red, and yellow suit again. My expression softens a bit.

You haven’t told her yet, have you? I ask him.

I know he hears me. But he doesn’t respond. He just lowers his eyes back to his burger and takes a big bite. Lois looks up at me.

“Be careful, Clark,” she says. She has no idea how much I needed to hear those three simple words right now.

“Thank you. I don’t know how long it will be.”

She nods and tightens her arm around his shoulders. And I take off out the window, heading toward New York City.

Chapter 26

After a quick flight, I stop mid-air and hover several hundred feet above the building, scanning for a bomb. It is easy enough to find — a compact black case about the size of a briefcase, sitting in the middle of the observation

deck. However, a second, much larger bomb is also located on the ceiling near the main support beams on the bottom floor. It is probably safe to assume the bombs are connected in some way and that moving one might set off the other. I frown and fly quickly down to where the police have gathered at the base of the building.

I land lightly next to the police chief, who acknowledges me with a nod, his expression grim.

“Superman, I’m glad to see you. We have a complicated situation here,” he explains. He motions me to a makeshift tent set up with computers and other heavy equipment, which they appear to be using to monitor communications in and around the building.

“I located the two bombs — one up with them at the observation deck and the other down in the lobby,” I say as he stops in front of a map of the building. He nods.

“They say the two bombs are connected. Move one, and the other goes off,” he adds. He points to the locations of the two bombs on the map in front of him.

“I suspected as much.” I cross my arms over my chest.

“They are demanding money, a helicopter, and safe passage out of the country. And they said they will start killing hostages — ” he glances at his watch — “in five minutes. One every minute until their demands are met. Starting with the children.”

My chest tightens. Always the children. They sure know how to get to me.

I lift my eyes and zoom in to the top floor. The hostages huddle fearfully against one of the glass windows, and one of the suspects waves a handgun at them, yelling profanities, while the other glances nervously at his watch and mutters to himself. The second suspect also carries two handguns and holds a small black object no bigger than a lighter — the trigger for the bomb I assume. Can I fly fast enough to get to both bombs before they explode? I’m not sure if it’s worth the risk of finding out. But we have no time.

“Do we know for sure if the bombs are connected?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “We haven’t been able to inspect them. They said if anyone approaches the building, they will detonate one, which will then detonate the other, and the whole building will collapse.”

“Right. Can I have paper and a pencil, please?”

He raises his eyebrows at me, but nods and turns to his assistant, who hands him a sketch pad and pencil. He passes the materials on to me, and I use my x-ray vision to inspect the bombs, enabling me to quickly draw the two bombs and the detonator device with as much detail and accuracy as I can. The drawings take up several pages of the sketch pad. When I finish, I hand him the pages.

“Does this help at all?”

“Maybe, Superman, let’s see. John!” The police chief turns toward two other men conferring in the corner of the tent. One man looks up sharply and moves toward us. “Superman drew these. Can you tell him about the bombs and how they may be connected from these drawings?”

John takes the pages and flips through them, mumbling to himself and running his fingers along the sketches. He turns to his partner.

“Nate. Is this what I think it is?” His partner steps over and stares at the page for a moment. His face pales as he nods. John turns back to me. “It’s a sophisticated design, Superman. You see this right here?” He points to the upper right corner of one of my drawings. “This will send a radiofrequency signal from one bomb to the other as soon as the bomb is moved. There’s a sensor here — ” he again points, this time to the center of the drawing — “and if the bomb is tampered with or detonates, the signal will be sent to the second bomb. Each of the bombs has this same mechanism. The signal is on the electromagnetic spectrum, meaning —”

“It travels at the speed of light,” I finish for him. He nods weakly. “Can the sensor or signaling trigger be disabled without setting off the bomb or triggering the signal? Like with my heat vision?”

“I would guess no, Superman. Like I said, it’s a sophisticated design.”

“Thank you, John,” I reply. I glance at the clock on the wall. We’re down to three minutes. I have to make a decision. No one is going to die on my watch. I’ll just have to be fast enough. “Once the bomb is moved, how long until it detonates? And once the signal is sent from the first bomb, how long will it be until the second bomb goes off?”

“Milliseconds. At best,” John replies.

I nod again, my eyes scanning the building. I plot my path. I’ll grab the bomb upstairs, along with the suspects guns, first and then... No, the lower bomb first, then the higher bomb, and I’ll just go straight up with both bombs. Get them as far up as possible before they explode. But I’m not sure if my earlier ‘boost’ from the Sun is still affecting me.

“Sir, how much time is left, exactly?”

The police chief looks briefly at his watch. “Two minutes thirty-seven seconds, Superman.”

“Okay.”

No problem. I can do this. I close my eyes for just a moment and focus. The power is still there — whatever the Sun gave me earlier. I know it.

I *will* be fast enough. I have to be.

I open my eyes and again plot out the path in my mind.

“I’m going to take out both bombs and grab the suspects’ guns,” I explain confidently.

He just stares at me for a moment as though assessing whether to trust me. Then, with a slight nod, he glances at his watch.

“Two minutes three seconds.”

“Got it.”

And I take off, careful to not damage the pavement as I go. I know I’m moving so fast that he won’t even see me until after I’m already up and out of the building and the bombs explode. Everything around me is frozen, even the droplets of rain appear to hover in the air. I break through the doors to the lobby, gaining more speed. I wrench the large bomb free from its spot on the ceiling without slowing and continue out the window on the far side of the building. I then swerve upward along the edge of the building, still picking up speed. When I reach the 102nd floor, I turn sharply, burst through the window on the side opposite the hostages, confiscate the gunmen’s weapons, and grab the second bomb before exiting the building using the same window I entered through. And I shoot straight up into the sky.

I’m several thousand feet up above the building when both bombs detonate almost simultaneously. The blast is huge, but I don’t feel a thing. I slow myself quickly, and the raindrops around me start to fall again as everything returns to normal speed. I glance down to make sure no debris from the explosion threatens anyone on the ground. Then, I fly back to the top floor of the building, where the hostages still huddle against the far wall. The suspects stand near the middle of the room, confusion on their faces, and I land lightly in front of them.

“Everyone can exit down the elevators in an orderly manner. Both bombs are neutralized,” I explain to the hostages. I grab the collars of both of the suspects and hoist them into the air. “I will take these two down to the police.”

I hear choruses of “Thank you, Superman” as I fly the suspects out the window and straight down to the police, who still stare up into the sky where the bombs exploded seconds ago. I land, not so lightly this time, allowing the two men in my grip to hit the ground just a little harder than they should, and I push them toward the police chief as they stumble.

The police chief shakes his head at me in amazement, and two of his officers step up and place the men in handcuffs. I nod at him and then launch back up to be sure everyone on the 102nd floor gets down safely.

Thirty minutes later, I land on the balcony to my apartment, head inside, and spin back into my regular clothes. Almost immediately, my cell phone rings, and I jog over to the kitchen table. It’s Martha Kent.

Oh boy.

I press the answer button and slowly bring the phone to my ear.

“Hello?”

“Clark, hi! I was hoping to catch you. Are you alone?”

Her tone is happy and light. So I figure she probably hasn’t spoken with Lois yet.

“Uh, yeah, yes, I’m — I just got back from — Yeah, I’m alone,” I stammer. Yep, I just turned a one-word answer into a twelve-word jumble. I’m so good with words.

“Great! So next week, I’m sure you know, is Lois’s birthday. I made her a gift — it’s a painting — and I wanted to give it to her, but I’m worried that if I mail it, it won’t arrive on time,” she explains.

“I’d be happy to come and pick up the gift for you, Martha,” I reply quickly. I rest one hand on the counter as I listen to the rustling on the other end of the phone.

“Wonderful, thank you, Clark! When is convenient for you?”

A small smile grows on my lips. It’s the perfect opportunity to tell them. And it would be much better to tell them in person than over the phone. I picture Martha’s bright smile and kind eyes, and I remember the deep sadness I saw in her and Jonathan the first time we’d met. I can’t wait to see her expression when she finds out that her son has indeed returned, just like she always knew he would.

“I think maybe in half an hour, if it’s ready by then,” I propose. That should give me enough time to talk to Lois and Clark.

“Perfect,” she says cheerfully. “I’ll have apple pie for you by then. Fresh out of the oven.”

I smile wider. This wonderful woman. I’m so grateful to have met her.

“Thank you, Martha. That sounds wonderful. I’ll see you soon.”

“Okay, Clark, see you soon.”

I hang up the phone and spin back into the suit. Maybe at some point today, I’ll have a chance to take a breath and relax. I’ve been going nonstop since this morning’s rain storm. For now, however, I take off out the window and head back to Lois’s apartment. The Sun peeks through the clouds again as I fly, and I smile as I think about how happy the Kents will be to hear the news. I slow as I approach Lois’s apartment, and I knock lightly on the window, which is still unlocked from my departure earlier. The window opens as I knock on it, and I step into the empty room and shut the window behind me. The table has been cleared, dirty dishes taken care of, and the lights dimmed, but sunlight shines through the window to brighten the room.

I hear soft voices from down the hall, and I again tamp down my hearing so I don't eavesdrop as I spin back out of the suit.

"Lois?"

I raise my voice enough so she can hear me, and the voices from down the hall immediately go silent. A moment later, Lois emerges from the hallway, a smile on her face. Her dark hair is now pulled back into a low ponytail, and she's changed out of her work clothes and into black yoga pants and a blue top.

"Sorry to just... The window was still open, and I-I got back from New York, and I needed to talk to you two. It's a-about the Kents."

Clark appears from behind Lois, supporting himself with one hand on the wall. His face is contorted with a grimace, but he moves up behind her, and she twists her head back to smile at him as his arms wrap around her.

"I told you to stay in bed, and I'd be right back," she says to him. She shifts in his arms and slides one of her arms around his waist to help support him.

"And I told you that I'm fine and feeling much better already," he counters, turning his grimace into a smile. I feel it is forced, but Lois doesn't seem to notice. She kisses him on the cheek and turns back to me.

"You're always welcome here, Clark. If the window is open, come right on in, okay?" Lois assures me. I smile tightly and nod, and she continues. "What about the Kents? Oh, my, Clark, your parents!" She turns again to look at her fiancé, who now stares at me almost blankly. I narrow my eyes at him, and he blinks and then turns to Lois and smiles again.

"Martha called me just a few minutes ago," I explain quickly, shifting my gaze to Lois. She tightens her hold around Clark's waist momentarily and then looks back to me, her eyes warm and kind. "She had a favor to ask, so she invited me down later this afternoon, and I thought I could deliver the news to them in person. In person would be better than over the phone, after all. And then I could bring them here, if they want. I mean, of course, they will want to come. They are going to be so happy to see you, Clark. You have no idea —"

"I take back what I said earlier," Clark interrupts me, a crooked grin on his face. He takes a step forward and glances at Lois as he adds, "He babbles just like me when he's nervous. So he does have at least one of my character flaws."

I chuckle as I lower my eyes for a moment. "Right, sorry. I just..." I shake my head. He's right, of course. But why am I nervous? "I wanted to make sure you both are okay with that. I mean, that I tell them. And, Lois, if they want to come up immediately — is that okay? And is the guest bedroom still made up? Or should I book a hotel for

them? Or..." There I go again. I stop myself as my cheeks turn red. "Sorry, I'm doing it again."

Lois laughs, and Clark's smile grows. She turns to him.

"It's your call. I think Clark has a point about it being a much better idea to tell them in person," she says. She rests her free hand across his stomach, and he clenches his jaw as he seems to think hard about it. He raises his eyes to mine.

"*Why is it so important to you that you be the one to tell them?*" His voice inserts itself into my mind, and my shoulders tense involuntarily. He doesn't wait for me to respond, and his gaze shifts back to Lois.

"I agree. In person is much better," he replies. He plants a brief kiss on her cheek and then turns back to me. Wordlessly, I feel his question again.

I don't have an agenda here. My response is clear and concise. But I feel compelled to add more. For Lois's benefit, I speak out loud. "I can't wait to see their reaction. They've really missed you, Clark."

His eyes remain trained on me, and I begin to feel slightly uncomfortable. I'm only trying to help here. Sure, I do want to see them happy. I close my eyes as I picture my own parents, the night before they died. One of the last memories I have of them. We sat together at the kitchen table. My mom wore a blue dress with white flowers that my dad had bought her for her birthday the week before, and my dad had changed into a clean dress shirt and slacks. And we ate apple pie. Freshly baked. With apples from our orchard. And they laughed and smiled as we played a game of Scrabble. My mom usually won, but I was leading then. I remember I had a seven-letter word to play — CONTENT. And I stood up and, in quite a dramatic fashion, I placed my tiles on the board and added up my points. In that moment, I had been perfectly content. And the very next day...

My eyes open abruptly. Does he know what I'm thinking now? I'm not sure. He's lowered his eyes and is looking tired.

"It's a fine idea," Lois says. Clark leans on her a bit more, and she shifts her weight to help support him better. "Clark, is it okay with you if he goes to Smallville and tells them you're home? Then he can bring them here? They were just here earlier in the week, but I'm sure they will be happy to come back. They are going to be so happy. I know I am." She kisses his cheek and seems to notice that his face has paled more. "Maybe you should get back to bed, sweetie," she suggests. He nods.

"Yeah. And yes, I think it's fine for you to go, Clark. I look forward to seeing them."

Please don't tell them about my injury. I don't want to worry them. My dad...his heart is not good. He again raises his eyes to meet mine, and I feel just a hint of the

pain still aching in his chest. He shakes his head, and it vanishes. *“Sorry again. I’m getting tired, and it’s harder to control.”*

Got it. I won’t say anything about your injury, I assure him. I add, And don’t worry. Get some rest.

“Great,” Lois declares, unaware of our silent conversation. “Thank you again, Clark. Let me get him into bed, and I’ll be right back. Hang on, don’t go anywhere, okay?”

I nod and watch as she helps him back to the bedroom. I stuff my hands into my pockets. The folded up notebook page that Perry White gave me this morning is still in my right pocket, and I pull it back out and open it up. The number at the top of the page jumps out at me. One million dollars. It’s just the advance, he had said. Millions more in royalties. But everything has changed now. Hopefully, the three of us can find a few minutes to sit down and talk about this... Maybe tomorrow.

“What’s that?” Her voice startles me, and I look up sharply and fold the paper back up.

“N-nothing, really, just a n-note P-Perry gave me,” I stutter. Ha. I’m so great at telling half-truths. No way she’ll see through that one. I frown and lower my eyes again. “It’s actually... Not that important right now. We can talk about it later. Tomorrow maybe.”

“Okay,” she replies, her voice low.

She steps over across the room toward me and stops just a couple feet away. I lift my eyes to hers. She watches me curiously, her arms crossed over her chest. She smells like strawberries. Why do I always seem to notice that? I smile weakly at her.

“This has been a weird day,” I say quietly.

To my surprise, she steps up closer to me and wraps her arms around me. My body tenses momentarily, and I stand stiffly while she hugs me. After a moment, she releases me and steps back. Her hands, however, settle on my lower arms, and she squeezes me gently.

“Clark, I know this feels awkward,” she starts. Her voice falters just a bit, and I sense she wants to say something more, but she changes her mind. “I watched the TV coverage of the bomb threat at the Empire State Building. I’ve never seen you move so fast.”

“Yeah, it’s kinda crazy, actually.” I reach up and rub the back of my neck as I turn away from her, breaking our contact. “Um, since flying up to the Sun, my powers are all amplified. I can...travel faster than the speed of light now...”

I spin back around to face her, my stomach twisting in knots. A thought I haven’t had in probably nearly three weeks pops into my head. *Freak alien. Breaking even more laws of physics.* Please don’t react like that, Lois. I

wouldn’t be able to handle it. But I have nothing to worry about from her.

“That makes sense. That the Sun would give you a power boost,” she agrees, nodding absently. Her eyes travel up to meet mine again. “It’s incredible, really.”

She pauses and glances over her shoulder back toward the bedroom. When she looks back to me, I see confusion and concern.

“Anyways, I just wanted to thank you again. And remind you again that even though he’s back, you are still a friend. You are welcome here, any time. Through the front door or the window, whichever is appropriate. And I know...” A sigh escapes her lips, and she drops her chin to her chest briefly before continuing. “...I know he’s going to need time to heal, physically and...otherwise... And I just want to tell you how much I appreciate —”

She stops and covers her mouth with her hand. I’m at her side immediately, and I support her with an arm around her waist. I help her move to the table, and I pull out a chair and lower her carefully into the seat.

“Maybe you need to rest too, Lois,” I suggest, squeezing her hand gently.

“Maybe I do,” she agrees. “Thank you. Boy, I’ve sure said that a lot today.”

I smile at her. “Like I said, it’s been a weird day.”

She nods slowly. “Well, you probably need to get going to Smallville. Um, just text me and let me know if you’re bringing the Kents back with you, so I can prep the guest bedroom for them?”

“Sure, of course,” I reply.

She stands a bit shakily, and I stand with her, ready to help her if needed. But she waves me off with a half-smile.

“I’m fine, really. Go. The Kents will be so happy.”

I return her smile and nod.

“See you soon,” I say.

“See you.”

And I’m off. Again.

Chapter 27

The Kansas cornfields stretch out below me as I fly at a leisurely pace under the early afternoon Sun. In the distance, the Kent farmhouse comes into my view. Dust rises as Jonathan drives his pickup truck toward the house down their long driveway. He stops and exits the vehicle, carrying a plastic shopping bag from the local hardware store. He waves to Martha, who stands on the porch, and then heads into the barn. Martha turns and heads back inside the house.

I slow as I approach and land lightly on the steps as I spin into my regular clothes. I can already smell the apple pie from inside the house, and I smile nostalgically. I raise

my hand to knock on the front door, but I pause mid-knock as I hear Martha's voice from inside the house.

"Come on in, Clark!"

I hesitate for a nanosecond, and my confidence and enthusiasm at telling them their son has returned waver. Will they still welcome me like this once he is back in their lives? My jaw tightens, and a chill runs through me. I hear his question echo in my head again.

"Why is it so important to you that you be the one to tell them?"

Had I thought, in the back of my mind, that this may be my last chance to make them happy? Or that since he is back, they will no longer need me? Just like Lois will no longer need me. Sure, the world needs Superman. But what of Clark Kent? I have gotten too comfortable thinking of them as my parents when they are not my parents. And I realize "losing" them in my life may be even more painful than "losing" Lois. Please, Martha and Jonathan, please don't reject me.

I swallow hard and paste a smile on my face as I open the door to the farmhouse.

"Good afternoon, Martha," I say cordially.

I carefully close the door behind me and turn toward Martha, who sets the modest kitchen table with three small white plates and appropriate utensils. Her yellow apron is dusted with flour, and her glasses fall down her nose a bit. She smiles at me brightly.

"Clark, it's so good to see you again," she hums.

She moves around the table and embraces me. My heart is filled with joy and hope. And my stomach twists into knots. Please, Martha.

"It's great to see you again, too," I reply, straining to keep my warring emotions out of my voice. Martha smiles at me again and scoots back around the table toward the counter, where her apple pie sits.

"Jonathan went out to the barn to replace a lightbulb." She pauses for a moment, her expression twisting into a frown. "You know," she says, looking up at me with a hint of anxiety, "maybe you can go help him out? He really shouldn't be climbing that old rickety ladder. I keep telling him to get a new one, but he insists his old one is still fine."

"Of course. I'll be right back."

I nod briefly to her, exit the house, and jog out to the barn. Sure enough, Jonathan is several steps up a ladder that has obviously seen much better days. It creaks and groans as he steps up another rung, and I speed over to stabilize it as a crack in the front side rail grows.

"Oh, Clark! You surprised me there," Jonathan exclaims, his hands gripping the rails tightly.

"Sorry, Mr. Kent. This ladder here isn't quite as stable as it should be. Can I help you with that lightbulb, sir?"

I hope that was polite enough. Jonathan freezes on the ladder and then takes a deep breath and lowers himself down one rung and then another. When he reaches the ground, he huffs slightly, and I hear his heart rattle in his chest. I place a strong, steady hand on his shoulder to support him, and he takes a deep, long breath.

"You okay, sir?"

"Yes, I'm fine. Thank you, Clark. Here," he says breathlessly, handing me the lightbulb.

I nod and take the lightbulb, and then easily float upwards, screw the new bulb into the light fixture, and float back down with the old, burnt-out bulb.

"There we go," I say with a smile.

I toss the old bulb in the trash can and turn back to Jonathan, who is staring at the crack in his ladder. His hands are deep in his pockets, and his cheeks are slightly red as he wheezes.

"I've had this ladder for thirty-five years," he says, his voice shaky. "I guess it's time to replace it. Martha was right. As always."

I laugh. "Spoken like a wise man. Would you like me to pick up a new one for you from the hardware store, sir?"

He turns away and starts walking toward the house, his hands still in his pockets.

"No thank you, Clark, I can handle it," Jonathan responds. He holds open the door for me, and I nod a thanks and exit the barn ahead of him.

We walk in a comfortable silence toward the house. I keep an ear on his heartbeat, which seems to have stabilized, along with his breathing. Copying Jonathan, I stuff my hands into my pockets, and my mind wanders as I remember my own father. He had been a proud, independent man, like this Jonathan. And, like this Jonathan, he'd internalized all of his stress and anxiety, which had elevated his blood pressure and weakened his heart. I remember a medicine cabinet full of prescription bottles with his name on them and late nights lying in bed, trying to turn off my keen hearing as Mom and Dad talked in hushed voices about doctor's appointments, dietary changes, and possible surgery. He'd passed away before surgery had been required, but it had been a consideration.

Given that Clark had asked me not to upset Jonathan because of his weak heart, I wonder whether this Jonathan has already undergone some sort of surgical procedure or whether Clark is just aware of his father's irregular heartbeat, like I am. We reach the front door, and this time, I step ahead and hold it open for him. He claps me on the back and heads into the house ahead of me.

Martha stands next to the table and looks up sharply at us as we enter. Her hands settle on the front of her apron, and her easy smile calms my nerves.

“Perfect timing, boys. Pie is ready,” she says as she walks over to meet us. She gives me a quick hug and then loops her arm through Jonathan’s and leads him over to the table. “Oh, Clark, before I forget,” she interjects, releasing Jonathan and stepping back over toward the counter. A wrapped rectangular package sits propped up against the cabinet. She lifts it and smiles. “Lois’s gift is right here.”

“Great, Martha, I — ” I stop myself and drop my eyes. I can’t say I’ll take it to Lois. Martha can give it to Lois herself. I grin widely and raise my eyes, meeting hers. She tilts her head and gazes at me with a curious expression. “I think you both should sit. I have some news.”

“Well, okay, Clark.”

She glances at her husband, who shrugs, and then silently hurries over to him and sits next to him at the table. I hear Jonathan Kent’s heart stammer in his chest, and my jaw tightens for a moment. They hold hands and look at me expectantly. I wonder what they are thinking — what they are expecting. And I realize that I should have planned how I would tell them. Especially since I’m so wonderful with words. Maybe I’ll manage not to stutter. Probably not. I let out a breath and sit, staring at my hands for a moment. This is good news. Great news. They will be happy and relieved and whole again.

I raise my eyes and smile.

“This morning, I — well, Lois and I, actually — we made a huge discovery.”

I see Martha’s hands tighten in Jonathan’s, and she holds her breath in anticipation. My smile grows. Whatever happens, at least I get to experience this moment with them.

“Clark, your son, Clark — he’s...um, he’s alive.”

Martha’s hands fly up to cover her mouth, and Jonathan shifts in his seat and wraps one arm around Martha’s shoulders. She turns to look at him, and as their eyes meet, she stifles a sob and leans into him. He holds her close to his chest and screws his eyes shut.

“The Sun healed him,” I explain quickly. My hands feel cold and tingly for some reason, and I clench them in my lap to stop them from trembling. “I felt his presence and heard his heartbeat. And then I flew up to the Sun and brought him back. He’s with Lois right now, resting. He can’t wait to see you two.”

Martha hugs Jonathan tightly, and he looks across the table at me. Tears form at the corners of his eyes, and his lips part as if to speak. Instead, he just mouths “Thank you” and buries his face into Martha’s hair, kissing the top of her head. She twists her head toward me and blinks away her tears.

“He-he’s alive?” she repeats uncertainly. I purse my lips and nod.

“Yes.”

“And he’s...okay?” Jonathan asks carefully.

With an ease that comes from years of hiding my true self, I push my own doubt regarding Clark’s physical and mental state out of my mind and smile comfortably at Jonathan and Martha.

“He’s tired and weak. But, yes, he’s okay.”

But although I’m used to lying and quite good at it, a familiar sense of guilt, which always accompanies any lie I tell, edges into my chest.

There, Clark. I did what you asked. But it didn’t feel good.

I immediately regret being so bold with my thoughts as I hear his voice echo in my head.

“I know. I’m sorry to ask you to lie for me. Thank you.”

Dammit. I blink uneasily and look away from the Kents for a moment.

I’m still getting used to this telepathy thing. I didn’t mean to connect with you there. Sorry about that.

I feel rather than hear a chuckle from him, and then his voice, as clearly as though he stands next to me, says, “No worries. Please, tell them I love them, and I can’t wait to see them.”

I raise my eyes to theirs. *Will do.* And I feel our connection break.

A weak half-smile grows on my face. “He says to tell you he loves you, and he can’t wait to see you.”

Martha suppresses another sob and quickly releases Jonathan to stand. She hurries around the table to me, and I push myself to my feet to meet her. Her arms envelop me in what may be the best hug I’ve had in nearly twenty years, and tears prick at my eyes as I return her embrace.

“Oh, Clark, thank you, thank you so much.”

Her voice quivers with emotion. And, consciously blocking my thoughts from prying intruders, I think, *No, thank you, Martha. Thank you.*

Chapter 28

The chilly morning air hits my face as I exit the apartment, and I instinctively close my eyes as I turn around to lock the door. Weak sunlight breaks through the thin cloud layer, glinting off the metal of the door handle. My hand, usually steady and strong, shakes almost imperceptibly as I insert the key into the lock and turn, listening for the telltale click that indicates the lock is engaged. I then stuff the keyring into my pocket.

I had to drag myself out of bed this morning. It wasn’t easy. I’d been out almost all night putting out a wildfire in Australia, stopping an avalanche from taking out a small village in Russia, and helping clean up a major mudslide in Brazil. And...well...my motivation for getting out of bed was quite low.

I turn around unenthusiastically and stumble down the steps. I scan ahead of me, out to the city. As is typical for a cold Sunday morning, the city is quiet and sleepy. A few people walk their dogs in and around Centennial Park, and traffic is light. Normally, I enjoy slow Sunday mornings like this. But today, I feel dreadfully alone.

I focus my eyesight back on the sidewalk in front of me. Why am I even running today? Will it provide me a distraction? Pass the time? Maybe I should go flying instead. I close my eyes for a moment. But then I just see them — smiling and happy and hugging, and I feel numb.

No, I will run.

Fast and far.

A different loop, maybe not through the park today.

I kneel down unsteadily to retie my left shoe. My knee hits the pavement, cracking the concrete ever so slightly.

Whoops.

Careful.

Freak alien.

No, don't do that right now. I shake my head and curse silently as I double knot the laces with trembling hands.

Yesterday — no, don't think about it. Don't think, just run. Isn't that why I run, after all — to forget? I used to need my morning run to clear my mind and prepare myself for long days of ignoring the disconcerting stares and whispers that came with my celebrity status on my world. Then, on this Earth, I used my morning run as a part of a familiar routine when everything else around me was unfamiliar. When Lois started joining me, it became something more. I didn't use it to forget anymore, but to build — build my life here, build my friendship with her, build myself up as Clark Kent, mild-mannered reporter who is definitely not also a superhero flying around in blue tights and a regal red cape.

Now...well, now I need to run to forget again.

To forget yesterday afternoon.

I need to forget their words, whispered quietly as though that would stop me from hearing. Not intentionally unkind words, no, but hurtful words nonetheless. And words that confirmed my worst fears.

I shouldn't have eavesdropped. It's my own fault. It was not intentional; I'd just been returning to Lois's apartment after having dropped off the Kents and thwarted a bank robbery a few miles away. I'd only been gone a few minutes. And then I'd hovered above the apartment and watched them hug and cry together. I figured I'd give them a few minutes before I knocked on the window.

Clark had spoken first. Had he known I was nearby? It didn't feel like it. But he was much more skilled at reading my thoughts than I was at reading his. And his words had seemed innocent enough.

"It's a good thing the other Clark was here to bring me back. I don't know how much longer it would have taken for me to be able to fly home of my own power."

However, Jonathan Kent had spoken up next, the mistrust from several weeks ago seeping back into his voice. *"Kinda fishy if you ask me."*

"What is, Jonathan?" Martha had sounded skeptical. She sat next to Clark on the couch, her arm around his shoulders.

"He shows up, claiming he is here to help since the world needs Superman. But the world has Superman still, we just needed to wait a bit longer for him to come home." From the other side of Clark, Jonathan had shaken his head. *"He jumped right into your life, taking over your jobs, your apartment, your fiancée..."*

My eyes had shifted to Lois, who stood silently a couple feet away, her arms crossed over her chest. She looked confused, her eyes on the floor, and although she shook her head, she didn't speak up to defend me.

"No, Jon, he was just acting on the information he had available to him," Martha had said. But her tone didn't sound convincing. *"It doesn't even matter now,"* she had continued, leaning into her son again. *"All that matters is that you're back now. I can't tell you how happy I am, Clark. Oh, my boy!"*

And she hugged him. Just like she'd hugged me earlier. But...more. And then Jonathan and Lois had joined her.

And I'd flown up into the sky, away from it, away from them. I hadn't stopped until I realized I was about to exit the solar system, Pluto looming in front of me. How long had I been flying? I wasn't sure. Numbly, I'd turned around and sped back toward Earth.

I thought I'd cool off overnight. But I'd been busy with Superman rescues as soon as I'd gotten back from my space adventure, and I hadn't had time to process any of it or to talk to them and...clarify? My cell phone had been silent; no one had tried to contact me. And so I'd just gone on. I still feel numb. And so alone.

I look down the street and then start off at a good pace toward Centennial Park. The light mist in the air fogs up my glasses; I take a chance, considering no one is around and I'm in normal clothes, and I remove them and stuff them into my pocket. The sensation of running without my glasses on distracts me sufficiently for several minutes, almost as though I am seeing the city for the first time.

The clean, tree-lined streets pass by me as I sprint along. It is cleaner than it was four weeks ago; trash has been picked up and placed in trash cans spaced at even intervals down the sidewalks along the edge of the park. A new homeless shelter had opened up last week one block away, and no more homeless families huddle together to stay warm in their broken, dilapidated tents near the

forested trails running through the middle of the park. I veer the other way today — toward the river rather through the park. In another minute, I take a hard right and speed along the bike path running parallel to Hobbs River. This area, too — it had been dirty and strewn with litter, a common spot for drug dealers and prostitutes — but now, the path is clean and safe.

I run a little faster still, my hands balling into fists. Then I remind myself that I should be careful not to attract attention to my speed, and I slow my pace a bit and pull my glasses back out of my pocket. I will not screw up things for him or for me. At least for now, I am still Clark Kent, who definitely is not a freak alien with the ability to fly at speeds faster than light. I carefully dry my glasses using a dry corner of my shirt, rather than the short burst of heat vision that I'd normally use, and shove them back on. The familiarity of the glasses back on my face seems to pull me out of the daze I'm in, and I turn right and continue down a side street.

Within a few more minutes, I have looped back to the park. I'm not even sure how far I've gone, but it's not far enough. I still remember yesterday. I sigh and slow to a walk a couple blocks from my apartment. A light drizzle starts to fall. I lower my head to try to keep my glasses from getting too wet and continue walking briskly the last couple blocks.

The numbness inside me grows as I round the corner toward my apartment. I eye the open parking spot where Lois's Jeep would usually be at this time of the morning. An uncomfortable tightness spreads through my chest. I'd hoped she'd be here waiting for me, apologizing for being late, and challenging me to beat her in our routine loop around the park.

But the spot is empty.

I swallow and jog up the steps to my door. *His* door. I shake my head as Jonathan Kent's words echo again in my mind.

"He jumped right into your life, taking over your jobs, your apartment, your fiancée..."

No, he's wrong. He's wrong. I never had any agenda. I still have no agenda. I only came here to help.

I unlock the door and move inside, out of the chilly morning and into the dim light of the living room. The apartment is warm, and I flip on the lights and stare at the now-familiar space. I'd only made a few changes since moving in. I'd shifted the furniture around a bit and replaced an old throw blanket that he'd had on the couch. I'd bought some new cookware, since he'd had startlingly few pots and pans. Otherwise, the space looks nearly identical to the first day I'd come.

I feel a sudden need to get out, however, to be anywhere else but here, in *his* space. At superspeed, I

shower and change into the suit. Although I usually leave my cell phone at home, today I decide to bring it with me. Yeah, a small part of me still hopes...maybe she will call me. Tell me she needs to see me. Needs my help with a story...or changing a lightbulb...or something. But it's Sunday. We're both off work today. And she's got him back...

She won't need me.

I stare at the blank screen of the cell phone. No, she won't need me. But I stuff the phone into the hidden pocket of the suit. Just in case.

I head out to the balcony and then launch up into the dreary, cold sky, extending my senses out to pick up the sounds of the city and beyond.

Someone out there needs me. I'll just have to find them.

Chapter 29

The eighteen-wheeler jackknives and slides across the slick, icy mountain road, its driver wide-eyed and fearful, his foot pressed deeply onto the brake pedal. Just as the truck crashes through the guardrail, about to begin a rapid, dangerous plummet over the side of the cliff, I catch it mid-air, and it groans as it shudders to a stop. I hear the driver exhale, "Oh, thank God," and then slump over with relief into his seat. I carefully lift the truck back up to the road and set it down slowly at a safer turnout further down the road to avoid jostling the driver. He rolls down his window and wipes sweat off his brow with a shaky hand.

"Thank you, Superman. I — you just saved my life. Thank you," he blurts out, leaning heavily on the door.

"You're welcome, sir," I reply, floating up to be level with the cab and to avoid having to raise my voice. "I need to get going, but can I give you a lift to your destination or at least over this mountain pass before I take off? The roads are just getting worse, and there's another storm front headed this way."

"You'd do that for me? Yes, Superman, I'd really appreciate it. I am heading to Durango."

I nod. "Durango — that's where Fort Lewis College is, just south of the mountains here?" I turn my head slightly and gaze out toward the south. "About fifty miles or so," I add, shifting back to the driver.

"Yessir, that's right," he agrees. Some of the color seems to be returning to his cheeks.

"All right. Sit back and hold on. I'll try to make the trip as smooth as possible."

"Thank you, Superman," he says.

I see him settle back into his seat and check his seatbelt, and I float back down to the ground and gently lift the truck. It's the third vehicle I've relocated from Red Mountain Pass already this morning. The unexpected

storm had moved furiously through the region, dumping feet of snow over a layer of ice on the already dangerous mountain roads of southwestern Colorado. The other two vehicles I'd relocated — one a passenger vehicle carrying a family of four and the other another eighteen-wheeler — had been heading north, toward Grand Junction. Both had been in similarly precarious situations, slipping and sliding along the icy road and at risk of going over the edge of the cliff. They'd closed the road by now, so no one else should be coming through. But I was glad I'd been nearby on my way back from helping to put out a chemical fire at a manufacturing plant outside of Las Vegas.

Within only a few minutes, I approach the small city of Durango, and I set the truck down in a nicely plowed parking lot near the county fairgrounds. And, almost immediately, I hear distant screaming. I turn abruptly toward the sound to localize it. Several skiers are caught in avalanche-like conditions on a mountain about twenty-five miles west. I quickly check that the truck driver is okay before I launch myself back into the sky and head west again.

About ten minutes later, the skiers moved to the safety of their lodge and out of the snow storm, I fly back over the region again, scanning for any more disturbances. The area is quiet now. Good. Disasters averted. All in a morning's work.

After executing one more large, slow loop through southern Colorado, I continue east, flying at an unhurried pace. My hearing seems to jump from one sound to another as I pass over urban areas on my way home. Instinctively, I focus on troubled voices, police scanners, and building alarms. However, nothing needs my immediate attention, so I continue on. I slow over a large group of protesters outside the White House in Washington, DC, monitoring the general atmosphere of the protest; however, the protesters are peacefully congregating, and even the police officers seem relaxed and unworried. So, again, I continue on.

The midday Sun shines over Metropolis now, and the clouds from this morning have all moved on, to the north. I fly in a wide arc over the city. Shoppers and restaurant-goers hug the sidewalks of downtown, and vehicle traffic, still light for noon on a Sunday, travels slowly through the streets. No sirens to be heard. No bank alarms or screams for help.

I fly the long way home, deliberately avoiding Lois's neighborhood, and land lightly on the balcony of my apartment. I've been gone for almost five hours, but it seems like days. And I'm tired. No, not physically. Despite getting very little sleep the night before and flying all around the world on rescues for the last five hours, my power boost from yesterday has me feeling quite good

physically. But mentally and emotionally, I am still a wreck. My brain feels tired. Maybe I'll lie down for a short nap.

I pull the cell phone out of my suit pocket as I enter the apartment and then casually spin into more comfortable clothes — black workout pants and a gray T-shirt. There is a text from Jimmy asking if Lois and I are free for dinner with him and Perry. I cringe. I'd completely forgotten about Perry and Alice. I will give Jimmy a call — maybe I can go with him to support Perry. Although I'll need to ask Lois as well; I can't assume she won't want to go...or that *he* won't want to go instead of me. I also see two notifications of emails from the Pulitzer Prize committee, confirming my plans to attend the awards ceremony in three weeks. Yet another thing I need to talk to Lois about.

My jaw clenches as I stuff the phone back into my pocket. I should eat something, I suppose. Then I'll call Lois. My stomach twists at the thought, and any appetite I'd had is now lost. Maybe I'll be a coward and just text her.

Weak. You're weak, Kent. Just call her.

I shake my head and move to the fridge, where I pull out some leftover chicken enchiladas from Friday night. I lazily reheat some using my heat vision and open up today's edition of the *Daily Planet* as I sit at the table.

Superman dominates the front page — a story on the near meltdown of the nuclear power plant in Japan is the main headline, and another article on the bomb threat at the Empire State Building graces the bottom half of the front page. I read through both articles, which are well-written and thorough accounts of Superman's activities, and I close my eyes for a moment as I realize how glad I am that I didn't have to write them. In fact, although I am often sure to give good quotes to Daily Planet reporters, I only sometimes have to write about myself. Most of Superman's activities are covered by Lois or three other reporters — definitely not by Clark Kent.

Lois once told me that her Clark preferred to distance himself as much as possible from Superman to avoid suspicion, although I suppose with Clark having been 'chosen' to accompany Superman to New Krypton, that deliberate distance between Clark Kent and Superman has been all but eliminated.

I flip through a few more pages while eating my lunch. And soon, too soon, really, I'm finished. I rinse off my plate and stick it in the dishwasher, then sit back at the table with a sigh and pull out my phone.

Call or text?

If she's currently having lunch with the Kents, a phone call would be disruptive; a text, however, could be ignored until the time is right. But I really need to call Jimmy back soon and let him know about dinner... So, I should call.

Sigh.

I run a nervous hand through my hair as I dial her number, and I bring the phone to my ear as the ringtone buzzes. Once, twice, three times. And then I hear her voice on the other end of the line.

“Hello?” Her voice is soft and sweet. She knows it’s me, of course, and I hear her mumble, “Sorry, I’ll be right back,” followed by some rustling.

“Hi, Lois. It’s me, uh, Clark. I-I — um, h-how are you all d-doing there? Is everything o-okay?” I screw my eyes shut and smack my fist to my forehead. Stupid stuttering.

“Yeah, yes, it’s all good here,” she says quietly. I hear a door shut and then the sound of her mattress squeaking. “We were just having lunch. We missed you yesterday after you dropped the Kents off. Was Superman busy?”

Oh, Lois. Thank you, but I know you don’t mean “we.” Maybe *you* missed me? But then why not call? I suppress the negative thoughts that want to force themselves through, and I do what I must, even though I hate it.

I lie.

“Yeah, busy most of the afternoon yesterday and then all night,” I reply.

I guess it’s not a lie if you consider ‘busy’ to be flying aimlessly through space for hours. And nice that my stutter completely disappears when I lie. Guilt causes my chest to constrict. I need to get to the point and then get off the phone. But she speaks before I can.

“I’m glad you called, actually, because Jimmy called me just a few minutes ago. Did you know about Perry and Alice?”

“Yeah, P-Perry told me yesterday morning,” I confess. I almost feel her nod into the phone.

“Jimmy invited us to dinner with Perry tonight to try to cheer him up,” she explains.

My cynical brain wonders what the “us” in her sentence means. Me and her? Or him and her? But I don’t try to clarify. Instead, I force a laugh into the phone.

“That’s why I was calling as well. Jimmy texted me. I just got back from Colorado, so I hadn’t seen the message until now.”

My voice sounds stronger, but I feel shaky, and my stomach is so twisted in knots that it almost hurts. She doesn’t say anything right away, and my discomfort grows.

Finally, I clear my throat and add, “Um, I don’t have any plans for tonight, but if you — I mean, if he, um, Clark wants to go, I understand.”

Again, I smack my fist against my forehead. *Dumb, dumb, dumb, Kent.*

“Oh, no,” she responds immediately, her voice trembling. “No, he’s definitely not ready for anything like that yet.”

She pauses on the other end of the line, and I hear a weak snuffle and cough. She’s trying hard to hold herself together. Something is wrong.

“Lois? Are you okay?” I stand up and start pacing.

“Yes, sorry, um, I’m just, you know, a little tired, and he—he’s definitely not ready for anything like that,” she repeats cryptically. “But actually, I think I’d like to go with you, if you’re available. Clark won’t mind, I’m sure.”

Oh, boy, something sounds terribly wrong. I stop pacing and lean back against the counter.

“Sounds good then. How about I give Jimmy a call and let him know? I’ll text you the details after I talk to him.”

My fingers drum absently on the table, and I feel a muscle in my jaw twitching. I have an urge to see her right now — to go over there, knock on the door, and check that she is okay. I hadn’t imagined even for one second that she’d be upset or unhappy. And, her words, repeated almost in anguish, that Clark was not ready for an outing yet... I’m sure there’s a lot more she’s not saying.

“That would be great, Clark. Thank you,” she responds quietly.

Again, I have another urge to see her. To hug her. There is hurt in her voice. But I will have to wait a few hours.

“You’re welcome. I’ll see you soon. Goodbye, Lois.”

“Goodbye, Clark.”

I think maybe I hear a small hint of a smile in her voice this time. I’ll take it.

I hang up the phone and dial Jimmy’s number.

Chapter 30

I hear her Jeep pull up outside my apartment at 6:55 p.m., five minutes before she’s supposed to be here to pick me up. Her heart pounds unevenly in her chest, and her breathing is shaky. I busy myself with knotting my tie and wait for her knock on the door. After several minutes, when no knock has come, I frown. Maybe she doesn’t want to be early in case I’m not ready. That would explain it, right? However, when I listen carefully, my keen hearing picks up telltale sounds of her soft crying, and I look through the walls of the apartment, out to her vehicle. She sits, her head in her hands, holding back tears.

Oh, Lois, no. Please, don’t cry.

I grab my wallet, phone, keys, and suit jacket and jog up the steps to the door. As I exit the apartment, I hear her shift in her seat, and I turn and wave at her with a smile. She wipes the tears from her eyes and cheeks and smiles back at me with a small wave. I lock the door quickly and then trot over to her car and climb into the passenger’s seat. She snuffles again and brushes another stray tear off her cheek.

“Hi, Clark. It’s really good to see you,” she says, projecting confidence into her voice.

She meets my eyes only briefly before looking away. With an unsteady hand, she reaches out to start the Jeep, but I instinctively place my hand on top of hers to stop her. She inhales sharply as her hand freezes on the key. Maybe it isn't my place anymore. Maybe I shouldn't pry and just let her share if and when she's ready. But my heart can't stand to see her hurting.

"Do you want to talk about it?" My voice is quiet but solid. No stuttering now.

She lets her hand drop from the starter, effectively breaking our contact. Drawing in a shaky breath, she closes her eyes as another tear falls down her cheek. I desperately want to brush it away for her — to brush away all of her pain and sadness. But this time I hold back. I keep my hands to myself.

"He's having a tough time adjusting to being home," she admits, her voice barely above a whisper. "And it's really hard to watch." She pauses to wipe the tears away again. "He won't talk to me about it. But I see something in his eyes. Like he's haunted by his memories. And last night..."

Her voice trails off, and she turns her head to stare away from me, out the window. She doesn't continue, but instead crosses her arms over her chest in a gesture I know is meant to shield herself — protect herself. I take a chance now, choosing my words carefully.

"What happened last night, Lois?"

She shakes her head as though she doesn't want to remember, but then turns back toward me. Her eyes don't quite meet mine.

"He was sleeping, and I came into the bedroom after helping the Kents settle into the guest room, and..."

I reach out to take her hand. She glances up at me, her eyes red and her mascara ever so slightly smeared. She bites her lip as she lowers her eyes again, but she doesn't pull her hand away from mine.

It's then that I notice a minor red discoloration encircling her wrist. My thumb gently brushes over the blemish, and I look up at her with alarm.

"Did he do this to you?" The words hiss out of my mouth before I can think, and she flinches and tugs her hand out of mine. I backtrack and soften my tone. "Sorry, Lois, I just — please tell me what happened."

Her other hand rubs the mark on her right wrist, and she blinks back more tears.

"He didn't mean to do it," she mumbles, almost to herself. Then she turns to me, and I see a faint fire flicker in her eyes. The expression quickly disappears, however, and she explains, "He was startled when I laid down next to him in bed, and he grabbed my wrist. It was an accident."

"Okay, I understand," I concede. I certainly don't want to cause her more distress. And I can't imagine that he'd have hurt her intentionally. "But if it was just an accident, why are you so upset?" I ask carefully.

She looks away, and I feel her shrink into herself. *No, don't shut me out, Lois.* I gently touch her shoulder, and she leans into me. I feel her trembling. She wipes another tear from her cheek.

"We're going to be late to dinner," she replies evasively.

"Lois," I whisper, squeezing her shoulder. "I want to help you. Both of you. Please, tell me what has you so upset."

She shudders and suppresses a sob, dropping her chin down to her chest. And then she collapses into me crying. I take a deep breath, close my eyes, and wrap my arms around her as best I can in the tight space of the Jeep. One hand rubs her back, and I clench my jaw involuntarily as I carefully control my thoughts to avoid accidentally opening a telepathic connection with him.

"Shhh, it will be okay."

"I'm not sure if it will, Clark. I-I don't know anymore." She pulls away from me and takes a deep breath to steady herself. "When he woke, after he realized what he'd done — that he'd hurt me — he completely lost it. I couldn't calm him down. I found myself thinking it was a...a good thing he didn't have his superpowers, because I would have had to call you to help contain him. It's like he had a major panic attack, Clark, I don't know how else to describe it."

I nod slowly, imagining the scene as she described it. And knowing what I know about his experiences on New Krypton, his love for her, and the darkness and self-loathing I've felt buried in him, I'm actually not surprised.

"How has he been today?" I ask softly.

"Quiet. Withdrawn. Tired." She shifts in her seat a bit and then rests her hands on the steering wheel. "He spent a lot of time talking with his parents. They were asleep and don't know what happened last night. But when we're alone...it's like he's scared of something."

"He is," I say, setting my jaw.

This is a fine line I'm walking — Lois's friend, but with insights into her fiancé's emotional state — and I'm not entirely sure how much to say to her and how to navigate it. I decide it has to be his decision about how much, what, and when he tells her everything. Not mine. But I can still guide her to help him. Right?

"He's probably scared he'll hurt you again, Lois," I explain, my voice low. "I...I imagine he's struggling right now because of how New Krypton changed him. And he may not trust himself to do or say or think the right things anymore, especially after last night."

“What can I do, then, Clark? What should I do?”

She sounds so lost, and I have a strong urge to hug her again. However, I realize part of this process is going to have to include me stepping back a bit to let their relationship heal.

I close my eyes.

“He needs time and understanding. And you. He really, really needs you.”

That’s probably as much as I should say. At least for now.

Her hands drop from the steering wheel as she nods and brushes another tear from her eye.

“Maybe I should go back home,” she proposes, her voice nearly a whisper. She doesn’t look at me, but I can feel her uncertainty. “Maybe I shouldn’t be gone right now.”

I reach up and adjust my glasses. I know what the right thing to say is. But for a moment, I almost consider being so selfish as to ignore it. My shoulders tense and my stomach twists in knots, but I *will* do the right thing.

“That’s probably a good idea.”

She nods again, and she reaches up with a shaky hand again to start the car.

“I’ll drop you off at the restaurant, if you want,” she suggests.

I shake my head and reach for the door handle.

“No, it’s in the opposite direction. I’ll be fine.” I hesitate for a moment, then smile weakly at her. “Call me anytime, okay?”

There is so much more we need to talk about. But for now, she needs to get home.

“Okay.”

She turns her head slightly to look at me, and my heart skips a beat.

I hope you figure things out, Lois. I just want you to be happy.

With another final half-smile, I push the door open and exit the car, then wave as she drives off. That was difficult. I inhale deeply and then turn and jog back up the stairs to my apartment. As I unlock the door, I feel his presence with me, and a simple, silent question inserts into my mind.

“Is she okay?”

I open the door, re-enter the apartment, and spin into the suit so I can fly to the restaurant. My hesitation is my answer, and I can feel that he senses this. However, I reply with carefully chosen words.

She is very worried about you. The best thing you can do is to talk to her.

I take off from the balcony toward the steakhouse where Perry and Jimmy are probably already waiting. I sense his anxiety, fear, and self-hatred. He’s not hiding his

feelings from me, although I’m not sure whether it’s intentional.

“I can’t tell her everything. I can’t do that to her.”

I consider his words and the simple fact that he is actually opening up to me. *Maybe not everything. Maybe not yet. But she wants to understand you and she wants to help you. She loves you so much. You have to trust her.*

“I do trust her. I don’t trust myself. You saw what I did to her.”

I land lightly in a secluded alley about a block from the restaurant and spin back into my regular clothes. I lean heavily against the wall and close my eyes. My thoughts focus with an intensity I’ve rarely known.

Let me tell you what I saw just now. I project an image of her to him — her beautiful eyes, marred by redness from tears, but full of love and hope. And then I tell him, I saw the strongest woman that I know brought to tears over how much she loves you. I saw the evidence of an accident, yes. I project an image of me holding her wrist, the redness from his outburst apparent. But I saw her brush it off, because that’s what it was — an accident. Clark, I’ve spent the last month watching her grieve your death. I’ve watched her smile and cry and laugh and crumble, all within the span of a few minutes. I’ve listened to her tell me about you with such adoration and respect. She truly is the strongest woman I know. And right now, all she wants is to understand enough about what happened to you, what you had to do, what you were forced to do — so that she can help you heal from it all, because she loves you that much. She is not scared that you will physically hurt her. But if you don’t open up to her, it will hurt her so much worse.

His thoughts are jumbled, and I sense that he’s fighting down a wave of chest pain as well, though he’s able to block the pain from affecting me through our connection.

An intense fear grows in him, and I suddenly am reliving his memory of the night before. The vision progresses in slow motion. I’m sleeping, dreaming of a hot, dusty warzone, the atmosphere glowing a hazy red. Ahead of me, a man in black armor approaches and swings a heavy broadsword at me, but I easily parry with my own weapon and then slash my sword at him, ripping a gaping wound in his abdomen. I feel a hand on my shoulder, and I swing around, my sword at ready. The dream ends abruptly, and my hand grasps a small wrist terrifyingly tightly. My eyes fly open, and I see her, pain filling her expression as she tries to tug her hand away, out of my grip. I hear my voice, which is his voice, I know. “*Oh, God, Lois. I’m so sorry.*” And I release her wrist. Tears form in her eyes, and I push myself away from her, out of bed, and stumble across the room, suddenly needing to be as far away from her as possible. His voice says again,

“I’m so sorry. Are you okay? I’m — God, I’m sorry, Lois.” She stands up and moves toward me, reaching out toward me, but I back away from her. *“No, stay away. I don’t want to hurt you.”* And then everything gets fuzzy and muddled, and the vision ends.

He didn’t mean for me to see that. But it’s just as Lois had said. An accident.

“Sorry. God, I can’t believe I hurt her.”

Such powerful anguish overcomes him. Then, suddenly, the connection is dropped, and I’m alone in my head again.

With practiced ease, I find her heartbeat and focus my vision to watch her. She’s just arrived at her apartment; that’s probably why he dropped the connection with me. They are embracing, but he’s stiff and unsure. The Kents are in the kitchen cooking dinner. I close my eyes.

They will be okay.

They have to be.

A deep sigh escapes my lips as I adjust my glasses and jog out of the alley toward the restaurant. Somehow, I have to get through this dinner, and then I’ll reconnect with Lois and Clark.

“CK!”

Jimmy calls me from the restaurant steps up ahead, and I paste a fake smile on my face and wave to him.

“Hey, Jimmy! Sorry I’m late.” I jog over to meet him and reach out to shake his hand in greeting. “Lois isn’t feeling well, so she decided to stay home.”

“Oh, sorry to hear that,” he responds, frowning slightly. He motions toward the restaurant. “Perry is already inside.”

“All right, let’s go then,” I say, patting his back and letting him lead the way up the steps and into the restaurant.

I quickly glance one more time toward Lois’s apartment.

It will be okay.

The thought lodges itself in my head. It is my thought. My positivity. But I hope they both feel it as well.

Chapter 31

“Thank you for the flight home, Clark,” Martha Kent says as I set her down gently on the porch of their farmhouse. Jonathan picks up their luggage and carries it inside, his mouth set in a tight frown.

“You’re welcome, Martha,” I reply, stepping back a bit. I glance nervously around her to where Jonathan had disappeared inside the house. The tension from him on the flight had been quite disconcerting, and I’d really tried to ignore it. But I still remember his words from Saturday afternoon, when no one knew I was outside the apartment listening in, and my jaw clenches. “Is there anything I can

help you with before I leave? It looks like Mr. Kent has already taken care of all the luggage.”

“No, I think we’re fine here, Clark. But, again, thank you for everything. Thank you — ” her voice breaks as she speaks — “thank you for bringing my boy home.”

I smile weakly at her, committing this moment to memory. Her bright, kind eyes and soft smile remind me so much of my mother.

“I’m glad I’m here to help.”

Jonathan Kent scoffs from behind the screen door, although I wouldn’t have heard it without my keen hearing. With difficulty, I manage to avoid reacting to it, and I instead grin wider at Martha, who hugs me amicably. I close my eyes and also commit the feeling of this hug to memory.

“I’ve got to get back to Metropolis or I’ll miss the morning staff meeting,” I say, pulling away from Martha. “Please don’t hesitate to call me if you need anything.”

Martha nods, and I raise my eyes to where Jonathan stands. “You too, Mr. Kent. If you need help with anything, I’m more than happy to come down.”

He just turns and walks back into the house. I swallow hard and try to control my reaction. I smile again at Martha and nod, then take off back toward Metropolis.

Monday morning is busy in the city, but there are no major traffic accidents to deal with, and the roads are fairly clear. The Sun shines brightly, despite the cold temperatures, and I soak it in before landing on the roof of the Daily Planet building. I then spin into my work clothes and hurry down the stairwell. I hear Lois chatting with Marcy Burns as I exit onto the third floor, and a wave of relief washes over me. When I’d picked up the Kents this morning, Lois had been getting ready for work and said she’d meet me at the office. And I’m really glad to see that she’s indeed here.

My eyes meet hers from across the newsroom, and she smiles and waves at me. Then, she gives Marcy a brief hug, excuses herself, and grabs two cups of coffee before walking briskly over to meet me at my desk.

“Good morning, again,” she greets me, setting down the coffee in front of me and settling on the edge of my desk.

“Good morning. And thank you,” I reply as I pick up the coffee and take a long sip of the steaming hot liquid.

“You’re welcome.” She glances at the clock on the wall. “You made it on time. I was worried you would get stopped on the way back from Kansas,” she adds, her voice low.

“Nope. Everything is quiet this —”

Oh why did I have to say it?

“...*The Amtrak passenger train is en route to Washington, D.C. and is reporting a failure of the brake*

system. This could be catastrophic as the train approaches the crowded and busy Union Station...

I frown at the breaking news broadcast that triggers my superhearing, and my hand reaches up to loosen my tie as I stand.

“I jinxed it,” I say with a wink. “I should be back before the meeting starts though.”

She grimaces at me. “Sorry. Be careful.”

I nod and jog off toward the stairwell. I spin into the suit as I fly up the stairs and then launch into the sky toward Washington, D.C. I listen ahead as I approach the out-of-control train. Passengers huddle in their seats, frantically calling their loved ones on their cell phones, and the train’s conductor speaks anxiously into his radio. One other train is stopped on the tracks ahead, and the two trains will collide soon if I don’t intervene. I speed up just a little and then position myself at the front of the runaway train. My hands find the most solid spot to apply counterpressure, and I gradually slow the train to a stop, monitoring the passengers inside to ensure no one is caught off guard by the change in speed. Cheers of joy and relief fill my ears, and I smile to myself. I allow the train to continue coasting on the tracks until we reach an empty platform, and I stick around for just a few minutes to be sure the passengers are able to disembark safely. Then, I speed back to Metropolis.

A moment later, I’m straightening my tie as I sneak in the door to the conference room and squeeze into my seat next to Lois. Perry stands at the front of the room and nods to me briefly before starting the meeting. I glance at Lois, who smiles at me with a questioning look, and I tilt my head toward the TV broadcast on a monitor in the corner of the room. The muted broadcast shows a somewhat dramatic video playing of me bringing the train to a stop and then some edited footage of me helping several of the passengers off the train and speaking with the police officers at the scene. She bows her head as though to say, “Ahhhh, good one,” and then looks back up to Perry, who is now describing recent changes made to the Planet’s computer system. Her hand covers mine on the table, and I steal another glance at her. She’s tied her long, dark hair back in a high ponytail today, and her eyes are bright, showing none of the distress from our discussion last night.

The meeting continues uneventfully, and after another thirty minutes or so, we are dismissed to go work on our stories. Lois and I walk hand in hand out of the conference room, and she then leads me over with her to her desk. I pull up a chair as she opens up a file folder and boots up her computer.

“So, um, we should finalize the Lex Luthor article today, you think?” she asks, turning in her chair to face me.

“I suppose we can,” I reply, reaching out and thumbing through the pages in the folder she’d opened. I stop on one page of notes from our interview. “I feel like we’re very close to finding the evidence we need to connect him to Intergang, but who knows when that breakthrough will come. And in the meantime, Perry doesn’t like that we’re just sitting on the interview of the century.”

“Right,” she agrees. She clicks a few buttons on her computer to open up the draft of our article and scrolls through to the bottom of the text. “With what we know, I just hate to publish this as is. It makes him look like a genuine philanthropist and all-around good guy. Are you sure that you can’t just, you know —” she lowers her voice to a whisper — “fly back to his penthouse and supersnoop around a bit?”

I grimace and shake my head. It’s not the first time she’s made such a request, but I’ve explained to her already that I really do not like to use my powers to invade others’ privacy, even if it’s the privacy of a suspected criminal. From what she’s told me, her Clark was the same, and it would frustrate her to no end.

“Sorry, you know the answer to that already.”

“Can’t blame a girl for trying,” she laughs.

She sounds relaxed and assured, and I again detect no hint of her anxiety from the previous day. Good.

“So, what do you think about this final paragraph then?”

She highlights the paragraph with her cursor, and I lean in a bit as I read it. Her writing is clear and concise, and although the style is much different from mine, I appreciate it. I nod agreeably.

“Good, it’s good. I think it ties everything together well but doesn’t put Luthor up on a pedestal like he’s expecting we will.”

“Right,” she concurs. She picks up a pencil absently and taps it on the folder on her desk. “Maybe he’ll take issue with it and make a mistake somehow, give something away.”

“We can hope.”

“Okay, well, I’ll send this to Perry,” she says as she uploads the document to the Planet’s internal server and starts an email to Perry. “And then we have that press conference with the Church Group in an hour. Since we have the time, I’d really like to stop at home to, um, check on him before the press conference.”

“Of course,” I respond immediately. “Remind me about the Church Group. They didn’t exist in my world,” I add quietly.

She stands up, grabs two thick folders from the top drawer of her desk, and hands them to me as we start off toward the elevators.

“Here’s my files on them. You can read them in the car,” she says. She pushes the ‘down’ button to call the elevator and crosses her arms over her chest as we wait. “In a nutshell, Bill Church and his son own a chain of Costmart stores in and around Metropolis, along with a bunch of other businesses, including gas stations, restaurants, et cetera.”

“Right, and they started the Church Group —”

“— as a philanthropic organization. Since Superman was gone, the focus of the group was on supporting law enforcement to stop crime. However —”

“— crime rates actually increased in the areas in which the Church Group was active,” I finish for her as we step onto the elevator.

I flip quickly through the first folder she handed me, reading at superspeed. Something grabs my attention, however, and I flip back several pages and run my finger down a column on the right side of the page, which lists business affiliates of the Church Group.

“Lois, they have quite a few dealings with Luthor Corp.”

The elevator doors open to the parking garage, and we step out together as I hand her the page. Her eyes widen as she reads, and she grabs my arm and drags me toward her Jeep.

“And the announcement they are supposed to be making at the press conference today is that they are expanding their Costmart chain to New York City —”

“— which is where Luthor Corp. is based.”

She unlocks the Jeep, and we both climb in. Moments later, we are speeding along on our way back to her apartment. I’ve already read through all of the information in her folders, twice, and I have a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach that we are about to uncover something big — a link among Intergang, the Church Group, and Lex Luthor. Maybe I’ll reconsider exploiting my abilities to get some evidence if it means taking down Intergang...

Lois turns sharply onto her street and pulls into a parking spot just outside her building. She’s been quiet for the last few minutes, and now, she takes a deep breath and closes her eyes, leaning her head back against the headrest briefly. Straightening up, she grabs her purse and reaches for the door handle, but then pauses.

“Do you want me to come up with you?” I ask gently. She shakes her head.

“No, I just — I’ll be right back. Thank you, though,” she answers, meeting my eyes with a small smile.

And then she exits the car and disappears up into the building. I close my eyes now and extend my senses out

around the city, listening to the familiar sounds of traffic and pedestrians and police scanners and pigeons. A homeless man a few blocks away sits on the sidewalk, talking to himself in Polish, and I frown as I hear his stomach growl with hunger. I’ll stop by later and bring him something to eat. Maybe some dumplings from a small café I know in Warsaw. Nothing I hear requires super help right now, so I shut off my superhearing and rest my head on the window, waiting for Lois to return.

I suddenly hear her voice calling me from her apartment.

“Clark, please help me, I need you right now!”

There is a note of urgency in her voice, and I quickly glance around to ensure I won’t be seen and spin into the suit as I exit the car and launch myself up toward her window. It is open, and I fly in and land next to her in the otherwise unoccupied living room. She rushes up to me, her hands wringing together nervously.

“He’s not here, Clark. He’s gone. I came up here, and the door was unlocked, and he’s not here.”

I can feel the fear in her voice, and I immediately envelop her in a calming embrace as I reach out to him telepathically.

Clark, where are you?

Lois shakes in my arms and presses her hands against the blue spandex of my suit, and I can tell she’s struggling not to cry. His concerned voice resonates in my mind.

“What’s the matter? Is Lois okay? I just needed some fresh air. I’m across the street from her apartment at the park.”

I turn my head slightly to look across the street. Sure enough, he sits on a bench, a small bag of birdseed next to him and a group of about ten pigeons flocking around, pecking up loose seeds from the ground. He pulls his baseball cap down lower and scoots to the edge of the bench as though to stand.

Everything is fine. Sorry, I should have led with that. Lois wanted to come check on you, and she got worried when you were not here. I’ll bring her to you.

I feel him sigh with relief, and I pull back out of my embrace with Lois. She looks up at me, her big brown eyes filled with dread.

“Did you find him?”

“Yes,” I answer with a weak smile. “He’s fine. He just needed to get outside. He’s across the street at the park, feeding the birds.”

“Oh, thank God,” she whispers, collapsing against me.

Her racing heart steadies somewhat as she takes several deep breaths. I lift her into my arms, cradling her gently, and float us out the window and across the street. Clark looks up as we approach, a mixture of love and trepidation in his eyes. He starts to push himself up to stand, but she

motions to him to stay sitting, and she nearly jumps out of my arms as we land and hurries over to him. I lower my eyes as she wraps her arms carefully around him and breathes kisses on his cheeks and lips.

“God, Clark, I was so scared when you weren’t there.”

“I’m sorry, hon,” he says, his voice muffled in her hair.

“*Thank you, Clark.*”

His voice echoes in my head, and I look up and meet his eyes. He smiles weakly at me and nods, and I nod in response.

Tell her I’ll meet her at the press conference, whenever she’s ready.

He again nods and then closes his eyes as he tightens his grip around her, burying his face into her hair. I hear him murmur “I love you” into her as I jump into the sky and head toward downtown, where the press conference will be starting any minute.

Their love is so strong and palpable, and witnessing it firsthand makes me both happy for them and jealous. I mentally kick myself as my conflicting emotions twist my stomach into knots. No, no, no. That’s not okay.

I’m glad for them, really.

I want them both to be happy, really.

I shake my head as I land in an alley about a block from where the press conference is being held and spin back into my work clothes.

Seeing her happy — seeing her whole again because he’s here with her, where he belongs — that is enough.

It has to be enough.

I walk briskly down the street toward the large group gathering in front of the Costmart store ahead of me.

Yes. Seeing her happy. It will be enough.

Chapter 32

I don’t see her again until much later in the day — after the press conference concludes, after I go back to the Planet and write up a short article on the announcement of the new Costmart expansion to New York City, and after Superman foils a bank robbery and clears up a seven-car pileup on the highway. From Perry’s office, where I’m listening to a lecture about how important financial stability is to a relationship — because, yes, I admitted to him that I still had not contacted Sharon Anderson regarding the offer to publish Clark Kent’s extended memoir — I hear her heartbeat as the elevator doors open.

I turn my head toward her, and our eyes meet briefly. She waves at me, almost shyly, and then heads to the coffee station for an early afternoon caffeine boost. In front of me, Perry clears his throat.

“Son, now, that’s what I’m talking about,” he interjects, setting his coffee mug down loudly on his desk. I tear my eyes away from her and back to Perry. His expression is

stern now, and he points out in the general direction of the elevators. “That little lady of yours, she deserves to know that she’s taken care of and to not have to worry about financial hardship. Lord knows she’s been through enough the last four months. Call Sharon Anderson, Clark.”

I bow my head in acquiescence and push my chair back from his desk.

“Sorry, sir, things just got away from me this weekend,” I explain quickly as I stand. “I didn’t get a chance to speak with Lois about it yet. I’ll take care of it today.”

“All right, Clark, all right.”

I nod and hurriedly exit his office, heading straight to Lois’s desk to meet her. She’s just settling into her seat as I approach, and she takes a cautious sip of her coffee while booting up her computer. Her strong, steady heartbeat and relaxed demeanor suggest that everything at home is resolved. She looks up at me as I sit on the edge of her desk.

“Everything okay with Perry?” she asks, glancing to Perry’s office.

“Yeah, he just...”

I trail off, my mind wandering. I should just tell her now, I think. It’s not that big of a deal, right? I mean, it should be a quick conversation, although the three of us — her, me, and her Clark — probably need to discuss it together as well. But...actually, there are many details that will have to be ironed out. Questions flood my mind. Who will do the writing? Who will be the financial beneficiary? Or should all the money go to charity? And, of course, the real problem — the real reason I’ve put off having this conversation — if I stay here, in this world, as Superman, while he resumes his life as Clark Kent, how will I make a living? Could some of this money help to secure my own financial future?

And does she know enough about how much her fiancé was affected by his experiences to know that his time as Superman is over?

“Can we talk in private for a minute, Lois?”

She hesitates, her eyes darting to the conference room, which is again empty, just like it was when we “needed to talk” on Saturday.

“Sure, okay,” she answers.

We both stand, and Lois takes my hand and leans against me slightly as we walk together toward the conference room. I swallow hard as my hand tingles where she touches me. Soft, smooth, warm skin. My thumb starts to rub the back of her hand, as I might have several days prior, but I manage to stop myself.

Oh boy, I need a distraction right about now.

My free hand reaches into my pocket, and I pull out the notebook page that Perry had given me on Saturday morning.

“What’s that?”

I release her hand, gesture for her to enter the conference room ahead of me, and then shut the door behind us.

“It’s...an offer for a book deal,” I admit, unfolding the paper and handing it to her.

She raises her eyebrows at me and then lowers her eyes to the paper. Her reaction is telling — she exhales sharply and sits heavily in the nearest chair as her eyes widen at the number on the page. She then shoves the paper aside and buries her head in her hands for a moment.

“Lois —”

“This is Perry’s handwriting,” she states, her fingers tracing the numbers on the page. She looks up at me abruptly, disbelief in her troubled brown eyes. “And Sharon Anderson — I know her. She’s with Chicago Review Press.”

I nod and sit next to her. “Perry said she called with this offer — it’s an advance. They want to publish Clark Kent’s extended memoir on his trip to New Krypton.”

“That’s — that’s an advance? Clark, that says —”

“I know,” I interrupt, reaching out to take her hand. The familiar touch feels almost wrong now, however, and she pulls away. “P-Perry told me about this on Saturday morning, r-right before, um, we figured out about Clark. I’ve been meaning to tell you.”

She is quiet for a minute, just staring at the page. I cannot read her expression, however, and I scoot back my chair, stand, and start pacing the room, my hands shoved deep in my pockets.

“I’m sorry, Lois, Perry is pushing me for an answer, and I know it’s not my decision to make,” I fumble, stopping with my back to her. “My initial thought — before we found out he was alive — was maybe I could write the memoir, and we donate all the money to charity. But now, everything has changed. I...I don’t know what tomorrow or next week or next month brings — for me, and for you, and for him...”

I turn around to face her. She watches me curiously, her lips pursed in a frown.

“And I don’t know whether he’s talked to you about...”

I hesitate again, and her confused expression suggests she has no idea what I’m getting at. I run a nervous hand through my hair and start pacing again. We need to sit and talk, all three of us.

“About what, Clark?”

The question lingers in the air for a moment. But then she stands and steps across the room toward me, and my resolve to let him decide how and when to tell her begins

to falter. Our eyes meet, and I can see her fear. I swallow back my indecision. I cannot break that trust I’ve built with him, or with her. It has to be his decision. I shake my head.

“Nothing,” I say in a feeble attempt to redirect the conversation. “I, uh, just need to know what your thoughts are on how we should handle this. Perry is pushing me to call Sharon Anderson back, and I don’t know what you want to do.” I close my eyes. She is only two feet away from me now, and I can feel her eyes boring into me, studying and interpreting my words and body language. She’s perceptive. I’m sure she knows I’m hiding something. I quickly add, “Or what *he* wants to do.”

She backs away a step, moving closer to the table where the notebook page sits. Her cell phone rings in her pocket, and she seems to welcome the distraction.

“Hello? ...Oh, yes, hi, Dr. Klein... No, I haven’t spoken with Superman yet today, but maybe Clark can get a message to him...” She looks up at me with wide, uncertain eyes as she listens to the man on the other end of the phone line. “Okay, I’ll let him know... Thank you, Dr. Klein.”

She hangs up and slowly puts her phone back into the pocket of her suit jacket. Her eyes close as she sits down, her hands reaching up to rub her temples. Tension creeps into my shoulders as I watch her.

“What’s wrong, Lois?”

With a loud sigh, she looks up at me and shakes her head.

“We just can’t catch a break here, Clark. That was Dr. Klein at S.T.A.R. Labs.”

I don’t recognize the name. “I-I’m sorry, who is Dr. Klein?”

“Oh, right, um — he’s Superman’s unofficial doctor, I guess. He’s helped us out quite a bit, figuring out how Superman’s powers work, along with other...stuff. But, um, he wants me to get a message to Superman that...” Her voice trails off as she holds my gaze. Then she shakes her head again and picks up the paper with the offer from Sharon Anderson. Shakily, she continues, “...the kryptonite has been taken from the vault at S.T.A.R. Labs.”

“Kryptonite?” I can’t keep the alarm out of my voice. I’ve only encountered the deadly glowing green rock once, but that was enough to terrify me. The memory is seared in my mind — blinding pain, like white hot shards, stabbing through me, accompanied by weakness and, worst of all, an inability to protect those around me. I feel my hands shaking, and I quickly shove them back into my pockets. “Why does he keep kryptonite? And who would have taken it?”

Lois traces her fingers along the edge of the notebook paper, taking her time in formulating a response.

“Lois?”

She looks up at me, sympathy in her eyes.

“Sit, Clark,” she instructs, motioning to the seat next to her. I oblige, but my heart pounds in my chest. I hate that I am so terrified; I’m supposed to be the strongest man in the world, and yet I’m scared of a stupid green rock. She reaches over and puts one hand on top of mine. “S.T.A.R. Labs is supposed to be one of the most secure buildings in Metropolis. Clark entrusted the kryptonite to Dr. Klein, who has been studying it for him and trying to develop a, uh, vaccine, I guess you could say, to protect him from the effects of the radiation.”

“Oh.” My voice still trembles, and I adjust my glasses anxiously. “But someone stole it?”

“Well, no, not exactly,” she answers. Her eyes drop to the table, and she squeezes my hand. I can feel her shaking too now. Her next words are slow and quiet, and she closes her eyes. “S.T.A.R. Labs was purchased by Luthor Corp. a couple months ago. Dr. Klein told me that Lex Luthor personally came to S.T.A.R. Labs an hour ago and confiscated the kryptonite and all of his research on Superman.”

My stomach does a somersault. If there were any doubts about Luthor’s intentions, they are now gone. I exhale hard and pull my hand away from Lois’s as I stand up to pace the room again.

“All of this can’t be a coincidence,” I state. The dots start connecting as I recall some of her prior research on Intergang, Luthor, and the Church Group. A shudder runs through me, and I turn to her abruptly. “Lois, I think Luthor is — or maybe is about to be — the new head of Intergang.”

Chapter 33

I hover above the bank, scanning as the scene below me unfolds. Two men in ski masks point their guns at the bank tellers and yell their demands. A third man keeps the bank customers, disarmed security guard, and other staff members huddled in a corner, threatening them with yet another oversized firearm.

Don’t forget due diligence.

I scan one more time to ensure that none of the suspects are carrying any scary green rocks. All clear. I speed down and disarm each of the three men before depositing them with the police cars pulling up outside the bank. I then head back into the bank to check that everyone inside is fine. An older gentleman seems to be experiencing some chest pains, and I quickly transport him to the hospital to be examined. Then, I launch back up into the sky, grab the bag of croissants I’d left on the roof of the bank on my way in, and head toward Lois’s apartment so that the three of us can talk.

I’m not looking forward to it, though, and I’m tired. Since late yesterday afternoon, I’ve been busy stopping crime all over the city. For whatever reason, criminals seem to have suddenly decided that Metropolis is now a free-for-all. Banks, jewelry stores, car dealerships, museums, and even grocery stores. Nothing seems safe. Every time I stop one heist, another alarm blares. Nonstop all night long. The activity spilled over into other highly populated cities nearby, including Gotham and New York City, almost like a coordinated attack. Which has me concerned that it may actually be a coordinated attack. And with Luthor now in possession of the largest known chunk of kryptonite and documents detailing exactly how the rock affects Superman’s physiology — my physiology — I’ve been careful to scan ahead at each robbery before just speeding in. So far, none of the deadly green rock has shown up. But it’s still early.

I land in the alleyway next to Lois’s building and spin into my work clothes, opting for the front door rather than the window today. A moment later, I knock lightly on the door of apartment 501 and straighten my tie as I listen to the rustling inside the apartment and wait. I suppress a yawn — wow, am I really that tired? — and paste a smile on my face as the door opens. Lois’s kind eyes meet mine, and she smiles at me before ushering me inside.

“Good morning.”

Clark’s cheery voice redirects my attention from Lois to the kitchen, where he stands preparing coffee. He looks much better than four days ago, when I pulled him out of the Sun; his cheeks are no longer gaunt, the color has returned to his skin, and he stands tall and straight, showing no signs of debilitating chest pains.

“Good morning,” I reply with a nod. “I brought croissants from a café in Lyon. We had the same one on my world, actually. The lady who owns it —”

“Marie?”

I smile. “You know it then. Kaova Café.”

“Yeah, it used to be my favorite,” he says, moving three full coffee cups to the table. “Milk and sugar?”

“Oh, no thank you, I just drink my coffee black.”

He makes a face, but then laughs. “Suit yourself.”

Lois moves past me to help set the table, and I follow. I set the food on the table and sit across from Clark. The smell of the coffee entices me, and I reach out, pick up my mug, and take a long sip as Lois opens up the bag of croissants. A smile grows on her lips.

“You got me the chocolate filled one,” she exclaims, picking out the biggest croissant, which oozes a delicious dark filling. She takes a big bite and then sets it on her plate.

I just smile and take one of the plain croissants. Clark copies me, and we all sit in silence for a moment and enjoy the pastries. Finally, Lois speaks up.

“So, um, Clark and I talked about the memoir and other stuff,” she says slowly, her hand reaching out and settling on his back.

He chews his croissant pensively, his eyes glued to the table and his expression otherwise unreadable. I shift my gaze back to Lois, who clears her throat before continuing, her voice trembling slightly.

“Clark and I both, um, well, we know that you’ve already done so much for us — coming here and helping out both as Superman and at the Planet —”

Across from me, I see Clark tense up, his hands balling up into fists and his jaw clenching. Lois senses the change in his demeanor and stops in the middle of her sentence, turning her head toward him. A wave of frustration and anger hits me as he raises his eyes to mine, and I swallow hard as I push back against his emotions, recognizing them as not my own.

What is it? I ask him silently, my eyes holding his troubled gaze. He continues to glare at me for a moment, but does not respond to my question. Instead, he finally drops his eyes back to the table and takes another bite of his croissant.

Lois rubs his back gently, blinking back some strong emotion of her own.

“We were hoping you’d be able to help us with this too,” she mumbles, her eyes refusing to meet mine. “With the memoir, that is.”

Another wave of bitterness from him almost startles me out of my chair, but I hold myself still. I don’t know whether his emotions are directed at me or whether they are just so strong that he can’t hide them. In any case, I’m feeling as confused as ever right now. But I lower my eyes and nod.

“I’d be happy to help, of course,” I reply, trying to keep my tone light.

Guilt. Resentment. Hostility. Sadness. His mixed emotions flood my mind.

I try again to connect with him.

Clark, what’s bothering you?

But I can feel he’s blocking my message. I wish I could just as easily block all of his incoming emotions. They continue filling me. Now there’s rage. Red, hot rage. And images of his sword slashing through enemies. Blood on the dry, dusty earth next to his black boots. Nausea and a stabbing pain in my head.

Stop it, man. Please. I get it. I beg him to stop, but again I feel that he’s not allowing any incoming messages.

“Great,” Lois says, breaking the tension building between him and me. “Um, we talked a little about the

money. It’s...a lot of money,” she adds breathlessly, shaking her head. “Clark, do you want to tell him what we were thinking?”

She gives him a sideways look, and I can see she’s uncomfortable with whatever they’d decided, which makes me uncomfortable. Clark quickly shakes his head.

“No, you can...please...” His voice is weak and laced with anxiety.

My discomfort grows, but I do my best to hide it, adjusting my glasses and giving her a weak smile.

“Okay, um, well... We were thinking that you could do the writing, using the journals and Clark’s help, if you need it, and then we could essentially, um, split the money. We’d donate our half to charity, and your half, you could keep to use for... I mean, until...”

She trails off, lowering her eyes to her hands. My stomach twists into knots. Until what, Lois? I almost say it out loud, but I stop myself. I feel the intent behind her words. I’ll make it easy on her.

“For when Clark returns to the Planet, so I’ll have income to live off of,” I finish for her. My voice is steady, unemotional, business-like even. I need to know more though. My voice is quieter now, as I add, “And I assume you talked about —”

He must have known my intent — he is after all much more skilled at our telepathic connection than I am — because an unexpected barrage of emotions and images hit me hard, forcing the air out of my lungs. I shut my eyes in a futile attempt to block the images, but they keep coming. Similar to when I was caught in visions of his memories, I am pulled into these new images as though I am him. I kneel over a fallen comrade, who begs me not to let him die, and I cover his gushing gut wound with my hand in an attempt to stop the bleeding. Then, I’m racing next to Lieutenant Ching, and my sword swings in unison with his as we rip through a line of enemy soldiers on our way toward the hill where Lord Nor waits; I feel total disregard for anyone standing in my way, my only focus on my goal — to get to Lord Nor at the top of the hill. Then, I parry a swing of an enemy’s black nanotech-coated scythe, pull my hidden dagger out of its sheath, and stab the smaller weapon into the man’s side; I feel the man’s life leave him as the weapon pulses with white energy.

More images and visions — all the same.

Hundreds of victims.

He’d killed hundreds.

And I can’t block it. They keep coming. And he shows me how much he hates himself for it. There is anger, guilt, shame. He almost — almost — wants to die. And he hasn’t told Lois all of this. He can’t stand the thought of her knowing. More images of lifeless bodies and fallen soldiers. And fear. His own fear. It is overwhelming. He

knows that with every kill, he loses a little more of himself. I feel tears threatening to fall.

God, please — please, stop it. Even my mind's voice trembles now. I repeat myself, a little stronger. *Clark, I understand. Please, don't show me anymore.*

I open my eyes. He stares at his plate, his hands clamped down on the table. Lois looks at me expectantly, since I never finished my sentence. But as my eyes shift to her, he inundates me again with images and emotions. Stronger than before. I can't take it.

"Kal, that's enough," I growl aloud, closing my eyes again and pushing back against him with all my willpower.

His Kryptonian name rolls off my tongue without conscious thought — but it works. He seems startled out of the hole he'd buried himself in, and he abruptly sits up, pushes his chair back from the table, and stands. A moment later, he disappears into the bedroom, and the door slams shut.

I hear Lois's heart racing across from me, but I can't look up at her yet. She lets out a shaky breath.

"Clark, what just happened?" she asks quietly. I feel her eyes on me, and I slowly shake my head and allow myself to take a deep breath.

"Sorry, Lois," I apologize, my voice sounding hoarse.

I'm not sure what to do or say now. I want to keep his trust, and hers for that matter, but I can't avoid explaining to her why I just nearly yelled at her fiancé. I lower my voice. He'll hear me anyways, if he's listening telepathically, but it makes me feel slightly better if I try.

"I can't tell you, because it's not my place. But I need to say this at least..." My expression softens as I see concern in her deep brown eyes. "Clark — he's been through too much. More than you know. More than you can imagine. And because of his experiences, I'm afraid that he will probably never be Superman again."

She sucks in a breath, but doesn't reply. Her head turns toward the bedroom, and after a moment, she closes her eyes.

"About the money — whatever you guys decide, it's fine," I say. "I am happy to help with writing the memoir, and I'll continue to be Superman here and Clark Kent as well, until he's ready to return to work. And when that happens, we'll figure out what to do. And I'll go along with whatever you guys want."

I pause a moment as my thoughts catch up with me. Then I add, "I've been welcomed here, on your Earth, so much more than back on my world. I have no desire to return there, even if that means changing my lifestyle to accommodate his return to work, when he's ready. I'm sorry I can't tell you more, but it's not my story to tell."

She nods in understanding and then stands, her eyes now glued on the hallway. I expect her to hurry off to

check on him. I can't sense his emotions at all now — he's effectively blocked me out, again — but I can hear an unsteady heartbeat and raspy breathing. He's struggling — a panic attack maybe, like Lois mentioned the other day. I shut my hearing off to give him privacy. Across from me, Lois sits back down at the table.

"He just won't talk to me, Clark. I don't know what to do," she admits. Her croissant sits unfinished in front of her, and she absently reaches out and picks up the pastry, but doesn't take a bite. She sets it back down and glances down the hallway again. "He...he says that he wants to be honest with me, but —" Her voice catches in her throat, and she looks back down at the table, steadying her shaking hands by clasping them together in front of her. She continues, "— but then he says that he doesn't think I'll love him anymore if he tells me the truth..." Tears slide down her cheeks. I desperately want to hug her, to comfort her, but I don't move.

I try for a moment to put myself in his position. They'd made the decision together that he would go to New Krypton to help, knowing that it was dangerous and that he may not return. But neither of them had had any idea that he'd be forced to take lead in a bloody war and that he'd be forced to kill — something he, and I, had always avoided at all costs. He's shown me, whether or not he meant to, that he tried to approach the problem in a different way — he argued and debated with them and tried to develop a diplomatic strategy. But in the end, Lord Nor had forced his hand, and he'd not only fought and killed, but led his troops expertly, as though he were born for exactly that reason. And despite his skill at leading, and at combat itself, every time — every time — he struck down an enemy, he lost himself a little more.

He feels he's no longer the same person he was when he left her, and I don't disagree with him. But he has to know that she still loves him; she will always love him.

Concentrating hard, I try one more time to break through his block.

Clark, please listen to me. This is important. I feel his attention shift to me. He has calmed himself a bit. Good. *I know this is hard. But you're hurting her more by not telling her than you would be by being truthful. She needs to know what you've been through. No, she doesn't need to know everything. She certainly doesn't need to know everything you just showed me. But she is strong, and she loves you. And nothing — nothing you tell her will change that. You have to talk to her, Clark.*

I stop, raising my eyes to meet Lois's.

"You're trying to talk to him — I mean, telepathically — aren't you?" she asks quietly. Her fingers fiddle with her coffee mug now, and she shifts her eyes nervously

again toward the bedroom. I nod, but don't respond verbally.

"Maybe you can tell her for me."

I feel the intention of his request. He is scared. But I shake my head, forgetting that he's not in the room. Lois looks at me quizzically.

"Sorry," I say. "That was meant for him, not you." She gives me a half-smile, but I can see the tension in her expression.

You know I can't do that. It has to come from you.

He answers without words, a wave of something worse than fear washing over me. The same sense that I had earlier — that he's not entirely sure whether he cares if he lives or dies anymore. A hopelessness and desperation that he feels deep down inside. I close my eyes. I know these feelings. They are not just his feelings this time. I've experienced them myself, accompanied by an intense sense of loneliness.

Clark, listen to me, and please understand this. She loves you. I repeat the sentence again for good measure. She loves you. Then, I take a deep breath as I continue. You can get past everything else. You will find yourself again. But you have to give yourself time. You've only been back for four days. Please, come back out and talk to her. Tell her some of it, some of how all of it affected you. I promise you, she is stronger than both of us. It will be hard, but she is worth it. Pulling from my own life experiences, I add, She is worth living for. If you cannot find anything else to live for right now, remember that. She is worth living for.

I open my eyes again, but I hold my breath for another moment as I look at her. An errant tear runs down her cheek, and she studies me carefully. I smile weakly at her and then shift my eyes toward the hallway. I can hear him pacing near the door. He keeps stopping at the door and then starting again. And I sense he's trying to talk himself into coming back out.

Do you want me to stay or go? I ask him. I project an image of her to him, as I see her now. She wipes the tear off her cheek and looks back down at the table. *She is waiting here for you.*

I hear him let out a long breath at the same time I feel his mind sort of focus. Then, the door knob turns. Her eyes dart up toward the bedroom as she inhales sharply.

"Thank you, Clark. I'm sorry about earlier... I appreciate your help more than I can say, even if I don't always behave appropriately... You can go. I — "

His thoughts cut out abruptly as a stabbing pain erupts in my head. I jump up from the table and rush over to him at superspeed as he collapses in the doorway. I'm just fast enough to stop him from hitting the door jamb as he falls.

I hear Lois approach behind me as I settle him on the ground. He is unconscious, and his heartbeat is irregular

and weak. A quick scan reveals no obvious injuries, however, and even the scar on his chest has faded quite a bit. Lois kneels next to him opposite me and brushes his hair off his forehead with a shaky hand.

"Has anything like this happened before?" I ask quickly.

The pain in my head persists, despite his unconscious state, which is also concerning to me. However, Lois shakes her head.

"Okay. Hmmm."

I carefully lift him, carry him back into the bedroom, and set him gently onto the bed. He doesn't move. I blink as the pain in my head intensifies.

"Clark, what's happening?" The fear in her voice is almost palpable.

"I don't know," I admit, scanning him for injuries again and again finding nothing wrong. "I can't see anything wrong. But I — I can feel his — it hurts a lot." I rub the back of my neck to try to ease my own tension. "He hasn't complained of headaches?"

Again, she shakes her head. She steps over to the bed and sits next to him as I back up a step. "No," she repeats, adding, "He's been doing very well physically, actually. He said he was feeling much stronger this morning too."

"That's what I thought," I say.

Then I recall one incident where Superman helped with a woman who had a severe panic attack and fainted afterwards. Maybe that's what happened here. I frown and study him again.

"It — it could be related to his anxiety. I've seen an extremely severe panic attack cause this before, but only one time..."

My voice trails off as he shifts a bit and moans, his hand reaching up to rub the bridge of his nose. Lois gently touches his shoulder, and he opens his eyes, but then flinches suddenly and groans in pain. I feel it too, but I manage to remain more stoic, swallowing hard and blinking a few times as the wave hits me. It is concentrated at the front of my skull, right between my eyes. Lois glances briefly up at me and then back at him.

"W-what happened?"

He groans again, covering his eyes to block the light.

I step away from the bed, turn off the lights, and then move to shut the curtains. The pain fades ever so slightly, providing a tiny bit of relief.

"You passed out," Lois explains softly. She raises her hand to caress his cheek, and he leans into her touch, his eyes remaining closed. I blink again and lower my eyes.

"I-I was g-going to come back out t-to the kitchen. I'm sorry, I... I was trying to —"

I can hear the panic rise in his voice again. Lois hears it too, and she bends forward and kisses his forehead lightly.

“Shhh,” she soothes. “It’s okay, Clark. We have all the time in the world. You rest, relax, breathe. We’ll talk more when you’re ready.”

I smile at her words. She knows just what to say to comfort him, and I almost feel like she’s talking to me. God, how I wish I’d had her around two years ago when I’d been struggling with my identity and trying to become Superman. I’d felt so alone after Lana left me, although I realized it was for the best. Lana never really loved me, not all of me. She loved the half of me that she’d grown up with, before I’d told her my secret. She loved the concept of Clark Kent, lonely little orphan boy who’d needed her companionship.

But immediately after the other Lois had left to go back to her world, when I’d truly been all alone for the first time, I’d wanted to just give up on everything.

Superman had saved me — given me purpose and given my life meaning. But my life would have been so much better, so much easier, if I’d had Lois.

I slowly back up out of the bedroom to give them privacy, although I keep an ear out for changes in his heart rate or breathing. My phone buzzes in my pocket, and I pull it out to see a text from Jimmy; Perry is asking where we are, and I sigh as I realize we’re late for the morning staff meeting.

I quickly text Jimmy back, deciding that it’s more important for me to stay with them here right now than to rush into work. *“Sorry, Jimmy, I’ve got a headache, and we’re running late. Can you tell Perry we’ll be in as soon as we can? I’d appreciate it.”*

He responds with a quick message in the affirmative, and I stuff the phone back in my pocket and clean up the table from our half-eaten breakfast. The leftover croissants go in the fridge, and the dishes get rinsed off and into the dishwasher.

As I finish up, I hear rustling from the bedroom, and a moment later, Lois emerges from the hallway, her arms crossed protectively over her chest. She gives me a feeble smile and stops a few feet away. I dry my hands, replace the dishrag on the counter, and then lean with my back against the counter, facing her.

“He’s resting,” she starts, shifting a bit uncomfortably from foot to foot. “He, um, wanted me to thank you again and to apologize for his behavior.”

I shake my head. “He doesn’t need to apologize.”

“I told him that,” she agrees, moving her hands to her hips. “But he said he hates that he sometimes can’t seem to control himself and that you’ve taken the brunt of it. I don’t know what he means, but I assume it’s related to your telepathic connection.”

I nod in confirmation, but then say again, “He still doesn’t need to apologize.”

She laughs weakly and steps over to the counter to pour herself a fresh cup of coffee. She then settles next to me, leaning back against the counter, and sips her coffee silently.

I sense he is asleep now, and the pain in my head subsides. I close my eyes for a moment.

“You feel his pain, don’t you? I mean, his physical pain.”

Her voice trembles a little, and I hear her shift against the counter. I nod.

“Sometimes. Most of the time, he can control our, uh, connection, so I don’t feel it,” I explain. “But when he’s unable to control it, it can be intense.”

“And probably when the pain is most intense is when he’s least likely to be able to control it,” she surmises sympathetically.

“True.”

“And earlier, before he left the room, was he ‘out of control’ then?” she asks.

My jaw clenches as I raise my eyes to meet hers. She’s fishing for information, and she smiles crookedly as she sees that I’m on to her.

“He promised me we’d talk after he’s rested,” she adds. She takes another sip of her coffee. “And I’m a bit scared of what he’s going to tell me.”

“I know, but it will be much better coming from him than coming from me. Trust me.” I straighten up a little and cross my arms over my chest. “I-I’ve felt all of what he’s carrying around with him, and it’s a lot,” I confess, my voice low. “But I also have felt how much he loves you, and I know, without a doubt, that you two will find each other again in all of this messiness. Your love for each other is that strong. And he needs you to love him, Lois. He needs it more than you even know.”

I frown slightly, but quickly hide my expression from her with another weak smile.

She nods. “I feel it when I look at him sometimes,” she says softly. “There’s something haunting him, and if he wasn’t here with me, he — he wouldn’t want to...” She falters as the implication of her words seems to hit her.

I stay silent now. There’s nothing I can say that will help her in this moment. But I take her coffee from her, set it on the counter, and cautiously wrap my arms around her in a warm embrace. She seems to melt into me, clinging to my shirt, and I take several deep breaths.

We stand there for several minutes, unmoving, until finally, she pulls back. Her eyes meet mine. They are not wet with tears, but instead filled with fire and ferocity. She will fight for him — she will fight not to lose him to what is buried inside. I smile at her solemnly and nod, although she hasn’t said anything. And she steps away from me.

“I should probably get to work,” I suggest. I stuff my hands into my pockets. “Jimmy texted me earlier, asking where we were. I’ll, uh, cover for you so you can stay here with him. Do you have anything you were working on that you were planning to get in before deadline today? That follow-up on the hotel scandal at Metropolis Hilton, maybe?”

“Yeah, Perry did want that story done today,” she answers, turning away from me and wandering over to the fridge. She opens it and takes out a container of strawberries. “I have my laptop here, so I’ll try to do as much as I can while he’s resting. And I’ll send you what I have. I...I really appreciate your help, Clark.”

“I’m glad to help,” I say sincerely. She smiles at me and nods. “And I’ll call Sharon Anderson and get the ball rolling on that, too,” I add.

“Thank you.”

With another weak smile, I move away from her and spin into the blue, red, and yellow suit.

“I’ll give you a call later, to see how everything is going,” I propose. Her lips purse with worry as she glances back toward the bedroom and then lowers her eyes. “It will all be okay, Lois, you’ll see. Just give him time.”

“Thank you, Clark,” she repeats.

“Anytime.”

I step over to the window, give her one more wave, and launch up into the air toward the Planet. The Sun gives me energy as I fly, and I slow down to give myself more time under its revitalizing rays. I take a moment and fly up higher, just outside of Earth’s atmosphere, where the Sun’s rays are more powerful. And within a few minutes, I feel rejuvenated, as though I’d gotten a full night’s sleep. I turn and speed back to Earth.

Time to get to work.

I find myself hoping that the criminal element of Metropolis and the surrounding region will take a rest so I can get some writing done, phone calls made, and maybe even some ‘supersnooping,’ which I’ve decided is indeed necessary given the situation with Luthor, Intergang, and the kryptonite. I shudder as I land on the roof of the Planet, and I look out over the city. The midmorning hustle and bustle is in full swing, and the city is loud. But, compared with last night, the noises are mostly innocuous; police scanners are silent, no alarms blare, and no gunshots or screaming sting my ears. Maybe my concern about the kryptonite is unfounded...

I shake my head as I spin out of the suit and back into my work clothes. One thing I’ve learned as Superman is that I can usually trust my instincts. No, I should definitely continue to be careful every time I go out.

Luthor has something planned, and last night was some sort of orchestrated attack.

I turn and head downstairs to the newsroom. At least I have a lot to do right now. All of it will keep me distracted from worrying about Lois and Clark. And his scary panic attack earlier. And her uncertainty. And my future here.

I shake my head again to clear my thoughts as I push through the door from the stairwell. Yep, I need this distraction. I wave to Jimmy as he sees me from his desk across the room and greet another of my colleagues as I head down the ramp to my desk.

Chapter 34

The early afternoon sunlight glints off the spotless windows of the Lexor Hotel in downtown Metropolis, only a few blocks from the Planet. Hundreds of feet below me, tourists and other hotel patrons come and go through the hotel’s lavish entrance. A sleek black limousine pulls up to the curb, and a bellhop rushes forward to open the door. Lex Luthor, dressed in an expensive black business suit, steps out and slips on a pair of sunglasses. He is immediately flanked by two bodyguards, who clear the way for him to enter the building. From the safety of one thousand feet in the air, I watch Luthor traverse the hotel lobby, his cool confidence attracting the attention of everyone else in the room, and there is a collective pause of other movement and rustling as he strides through. He takes a private elevator up to the penthouse suite, a luxuriant space probably several times as large as my entire apartment. His bodyguards take up positions outside the suite’s entrance as he makes his way into the bedroom area and opens a small cigar box on the side table next to the bed. Despite the hotel’s no smoking policy, Luthor lights up his cigar and settles in a plush chair, crossing his legs. He pulls his cell phone out of his pocket and dials a number, and then, with the cigar held between his teeth and one hand holding the phone, he reaches back into his pocket and removes a small black jewelry box.

“Nigel, set up the test for tonight,” he says into the phone. An evil smile grows on his lips as he opens the black box, revealing a dark titanium ring studded with small, glowing green gems. My stomach lurches, and I lose a bit of altitude. I quickly recover as his conversation continues. “Yes. Something he can’t ignore, with a lot of innocent lives in danger.”

Through the phone, I hear a British voice belonging to an older man. “I will take care of it, sir. You will not be disappointed.”

“Remember, Nigel, just a test. I don’t want to kill him... Yet.” Luthor turns the ring over in his fingers, studying the green stones. He then slips the ring onto his finger.

“Of course, sir.”

With a dry laugh, Luthor hangs up the phone and stands. He moves to a safe in the wall opposite the bed and inputs a numerical code into the security panel. I commit the numbers to memory and watch in horror as the door to the safe opens and a sickly green glow lights up his features. The contents of the lead-lined safe are now visible, and every muscle in my body tenses as he removes the huge chunk of kryptonite and twists it around, inspecting it carefully. He laughs again.

“Superman, Superman... You are not a god, and I shall show the world just how weak you actually are,” he sneers. He places the kryptonite back in the safe and locks it, effectively blocking my view of the deadly rock.

A knock comes at his door, and one of his bodyguards enters the room.

“Mr. Luthor, sir, a Ms. Mandy is here for your afternoon massage, sir.”

“Great, send her in. Thank you.” He settles on the edge of the bed, removes his suit jacket, and begins to undo the buttons on the cuffs of his shirt.

I’ve seen all I care to see. All I can stand to see, really.

I turn and head back toward the Planet, scanning the city below me as I fly. I have a couple hours until deadline, and I need to finish a write-up on a story I’m working on about the Mayor’s re-election campaign and check in with Lois to see if she needs help finishing her story on the Metropolis Hilton. And I need to tell her about what I just witnessed.

I steady myself with a deep breath. This is yet another thing for me to worry about...and one more thing for her to have to worry about as well. I briefly consider not telling her; I can try to handle it on my own, after all, and Luthor even said the plan is not to kill me.

Ha.

No, I need to tell her. Maybe she can help me devise a strategy to steal the kryptonite — is it stealing, really? — without getting caught or, you know, dying from exposure.

Lois. I land lightly on the roof of the Planet and pull my cell phone out of the hidden pocket in the suit — actually the only difference between my suits and the other Clark’s. He never carried his cell phone around with him, since being caught with Clark Kent’s cell phone could be suspicious, I suppose, so his suits don’t even have the hidden pocket. I don’t always keep the phone with me either. However, I’ve been bringing it with me the last few days in case Lois needed to get a hold of me in an emergency. I quickly dial her number, but she doesn’t answer, and after several rings, I hear her voicemail message. I hang up. I’ll plan to call her later.

I spin back into my work clothes and hurry down the stairwell.

Chapter 35

The day quickly gets away from me, and before I know it, I’m rushing to finish my story and put the final details into Lois’s story for her before deadline, surreptitiously using a little bit of superspeed to type faster than I should. I get both stories submitted via email with just a few minutes to spare and then grab myself a cup of coffee and settle back at my desk to dig into some files on the Church Group that Jimmy had compiled for me.

My mind wanders as I read, however, and I find myself distracted as I listen across the city for her familiar heartbeat. Steady and regular. Good.

I lower my glasses and flip quickly through the file from Jimmy. Nothing stands out as terribly important, except maybe one large bank deposit. The size of the deposit itself was not that noteworthy; the Church Group frequently received large deposits from various sources. However, the payor is listed as Dynamont Ltd., which I remember is an obscure subsidiary of Luthor Corp., and the transaction occurred on the day before Costmart announced its expansion into New York City. I highlight the transaction, snap a quick picture of it with my phone, and then send it to Lois with a short text.

“Looks a little suspicious to me. Can I stop by later to talk it through? Also have some info re: Luthor and the K.”

I set the phone back on my desk and read through the files from Jimmy one more time. When nothing else grabs my attention, I switch gears a bit and open up a new document on my computer to start work on the memoir. My conversation with Sharon Anderson earlier had been fruitful; I can expect a contract to arrive here at the Planet tomorrow, and the first draft of the book will be due in three months, although I fully intend to have it completed well before then. I have a few ideas regarding the organization of the memoir, and so I start outlining the chapters and text.

Slowly, the newsroom clears out until I’m the only one left working. I glance at my watch — 9 p.m. — and then check my phone again; still no text from Lois. I suppose no news should be good news, and since they had planned to finally sit and talk, it is possible she’d just turned off her cell phone. Regardless, I can’t shake the feeling that something is not quite right, and I frown with concern as I pick up the phone on my desk to give her a call. However, as I start dialing her number, my superhearing kicks on. I set the phone back down on the holder and stand abruptly as I listen.

“All units respond. Bomb threat at Metropolis High School gymnasium.”

I freeze for a moment. Is this Luthor’s doing — his ‘test’ for me?

I shake my head and blink away the feeling of unease starting to grow in my chest. It doesn't matter if this is his test. I will not allow more children to die.

I dash off to the stairwell and listen in to radio communications among police and the bomb squad as I spin into the suit, speed up the stairs, and jump up into the sky, heading north toward the high school. I extend my senses ahead of me to take in the situation. A basketball game was just about to end, but the gymnasium is now chaotic. School officials have gathered everyone in the middle of the gymnasium, away from the doors, but the large group is frantic; parents push through the crowd to find their children, and staff valiantly but unsuccessfully attempt to keep everyone calm.

I quickly scan the room and find three powerful explosives — one rigged to each set of doors. I land lightly near several police vehicles parked outside the gymnasium as I scan the bombs in more detail. They have the same trigger mechanism as was used for the two bombs at the Empire State Building last week; presumably, the three bombs are connected, just as the other two had been.

Police Chief Adams jogs over to me, his face twisted in a grimace.

"Superman, thank goodness you're here," he says, relief evident in his voice.

"Please tell me what you know. I see three bombs with a connected trigger mechanism," I reply tersely. I continue scanning the room, doing my due diligence and looking for glowing green rocks or shady-looking lead-lined boxes.

"That's correct, Superman," he answers. "We got an anonymous call reporting the bombs 5 minutes ago. They said the bombs are rigged to explode at 9:15, unless the doors are disturbed, in which case, they will explode immediately."

"That leaves us, what, ten minutes? What if I go in through the windows? Can I evacuate everyone without setting off the bombs?" I ask as I meticulously inspect the windows for other triggers. I see nothing suspicious.

"There was no mention by the caller of the windows being rigged," he replies. "Annabeth!"

A woman about in her late forties jumps out of the back of a van parked nearby and jogs over to us. She stops in front of Adams and nods to me.

"Superman asked whether he can evacuate everyone through the windows."

Annabeth turns to me, her expression intense.

"All indications from our infrared analysis indicate that the bombs can be triggered by the doors being disrupted. Can you see any sensors on the windows themselves?"

"No, ma'am, there is nothing I recognize as any sort of sensor on any of the windows," I answer immediately. "And I've seen these same explosives before, last week at

the Empire State Building. The bombs were connected to each other, and the perpetrators had a trigger with them." My stomach drops. "If they are watching and trigger the bombs while I'm attempting to evacuate, it could be disastrous."

Another sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach hits me, and I scan the crowd inside the gym again. One older gentleman standing in the middle of the crowd is on his cell phone, looking quite undisturbed by the situation. I focus in on his voice for a moment and immediately recognize him as the 'Nigel' whom Luthor had been speaking with earlier that day. He is on the phone with Luthor now, and he indicates to Luthor that he knows I'm outside. I narrow my eyes. He's wearing a ring exactly like the one Luthor had — a black titanium band studded with several small chunks of the deadly green glowing rock. So this is his 'test'... The situation just got more complex.

Maybe.

I look down a moment as I try to process this new information. He wouldn't kill himself, would he? So the bombs may be decoys. I inspect them again. Ah ha.

"The bombs are duds," I say confidently. The police chief stares at me with disbelief, and Annabeth's eyes widen. "Can I have a paper and pencil? I'll show you."

A moment later, I've drawn a detailed diagram of each of the bombs, similar to the drawings I made at the Empire State Building. However, each of these bombs is missing an important wire connecting the trigger mechanism to the actual explosive unit; the bombs will not activate.

"Wow, you're correct then, Superman," Annabeth confirms as she studies my diagram. "What an elaborate ruse they created here. But why?"

I turn to Police Chief Adams. "There is a man inside whom I recognize as an associate of a dangerous and very powerful criminal. I believe this ruse is an attempt to test me in some way, sir, and this man is connected, although I have no proof of it at this time."

He raises his eyebrows at me, but I simply cross my arms over my chest and turn back to the gymnasium.

"Just to be safe, Superman, do you think you can dispose of the three bombs quickly, and then we can evacuate the building, similar to how you handled the Empire State Building situation? And you can apprehend this man so we can interrogate him."

I hesitate. The kryptonite chunks in Nigel's ring are fairly small, and if I move carefully, I should be able to stay a safe distance away while disposing of the bombs. And I haven't found any other kryptonite anywhere else in the gymnasium. But I'm wary, nonetheless, and I don't know how I can arrest Nigel without risking exposure. I swallow hard. In our conversations the last few days, Lois had mentioned that only a few people know of the effects

of kryptonite on me; the police chief is not one of these people. How can I explain my reluctance?

“That should work,” I say, trying to project confidence into my voice. They are not trying to kill me — yet — I recall. They are just testing me, probably testing the effects of the kryptonite on me. So I’ll be fine. Really. Right? I step forward and plan my path. The bombs are rigged on the inside of each door, so I will need to enter the gymnasium first, remove each of the bombs from each of the three sets of doors, and then discard the bombs, maybe out into space, where they can do no harm to anyone in case there’s some other mechanism that could set them off.

Before I can chicken out, I take a deep breath, nod to Adams and Annabeth, and launch myself toward the gym at a good speed. I enter in through a window on the west side of the gym, as far away from Nigel as I can get. Continuing at a pace that is probably not quite the speed of light, I zip around the gym, carefully but efficiently grabbing each of the three bombs off the doors, and then fly back out the window. As I shoot upwards, away from the crowds gathered at the edges of the police barriers, toward the dark emptiness of space, I let out the breath I’d been holding. The kryptonite hadn’t affected me from that far away.

Slowing to normal speed, I toss the three explosives out into space, away from any satellites, and then turn and head back toward the school. As I land, Police Chief Adams directs his officers to begin escorting the students, staff, and families out, and a general commotion can be heard from inside the gym, where everyone is just now realizing what happened.

I start toward the gymnasium with several officers, narrowing my focus to the man known as Nigel, who now pushes toward the exit along with the other two hundred or so people in the group. A piercing pain in my head suddenly stops me in my tracks, however, and I double over and fall to my knees as my vision goes blurry and the pain radiates throughout my body. I groan as every inch of my body seems to burn, and my energy is completely sapped. I try to steady myself and stand back up, but I stumble, and my hands hit the pavement, scraping the ground as I catch myself from falling completely. Muffled voices nearby call my name, and several hands grip my shoulders and hoist me up. I wobble a bit, but whoever is holding me up supports me and keeps me on my feet.

Then, as swiftly as it came, the severe painful sensation suddenly fades.

“Superman, are you okay?”

I force my eyes open and recognize Police Chief Adams, who stands in front of me, concern etched across his sharp features. The two officers holding me up move

away as I straighten up and nod mutely. My body still aches, but the stabbing, severe pain is gone.

“Sorry about that, sir. I’m fine,” I manage, attempting to project strength into my voice. I quickly glance around the area; however, an intense wave of nausea hits me, and I immediately regret the move. I almost stagger again, but manage to catch myself. I don’t see anyone suspicious leaving the scene, but my vision is still fuzzy. I take a deep breath to help steady myself, and then look around again, testing out my superpowers. Nothing. No vision gizmo, no superhearing, nada. Great.

Next to me, Adams motions to the two officers with us to go help with the evacuation. He then addresses me uneasily. “What happened there, Superman?”

“I’m not sure,” I lie. I must maintain the façade of the powerful superhero; I force myself to stand up straight and cross my arms over my chest. He doesn’t need to know that I’m completely powerless. He also doesn’t need to know that there is most likely a deadly rock somewhere nearby that can incapacitate me and even kill me.

Through the haze created by the kryptonite, my mind tries to connect the dots, and I realize that either Nigel was a distraction — that is, they knew I was expecting him — or they had a backup plan. I hadn’t expected someone out in the crowd or a part of the emergency crew to be carrying kryptonite, and I had neglected to scan outside of the gymnasium. I shudder involuntarily. I should have been more careful.

I turn back toward the gymnasium. I cannot see Nigel now among the sea of evacuees exiting the building. Dammit. Overcome by an urgent need to get away from all these people, any of whom may be Luthor’s agent carrying some form of kryptonite, I quickly add, “I, uh, think you have it handled here now, and I’m needed elsewhere, so I should get going.”

“Of course, Superman. Thank you again for your assistance,” Adams says. He offers his hand for me to shake, and I reciprocate the gesture and nod. He then advances toward the building to help his officers.

I disappear into the shadows of a nearby alleyway, thankful that no one notices me amidst all the commotion, and the last of my energy seems to seep out of me. I lean heavily against the wall, my head and body aching, and I close my eyes as weakness and nausea overtake me.

God, how am I going to get home, I wonder.

I again test out my superpowers, and again, I find that nothing seems to be working. There is no sunlight to help my energy return right now, or I’d probably already have my powers back after such a short exposure. I force myself to take slow, deep, deliberate breaths to stave off the anxiety growing in my chest.

At once, I feel his presence with me, and several questions are interjected into my consciousness.

“What happened? Where are you? Are you okay?”

There is an element of panic to his voice, and I fear he may have been a victim as well, my pain transmitting to him. Trembling, I push myself back to my feet, using the wall for support.

Sorry if I — there was kryptonite, I communicate to him. My thoughts are jumbled, and I struggle to form complete sentences to respond to his questions. *Luthor testing me. Bomb threat at high school. I’m okay, but no powers. Could use a ride.*

I sense his alarm, but a moment later, he responds with a quick, *“We’re on our way. Be there in five minutes.”*

Thank you.

I lean my back against the wall again, close my eyes, and allow myself to slide down to the ground, giving in to the extreme exhaustion I feel. I wrap my cape around myself, shielding my now-vulnerable body from the cold night.

After a few minutes, his voice echoes in my head again. *“We are nearby. Where are you?”*

I take another deep breath and open my eyes, immediately regretting the decision as the world seems to spin around me. However, I manage to struggle to my feet and stumble toward the road.

I’m here.

Not helpful, I realize, and so I focus enough to project a vision of my location to him. There is a bookstore visible across the street, which may help, so I concentrate on that while limping slowly along the edge of the wall. Just a few more feet.

I hear a quick, *“Gotcha,”* and see headlights approaching. I hold onto the wall as I glance around the corner. Down the street toward the high school, lights from emergency vehicles flash, and helicopters fly above, their spotlights shining down on the crowds congregating around the building. The bright lights hurt my eyes, however, and I quickly look away as Lois pulls the Jeep up along the curb. I let go of the wall and stumble toward the car, and Clark hops out of the passenger’s seat to help me, his arm looping around my waist.

Thank you. I can’t seem to speak, but I communicate my gratitude to him telepathically as he opens the door to the backseat and helps me into the car. And then I collapse across the seats and close my eyes.

Chapter 36

Throbbing pain. My limbs feel like lead — heavy, unmovable. And when I open my eyes, the world swims. I don’t remember the effects of kryptonite lingering like

this. Granted, I’d only had one exposure before. But this... It was not like this.

Lois stops her car outside my apartment, and I break the silence with a groan as I sit up. From the front seat, Lois shuts off the car, and Clark glances up and down the street before opening up his door and hopping out. Lois follows, and a moment later, they are offering to help me get out of the car. I wave both of them off; I can walk by myself now, right? It was just a very brief exposure. I should be fine by now. Right?

But as soon as I try to stand, my legs shake and give out, and I grab the side of the car to stop myself from falling.

I guess I’m not fine.

“Here, let me help you,” Clark offers, stepping over toward me.

“I should — I shouldn’t need help b-by now,” I object. However, I allow him to support me, and we make our way slowly up the steps to the apartment. Each step drains me, and I lean on him more as we reach the top of the stairs. “S-sorry,” I mumble. Even that small effort hurts, and my chest begins to burn with each breath.

Lois hurries ahead of us and unlocks the door, then holds it open while we limp through. Once into the apartment, Clark helps me over to the couch, where I lie down, and Lois turns on some of the lights and locks the door behind us. My eyes are squeezed shut now, and any movement exacerbates the nausea I feel and the pounding in my head.

“Why is it getting worse?” I blurt out, my hands trembling as I bring them up to cover my eyes.

A small hand rests on my forehead for a moment, and then I hear Lois stand back up and whisper to Clark. I can’t hear what she’s saying, however, and a strange sense of unease washes over me. I force my eyes open, ignoring the stabbing pain at the base of my skull, and turn my head slightly toward where they both stand. Clark has his arm around her shoulders, and they both stare at me expectantly.

Had they asked me something?

I shake my head, which is a bad idea; the room dances around me, lights swirling and stars jumping around in front of my eyes. I groan again and close my eyes.

“What’s happening? I-I haven’t felt this before.”

Again, I feel her hand on my forehead. This time, it lingers, brushing back my hair, which has fallen out of place. I hear her voice, but she sounds far away. The words are fuzzy, and I only make out random syllables and phrases.

“...kryptonite...melt...lasts long...hours...”

What? I don’t mean to communicate with him, but he hears my confusion.

“Lois said they have Superman’s medical files, so they will know this. When kryptonite is melted down and then resolidified, even a short exposure hits hard. The effects will last for a few hours, and it will get much worse before it gets better. I was exposed like this once.” I feel him push away the memory, intent on not sharing it with me, and for that I’m thankful.

Great.

I hear muffled voices that I can’t make out. And even with my eyes closed and lying flat on my back on the couch, the room feels like it’s spinning. Lois’s hand moves from my forehead to my shoulder.

“She says she’s sorry she missed your calls earlier. And that we’ll stay here as long as you need us.” He hesitates and then admits, “For me, the exposure was very brief, and the effects lasted about ten hours. I tried to sleep it off, but sleep is hard when everything hurts.”

Ten hours.

Wonderful.

Please, tell her she doesn’t need to apologize.

Pain.

I screw my eyes shut tighter and curl over onto my side.

God. This is the worst.

Lois’s hand leaves my shoulder, but then returns a moment later. “...bedroom...more comfortable...”

Again, I only seem to be able to understand a few of her words, but I get the gist, and I force out a single-word response. “K.” I try to push myself up, but I’m much too weak. “I-I can’t...”

“Let us help.”

Pain rips through my abdomen and chest as I’m first pushed up into a sitting position and then hoisted to my feet. I feel Lois on my left and Clark on my right, and together, they haul me through the living room and to the bedroom. The pain intensifies more, and I collapse onto the bed with relief as my vision blurs again.

“Thank you.”

“Just rest now,” Lois says quietly. This time, I hear her voice, soft and kind. Someone slips my boots off, and a blanket is laid gently over me. I feel her hand caress my cheek. And then I lose consciousness.

Chapter 37

I wake gradually, painfully. Darkness enshrouds the room; daylight has not yet come. My body aches, although the acute pain of earlier seems to have passed. How long have I been out? Carefully, testing my body’s reaction, I turn my head and glance at the clock on the nightstand. 5:30 a.m. Ugh.

I shift in the bed, pushing myself up and swinging my legs off the edge. I still wear the suit, minus the boots, and

the spandex feels itchy against my vulnerable skin. Aching and stiff, but not incapacitated, I stand up, keeping one hand on the bed to steady myself, and I then inch slowly toward the end of the bed. Moonlight filters in through the windows to the balcony, providing enough illumination for me to navigate the room. I manage to stumble to the dresser, where I pick out a pair of black workout pants and a dark gray T-shirt, and I then head into the bathroom to change. Several irritating minutes later, I manage to get the suit off — undoing the hidden zipper in the back is somehow much too challenging when I’m sore and stiff and without my superpowers — and I pull on the clean clothes and toss the suit in the clothes hamper. My reflection in the mirror gives me pause, and I take a few minutes to run a comb through my tousled hair and wash my face.

Reflexively, I attempt to focus my heat vision into the mirror to remove the stubble from my chin; nothing happens, of course, and I grimace in frustration as I pull out a razor from the medicine cabinet. I stare at it for a moment. Nope. I’ve never actually even used a razor before, and I don’t feel like learning right now. Dejectedly, I resign myself to being less than clean-shaven, and I place the razor back in the medicine cabinet to collect more dust.

I slowly make my way out toward the living room area, but I stop in the doorway. Lois sleeps peacefully on the couch, curled up with a throw pillow under a light blanket. Since the other Clark returned, I’ve deliberately avoided allowing myself to study her beauty, but my willpower seems to have disappeared with my superpowers, and I now can’t seem to tear my eyes away from her. Her loose dark hair falls over her face, and her lips are gently parted. I remember the feel of the kiss we shared only a few days ago, her soft lips pressing into mine and her hands threading through my hair. I shake my head to push away the memory, but my thoughts betray me. *So beautiful, Lois.*

Immediately, my eyes dart around the rest of the living space. Two half-full mugs sit on the coffee table, but there is no sign of Clark. I don’t feel his presence either. Hopefully, he didn’t hear my thoughts about his fiancée.

Boy, this is getting complicated.

I force myself to push away all thoughts of the gorgeous beauty sleeping on my couch, and I quietly pad into the kitchen, frowning as the muscles in my legs complain. Coffee actually doesn’t sound appetizing right now, but I feel mildly nauseous, with a sort of uncomfortable emptiness in my stomach — is this hunger? Maybe a piece of toast and some ginger tea would help. I busy myself with preparing the tea and toast, as quietly as I can to avoid waking her. Every move is punctuated by stiff, sore muscles, and I find myself glancing out the

window, waiting for the Sun to rise. If I take a nice walk out in the sunlight, maybe my powers will return faster.

And then I can figure out what I'm going to do about Luthor and his so-called test of this modified kryptonite. God, I never want to experience that agony again. I shudder as I rest my hands on the counter and wait for the tea to steep.

"Hey, you."

I jump at the sound of her voice right behind me, and I twist around abruptly. I hadn't heard or felt her approach, and this lack of awareness is disconcerting. She smiles sheepishly at me. *Adorable*. No, I can't think that. My shoulders tense as I remind myself again that my feelings for her need to be kept at bay, even hidden from my thoughts.

"Sorry to startle you," she apologizes.

She steps up close to me, and I hold my breath as she reaches out and places a gentle hand on my forehead.

"You were feverish overnight," she explains, her eyes studying mine. She pulls her hand away, but my skin still tingles where she had touched me. "But you seem fine now. How do you feel?"

She moves slightly away from me and takes a clean coffee cup out of the cupboard.

"Tired. Sore. But nothing like last night. All my powers are gone still," I admit, scooting away from her slightly to give her room to pour a fresh cup of coffee. My toast pops up from the toaster, and the tea should be finished steeping. "And I'm hungry, I-I think, which is something I've never experienced before."

She laughs weakly and takes a sip of her coffee.

"I sent Clark home to get some rest himself, but I thought you'd still be sleeping for a while yet. I remember when Clark was exposed to that modified kryptonite. It was rough." Her voice trembles, and she swallows hard before continuing. "I think he was only exposed for a few seconds. At first, it seemed like he recovered quickly, but then, just like you experienced, he suddenly started feeling worse and worse. I think it was a good ten or twelve hours before he could even stand up. Several more after that before he was functional. His powers took another day to return."

My stomach twists in knots. I take a small bite of the plain toast and then strain the tea leaves and pour my cup of tea. Lifting the kettle almost takes more strength than I have, but I manage.

"I really hope I recover more quickly than that," I say quietly. I set the kettle back down and take a sip. The sweetness of the ginger immediately calms my nausea. "Luthor is probably already on his way back to New York with the kryptonite. I need to get rid of it, and we need to figure out how to put him away. He's bad news."

"Luthor, right. Clark and I talked about that yesterday, too. It makes sense, you know, that Luthor would want to get rid of Superman now." My gaze meets hers, and she frowns as she seems to be recalling our discussions over the last few days. "It's still hard to imagine that Luthor is Intergang now. But it does make sense."

"There's more though," I add. My legs suddenly feel weak, and I move to sit at the table. She joins me. "I tried to call you yesterday, but your phone kept going to voicemail."

She grimaces. "Yeah, sorry about that. Clark and I...we were talking. For a long time."

Her expression darkens for a moment. I don't need to pry.

"It's okay. And that's good. That you guys talked, that is." I raise my eyes to meet hers with a reassuring half-smile. "Um, I decided that some — what did you call it — 'super snooping' was in order, and I followed Luthor to where he was staying at the Lexor Hotel downtown. He had a stash of kryptonite in the safe in the room. He also had a ring made with small kryptonite stones. And..." I hesitate. I don't want her to feel any guilt over what happened. But she needs to know, because I'm definitely going to need her help to get this situation solved. I continue. "He spoke with an associate, whom he called 'Nigel.' They discussed their plans for a 'test' for Superman, scheduled for last night. The bombs at the high school were decoys. Nigel was there in the gymnasium, wearing a ring similar to the one Luthor had, studded with kryptonite. But I was exposed outside the gym, after I'd removed all the bombs. It's like they had a backup plan in case I didn't get close enough to this Nigel guy."

Lois's face pales, and she sets her coffee mug down loudly on the table. "But, Clark, they had the whole area blocked off. No one would have been allowed access to the area outside the gymnasium, except police and the bomb squad..." Her voice trails off.

She's right, I remember. The whole street was blocked off. I close my eyes for a moment as I consider the implications of that little tidbit of information. Intergang has infiltrated the police department? It makes sense. But it's terrifying.

I think hard, picturing the scene below me as I'd flown back after tossing the bombs out into space. I'd been focused on the gymnasium, and I'd landed next to Police Chief Adams. Four other officers had been nearby. No one else was close enough. Again, I try to put myself in that moment in time — to picture who was around me and what happened immediately before the kryptonite had stopped me in my tracks. Somehow, even without my powers, my nearly photographic memory is intact, and I carefully examine the scene in my mind. I'd taken a step

toward the gymnasium. An odd silence had surrounded me. And then...there. To my left. A small clicking sound, like the latch of a box opening. In my mind, I concentrate on the edges of my peripheral vision. Details that I hadn't noticed in the moment. An officer — one of the four who had been nearby when I landed, but not one who had stayed behind to help me back to my feet — opened a small box, and a sickly green glow lit up his features, milliseconds before my eyes screwed shut in pain.

I see his face clearly now, and I pull myself back to the present as my eyes fly open.

Lois watches me curiously, her gaze troubled. "What is it?"

"Bill Henderson," I gasp, shaking my head in disbelief. "Bill Henderson was the officer with the kryptonite."

Chapter 38

"No, no, Clark, that's not possible. Not Bill. You know him. I know him. He wouldn't —"

She stops herself and stands up abruptly, crossing her arms over her chest. And she immediately starts pacing the room while continuing to mutter to herself.

I understand her confusion. In fact, I feel the same way. But I know what I saw, and I trust my own memory enough to know that it's true. He was there. It was him. He opened that box with the kryptonite. Now, why he'd done it — that's what we need to figure out.

I raise my eyes up. Lois's shoulders are hunched, her back to me, and I can still hear her mumbling to herself, though I cannot make out her words.

"Lois, come back and sit, please. And let's talk about this."

She spins around to face me, and I almost recoil. Her eyes bore into me accusingly.

"Talk about what?" she blurts out angrily. "You just alleged that Bill Henderson — who, by the way, is one of the best cops I know — that he is involved with Intergang and responsible for hurting you last night. I don't even — I can't — Clark, he's a friend of mine!" She throws her hands up in the air and turns away from me again.

I swallow hard and push myself to my feet. My head is throbbing now, and my back aches, but I ignore the discomfort, stand up straight, and step over toward her.

"Lois." My voice sounds raspy, my throat dry. I shake my head as my mind races to come up with the right words to say to her. "He's a good man, Lois. I know that. So that's why — that's why we need to — to talk to him and get to the bottom of this. Maybe...maybe they blackmailed him, or something?"

She stills, her whole body tense, as she listens to my words. When she turns back around to face me, my stomach drops. Tears stream down her cheeks.

No, please don't cry, Lois.

"He is a good man. He's a good cop. He would never — never do something like that, Clark. You — you don't know him like I do. He would never," she argues. Her jaw set in anger, she spins around and heads toward the door, grabbing her coat and purse on the way.

My head swims, and I grab a hold of the wall next to me to steady myself. *No, Lois, don't go, please.* She is leaving because she is angry with me. Not for any other reason. She's angry with me for making such an accusation against someone she knows, someone she trusts — at least, someone she trusts a lot more than she apparently trusts me.

"P-please don't leave, Lois. Please, let's just talk about this for a minute. Please," I beg. I try to move across the room toward her, but my knees wobble, and I nearly fall as she hurries up the stairs to the front door.

"No, Clark. I need to go now. I'm glad you're up and okay. But please don't call me. I need time to think."

And then, she turns and leaves. And I slide to the floor with my back against the wall as my legs give out, the little energy I had spent.

Chapter 39

I stuff my hands deeper into my pockets, protecting myself against the cold air of the sunny, but chilly morning. My steps are labored and slow, but it feels good to be outside, and I hold my head up high to soak up the Sun's powerful radiation. I feel its healing power, and each step I take becomes physically easier. However, the Sun does nothing to heal my broken spirit.

One hour ago, she stormed out of my apartment.

One hour ago, everything I'd built in the last month had been shattered.

One hour ago...

I make my way slowly around the edge of Centennial Park, walking the path I'd normally be running. I avoid the shady forested trail in favor of a sunnier route, and I find myself at the edge of the pond. Two ducks float along together, peacefully. One reaches back and preens its feathers, and the other dives down into the water briefly, returning to the surface a second later. I sit at a nearby bench and allow myself to rest for a while in the growing morning light.

But it is dangerous to allow my thoughts to wander.

I hear her voice echo in my head — the anger, the resentment, the disbelief. I wish I could take back my words, although they'd been necessary and truthful; had I known how she was going to react, I would have held back the information or...something. I rub my eyes with one hand and then straighten my glasses.

The truth is, I'm as confused by my memory as she was, just like I'd told her. Since coming to this world, I'd had many interactions with Bill Henderson, both as Clark and as Superman, and he's always been a straight arrow, no-nonsense kind of guy. He's helped me and Lois out many times, and he's never once shown anything but respect for Superman and the work I do. I didn't have a Bill Henderson in my universe, but Lois has known the man for years, and I trust her judgment of his character as much as I trust my own memory.

Which is why none of this makes sense. And why we should have talked more about it.

And why it hurts so much that she didn't even take the time to consider what I'd said.

For the first time since coming here to this Earth, I almost wish I could go back home. Anything would be better than knowing that she was crying because of me.

I sigh and shift on the bench to get more comfortable. In front of me, the ducks continue to glide on top of the water. I blink repeatedly as the sound of the water moving around the ducks seems amplified momentarily. Are my powers coming back already?

I close my eyes and concentrate on the forest nearby. And my spirits rise just a little.

A squirrel chitters in a tree at the edge of the pond, and a robin pecks the ground in search of seeds. Several leaves fall to the ground. A runner breathes heavily, her heart racing, as she picks up her pace and continues out of the forested path and along the sidewalk on the side of the pond opposite me. I can hear it all.

I open my eyes and watch the runner, smiling as I distinguish tiny details that shouldn't be visible. I shift my gaze up toward the Sun momentarily and then stand up. Nothing hurts. I very cautiously raise myself off the ground, only an inch, and a wave of relief washes over me.

Good. Good.

I set my feet back on the ground and take a final look at the ducks in the pond before turning and heading back toward my apartment.

A few minutes later, I round the corner, and my apartment comes into view. As does Lois's Jeep.

I stop in my tracks for a moment as I scan ahead. Lois is not in the Jeep; Clark is. And he looks worried. My stomach drops, and I clench my jaw. He's probably here on her behalf. I'm probably about to get kicked out of this world. Literally.

I take a deep breath and jog down the street. He sees me in the rearview mirror and waves. He looks...relieved to see me? He climbs out of the car, pulling on a baseball cap as he glances around to ensure he isn't seen, and then trots ahead of me up the steps.

"You look like you're feeling much better," he says, stuffing his hands in his pockets as I pull my keys out to unlock the door.

"Yes, thank goodness. The sunlight helped a lot," I admit.

"I bet. Lois must still be sleeping, huh? I knocked, but no one answered," he says.

My hand freezes on the door handle.

"Wh-what? You mean she's not — she never went home...?"

His eyes widen, an expression of confusion and fear crossing his face, and he reaches forward and pushes the door open ahead of me.

As soon as we pass through the door, he turns to me.

"What do you mean? Where is she?" His voice trembles, and he closes the door quickly and scans the empty, cold room.

I flip on the light switch next to the front door and remove my glasses, rubbing the bridge of my nose. I feel his anxiety and distress grow as he stops hiding his thoughts from me.

"She left about — " I pause and glance at the clock on the wall — "two hours ago," I reply, trying to avoid picturing the scene in my mind. However, I'm not completely successful, and he isn't shy about prying; I back away, lower my head, and turn toward the kitchen as he sees my memory of her outburst, her tears, her hasty retreat.

"What did you do to her?" Anger comes off him in waves, and he grabs my shoulder. "Why was she so upset?"

I stop and close my eyes as I shake my head. "I-I didn't do anything. I j-just — she got upset when I — " I turn back toward him, words failing me.

Here, just see...

I show him everything, replaying our whole conversation, my recollection of the night before, my realization that it was Bill Henderson who had the kryptonite, and then her reaction. And I feel his anger fade, replaced by an intense dread.

He staggers over to the couch and sits heavily.

"Bill Henderson? I-I can't believe it. I — there must be a reason — like you said." He rubs the back of his neck nervously. "But Lois, I know why she got so upset. Bill, he helped her when her sister Lucy almost...committed suicide. He saved Lucy's life and helped her turn her life back around. Lois, she respects him a lot. He's a good man, a good cop. There has to be a reason — like you said. I —"

He shakes his head and stands back up, crossing his arms over his chest. "She probably went to find him and confront him. We...we have to go now. I don't like her off

by herself with all this going on — with Luthor and Intergang and — and I have no powers and can't protect her if something..." His voice trails off, but I hear his heart racing and his breathing become shallow and fast.

I will protect her, I promise him silently. I will always protect her.

His eyes meet mine. He is close to panicking. "We have to go find her. She probably went to Bill's house."

I don't know why we've switched to telepathic communication, but it seems to calm him somewhat, and I nod.

Let me go get the suit on. We can't be seen together otherwise, I reply.

"Please hurry," he says aloud. He begins pacing the room, his tension growing.

"Yeah, of course," I respond. "One second."

And one second later, I'm back in the living room, clad in the spandex suit, which no longer itches. He narrows his eyes at me, and I hear his thoughts.

"Your powers are back already? It took mine much longer."

I give him a halfhearted nod and toss him a pair of my glasses. He shakes his head and chuckles weakly. "I do not miss having to wear these," he admits, slipping the glasses on.

"I'm not at anywhere near full strength yet," I confess quietly. He starts toward the door, and I follow. "So, uh, maybe we can just drive there, if that's okay..."

"Of course."

Together, we exit the apartment, and he jogs down the stairs and pulls the keys for the Jeep out of his pocket. He radiates anxiety, and I notice his pulse racing and his hands shaking.

Are you okay to drive? I could —

"No, I'm fine. I'm j-just..." He hesitates as he grasps the handle to the driver's side door, gazing at me from over the roof of the vehicle. "I'm worried about her. And I...I don't like being powerless when she's in trouble." His voice is low, and he drops his eyes.

I open the front passenger's side door with a small nod, acknowledging his admission, and then I climb into the car. He follows, and soon, we are on the road, heading north. He navigates the car out of the city and into a small suburb of Metropolis, where the streets are lined with crisp, landscaped lawns and all the houses are new and brightly painted. He turns into a quiet cul-de-sac and pulls up to the curb behind a police cruiser.

I'm trying, but I cannot detect her heartbeat here or anywhere nearby.

I glance up to the house — Henderson's house, I presume — and my chest constricts. The door is wide open, and inside, the house is wrecked; the furniture is

upturned, windows are broken, a laptop lies smashed on the kitchen floor, and clothes are strewn around the bedrooms. There are traces of blood on the carpet in the living room.

As soon as he stops, I jump out of the Jeep and fly inside, scanning the house as I do for any clues.

Oh, God.

I reach down behind the overturned couch. Her purse. She was here.

I hear Clark behind me, his breathing ragged as he jogs in after me, and I sense his growing panic again. His cheeks are flushed from the effort of jogging, reminding me that although he's been acting strong, he's still very much recovering.

"What is it?"

I turn toward him, carefully controlling my thoughts and expression. But he sees right through me. And his eyes drift toward the purse in my hand. I feel the moment he loses control. He begins to hyperventilate, and he falls to his knees.

"No, no, no. God, no."

I grasp his shoulders and pull him back up to his feet, but he fights against me as rage and despair overtake him.

"How could you let them take her?! You said you would protect her!"

He pushes me away with enough power that I actually move back a step, and he then lunges at me. I easily move out of his way and grab him from behind before I launch us both up out of the house, into the sky, and back toward the city.

Clark, we'll find her. We'll find her. Please trust me.

I'm not calm, but I force myself to sound confident.

Despite our gaining altitude rapidly, he continues to struggle against me, his heartbeat erratic and fast.

"Let me go! I have to find her. I can't lose her. You don't understand!"

"I do understand," I tell him out loud, my voice firm but low. "I do understand. And I promise you, we will find her. I will not let you lose her. I will not lose her."

He stills slightly in my grip. Maybe he senses my own desperation and the sincerity of my words. Or maybe he just realizes how stupid it is to insist that I let him go when we are hundreds of feet up in the air and he still lacks the ability to fly. We hover over downtown Metropolis, and I breathe deeply to steady myself.

Please let me focus so I can find her.

I sense that he understands, and he remains quiet while I extend my limited superhearing out over the city. The effort causes me to lose a bit of altitude, but my eyes fly open as I find her heartbeat — rapid but regular.

She's at the Lexor, I tell him silently.

He twists his head to the left, toward the massive skyscrapers lining the busy downtown streets, and I scan with my vision ahead of us as we speed toward the towering structure off Fifth Street and Main, the huge capital letter *L* sitting atop the hotel shining in the Wednesday morning sunlight.

My stomach drops as I see her, along with a battered and bloody Bill Henderson, on the roof of the hotel, accompanied by that Nigel character. Lois and Bill are tied back-to-back and are precariously balanced on the ledge of the roof. Lois spits a fiery retort back to something Nigel says, and Bill hisses at her to keep quiet, blood dripping down his face from a nasty cut above his left eye. Undeterred, Nigel points a gun at Lois and steps closer to them. Bill recoils slightly, but his foot slips.

No, no, no. God, why am I not faster? I complain to myself as I attempt to increase my speed more.

I feel Clark tense as he reads my thoughts, his earlier panic growing again, but I can't be concerned with him right now, and I block him from my mind.

Ahead of me, the scene seems to slow down as I accelerate more. I head straight toward the ground in front of the building, carefully set Clark down without slowing, and launch up toward the roof, the cement cracking beneath my feet. My eyes remain trained on the duo now in free fall about 20 stories up. Lois's scream pierces my ears, fueling my determination. I reach out and grasp both of them as relief washes over me, and everything around us speeds back up to normal time.

I close my eyes for a millisecond as I consider how I was almost not fast enough.

But then I hear her voice, and I shove those thoughts out of my head as we float toward the ground.

"Superman, I — thank you, Superman," she says breathlessly, her head slumping sideways a bit onto my shoulder.

Bill Henderson stays silent, but I can hear and feel his heart pounding in his chest. Below us, Clark frets, his hands wringing nervously as he waits for us to reach the ground.

My feet land lightly on the cement. Although the exertion has sapped my energy quite a bit, I hold myself upright as best I can and steady Lois and Bill as they regain their footing. I then reach between them and snap the bonds holding them together. Bill staggers forward, and I grasp him not so carefully by the collar of his coat to keep him from falling. He mutters a weak "Thank you" and moves slightly away from me as I release him. Lois, on the other hand, is more stable on her feet, and she turns toward her Clark, who is shaking visibly.

"Lois." His voice is hoarse, and she collapses into him with a shudder as his arms envelop her. One of his hands

threads into her wind-whipped hair, and he buries his head into her neck.

I turn away from them as they embrace, and I shift my gaze up toward the roof. Nigel still stands up on top of the building; he hasn't bothered trying to disappear. I feel anger building up in my chest, but I control myself, steel my nerves, and float unhurriedly upwards, giving myself an extra few precious seconds to soak up more sunlight as I scan the roof and Nigel's coat pockets for any sign of more kryptonite. He wears the same black ring studded with the small kryptonite stones, which is probably why he seems confident and unperturbed. My jaw clenches, but I again force myself to remain calm. I land on the roof a good distance away, where I'm sure the kryptonite cannot affect me, and I glare at him as I cross my arms over my chest, still barely holding my anger in check.

A strong gust of wind blows Nigel's hat off his head, sending it flying down the hundreds of feet to the ground below. Nigel still seems perfectly composed, but he skirts carefully away from the edge of the roof, his eyes studying me with disdain.

"I'm quite surprised to see you here, Superman," he admits in his distinct heavy British accent. "You see, I was told that I'd have at least twenty-four hours after our little incident last night to, shall we say, clean up the mess." His eyes leave me for just a moment as he glances down over the side of the building. "It is unfortunate though that by saving that goodie-two-shoes cop, you've doomed his family, Superman."

I narrow my eyes as Nigel pulls a small black device out of his pocket. I recognize the device as the same type of trigger mechanism I'd seen the suspects have at the Empire State Building. Another bomb. Dammit. I'm sure this one is not a decoy.

Quick thinking is not my best attribute when I'm not at 100%, but I manage to zap his hand with a brief burst of heat vision. He inhales sharply as the trigger device flies from his hand, and using a carefully controlled bit of super breath, I float the device down and across the roof, away from him.

"I don't think so, Nigel," I say, my voice now dangerously low, betraying the rage I feel. I shake my head as I realize not all the rage is mine; some is still a remnant from Clark's feelings directed at me earlier.

Nigel seems to sense my fury, and a flash of fear briefly mars his otherwise passive features. He steps backwards, toward the edge of the roof, and his foot hits the ledge. He recovers quickly, however, his fingers playing with the deadly black ring on his right hand. And he tests me by moving back in my direction, just one stride. I don't move, knowing I'm still far enough away.

“Turn yourself in now, and I’m sure you can work out a deal with the police if you give up Luthor,” I suggest, watching him warily.

“That shows how little you understand, Superman.” He takes another step toward me, and this time I do move away, floating up and back several feet. He laughs. “Turning on Luthor is suicide. Getting caught while on Luthor’s payroll is also suicide. I might as well just jump now.”

He turns back toward the ledge and steps right up to peer over the side of the building. My eyes follow his momentarily. Bill Henderson now sits on the curb, his head resting in his hands, and three police cars pull up at the scene. Lois and Clark still hold each other. Lois’s head is buried in Clark’s chest, and his eyes are screwed shut tightly. I look back toward Nigel, who studies me curiously.

“What would you do, Superman, if I jumped? How would you explain not being able to stop me from falling to my death? They would blame you, you know. Say you were taking justice into your own hands. I dare say, they would start to fear you. Maybe that would be worth it. To see your perfect image tarnished.”

I know my eyes betray me in this instance as I swallow anxiously.

Watch out, the alien has laser eyes.

Memories of the fear and distrust hidden in the eyes of even my closest colleagues from back on my own world temporarily rattle me, and Nigel again laughs. He places one hand on the ledge and leans over, as though tempting me to move closer. I don’t budge. He raises an eyebrow at me and hikes one leg up onto the ledge.

“You are too good to just let me die, even if it means you would die trying to save me,” he surmises, a sneer growing on his face.

“Don’t do it, Nigel. I’ll get you into protective custody, and we’ll take down Luthor,” I say quickly, trying to keep a steady tone. I sense his heart rate increase, and I realize he’s seriously considering jumping rather than surrendering. A chill runs through me to think that Luthor’s influence extends that deep into the system.

“I already told you that will not work,” he responds angrily, the first real show of emotion from him since I’ve been up here. My whole body tenses as he finishes his climb up onto the ledge, his hand grasping a flagpole to steady himself, and I instinctively reach out toward him, although I don’t get any closer. “Living with Luthor after you is worse than not living. I know, because it was my job to exterminate those who betrayed him.” His face is red, and his eyes are wide and unnerving.

My mind races as he smirks wickedly at me, lifting one leg and shifting his balance to lean off over the edge of the roof.

No, please, don’t do this. God, what do I do?

I can’t just let him die.

However, I don’t have time to devise any sort of strategy. He laughs a twisted, maniacal laugh, which seems oddly uncharacteristic of him, even in the short time that I’ve known him, and then winks at me, releases his hand from the flagpole, and begins to fall.

Chapter 40

I don’t think. I just act.

I speed down toward Nigel, grab him by one arm, and brace myself against the ledge of the roof as his feet slip off over the edge. Pain engulfs me as the kryptonite chunks in his ring contact my arm, and I groan with effort as all my strength seeps out of me. I cannot hold him; I am not strong enough. But I try. I grip his arm, and my fingers dig into the wall of the ledge to keep myself from going over the edge with him. Pain radiates through my body, and I feel myself curling up, my grip loosening, as my body retreats instinctively from the source of the discomfort.

As I realize I cannot stop it, I cannot hold him, some frantic, terrible sound escapes my lips, and his arm slips from mine.

I tumble backwards on the roof, my head knocking against the rough ground and my hands stinging as I try to catch myself. But the immediate relief from pain as the kryptonite moves farther away from me clears my mind, and my head turns sharply toward the ledge.

From extensive experience timing the speed of falling objects as I race in to save the day, I know I have only maybe five seconds before he reaches the ground from this height. Only five seconds. And from extremely limited experience, I strongly suspect that kryptonite in his ring was *not* the modified version. I can already feel my keen senses returning as the kryptonite is out of range.

Maybe I can still save him.

Time seems to slow down around me as I quickly test out my ability to fly, and with effort, I push myself off the ground a few inches. I grimace. This won’t be fast enough.

Four seconds.

My mind races in an attempt to formulate a plan as I launch off the side of the building, veering away from him a safe distance. For a terrifying moment, I flail, unable to precisely control my flight. However, I recover rapidly and hurl myself down in a wide arc, toward the ground.

Three seconds.

I hold my breath as I swerve underneath him, still from a safe distance. My feet hit the ground a little too hard, and the cement of the sidewalk shatters under my boots,

sending a wave of pain through my legs and back. I'm vaguely aware of Lois, Clark, Bill Henderson, and several police officers nearby, all of them in various states of alarm, staring up at the man falling down from the roof. However, I have no time to consider them right now. I take a deep breath.

Two seconds.

With every ounce of energy I have, I release the breath I'm holding, blowing upward to rapidly slow his fall, while hopefully maintaining my distance. I falter as he continues falling. Maybe my current low-power state isn't enough. He's almost too close; another few milliseconds and I'll have nothing left as the kryptonite will be too close.

I try harder, my lungs burning with the effort.

To my great relief, his fall slows.

Time speeds back up around me. He is floating, about fifty feet above me, on a cloud of wind created by my breath. Carefully controlling the wind I've created, I move him toward the police cars. I'm now quite aware of Clark's position as well as mine, and I hesitate as I try to navigate without getting Nigel too close to Clark. He and Lois seem to realize my predicament, and they back out of the way as Nigel's cloud of wind floats him over and then sets him down, rather roughly I'm afraid, right at the feet of the three police officers who had just exited their vehicles.

And then I stagger backward with exhaustion, barely managing to keep myself upright.

Time's up.

No one died.

Chapter 41

Fifteen minutes later, I land lightly in front of Bill Henderson, who sits on a gurney as an EMT attempts to clean and bandage his wounds. His wife and son jump out of my arms and hurry to his side, tears of joy and relief staining their cheeks. As they embrace, he raises his eyes to meet mine; I see his guilt and gratitude, and I nod at him, silently communicating that I hold no grudge against him. Nigel had indeed kidnapped Bill's family and threatened to kill them unless he helped Nigel weaken me using the modified kryptonite the night before. There was no winning for him in that situation; he'd only done what he felt he had to do to protect his family, and I can respect that. I turn away from their reunion and take in the rest of the scene.

Lois is being grilled by two detectives, her arms crossed defiantly over her chest. I chuckle inwardly as I hear the tail end of one of her responses, which contains several curse words directed at Nigel, who is now handcuffed and restrained in the back of one of the police cruisers. Clark sits on the curb where Bill had been a few minutes prior, his hands clasped together against his knees

and his dark eyes trained on the older man who almost killed his fiancée.

Rage. Rage fills him. He senses me watching him, and his head turns sharply toward me. Not all of his anger is directed at Nigel, no — a good bit is also meant for me. And he doesn't hide it.

"He tried to kill her. You should have let him die." The thought pierces into my skull almost painfully, and I slowly shake my head in response, my eyes not leaving his.

That's not what I do. You know that.

His anger just grows, and I hear him growl deep in his throat as he tears his eyes away to stare again at the pavement in front of him.

"I want to kill him."

I feel him hesitate then, and he looks back up at me. His expression has changed. Now he looks almost... scared?

"I need to get out of here. Away from him. Now. Before I do something that I can't take back."

And I understand. I nod to him and then glance to where Lois still talks animatedly with the police. She'll probably be a few more minutes still. I take a step toward him and motion to him to join me.

I can take you back to the apartment and then come back to get her.

He doesn't move. Instead, he hesitates again as his eyes drift to Lois. *"I don't want to leave her."*

You can trust me. I'll drop you off and come right back here.

Animosity fills him. He can't control it, I know, but the feeling is so strong that I back away a step.

"I don't trust you," he snarls in my mind. Something snaps inside of him. *"You almost let her die. And you let her would-be killer live. I'm gonna kill him myself."*

He stands up abruptly and takes a deliberate step toward the police cruiser holding Nigel. Immediately, I am in front of him, and my hands reach up and push back against his shoulders. Conscious of the crowd around us, I communicate one last time with him silently.

Let me take you home. Then I'll come back and get her.

"Let me go," he growls in a low voice. He doesn't try to push through me; he knows he can't. But I know he's not going to go quietly.

You know I can't let you hurt him. Let him rot in jail. Luthor will probably have him killed anyways. Let me take you home, Clark.

My pleading doesn't change his anger, and this time, he does try to power his way through me. He is stronger than earlier in the day, but so am I, and I easily stand my ground against him. And before he can cause a scene, I grasp him by the shoulders and launch us up into the air.

“Dammit, let me go! What are you doing? Take me back there. I’m gonna kill him. And she’s alone again. You let her be left alone. Let me go!”

“Listen to yourself, Clark,” I insist. He struggles in my grasp, but I hold him tightly and fly him toward Lois’s apartment. “Calm down. Please. What good will you be to Lois if you kill him and then go to prison?”

Finally, my words seem to get through to him, and he stops struggling. His breathing is ragged and fast, however, and his heart seems to stutter in his chest. I descend toward the apartment, scanning ahead to ensure that the window is unlocked, and then gently push the window open ahead of us and set him down in the living room. He immediately turns away from me and starts pacing the room, his face wrought with anxiety. I don’t want to leave him like this, but I know I need to get back to Lois ASAP. As though he hears my thoughts, which he probably does, he spins around and faces me.

“What are you waiting for? Go back to her. You’re leaving her alone too long. If she’s not safe — ” He falls to his knees in the middle of the living room, burying his head in his hands. *“I’m...I’m sorry. Please, hurry. I can’t stand these feelings. I need her.”*

I nod. *I will be back. Please stay here. Less than one minute, and I’ll be back with Lois. Okay?*

“Please, hurry,” he repeats.

I turn away from him and jump back out the window, speeding over toward the Lexor. I deliberately keep our connection open, sending him images of Lois as I use my special vision to check on her. She stands next to Bill now, and they chat quietly as the EMTs check Bill’s wife and son for injuries. I slow as I approach, and she looks up toward me. Landing lightly next to her, I nod again to Bill, and then address her formally.

“Ms. Lane, if you’re finished up here, can I give you a ride home?” I ask, crossing my arms over my chest.

“Sure, of course, Superman,” she replies.

She turns back to Bill and gives him a brief hug, then waves to Bill’s wife and son before following me a few steps away. Her eyes meet mine, and her expression of concern is overwhelming. She’s probably quite worried about Clark, since we took off pretty abruptly earlier. I offer her my hand. She takes it, and I carefully lift her into my arms and then up into the sky, again heading in the general direction of her apartment, although not quite as quickly this time.

“Are you okay?” she asks quietly as we fly through downtown.

The question startles me, and I glance down at her briefly before answering.

“My powers are still not 100%,” I admit, refocusing ahead of us as I veer slightly south. “But I’ll be fine.”

She shakes her head. “That’s not what I mean. I mean... I’m sorry about how I behaved this morning.” Her voice is low and a bit shaky. “And thank you for saving me. And... And are you okay?”

We’ve reached her apartment, but I hover outside for a moment. Inside, Clark is pacing the room again, occasionally glancing at the clock. His shoulders are taut with worry, and he runs a nervous hand through his hair.

“I will be okay, Lois,” I say noncommittally. “Clark really needs you right now.”

I know I’m short with her, and I don’t like it. But he looks like he’s about to break down into a full-blown panic attack any second. Also, I don’t really want to revisit the events of the morning. At least not right now.

“Yeah,” she replies. She knows I’m distancing myself.

A small shard of hope lodges itself in my heart as I note the disappointment in her tone. But I quickly push that away and descend toward her window as Clark again glances at the clock and then reaches out to me.

“Where are you? Is she okay?”

“We’re here,” I say out loud as I push open the window for the second time in just a couple minutes.

I gently set her feet on the floor, and my hands linger maybe a second too long on her waist as I ensure she is steady before releasing her. Clark rushes over to us, and I back up and lower my eyes as he envelops her in a tight embrace. She returns the hug, whispering calming words into his ear. Her eyes meet mine very briefly, and she gives me a weak smile. I nod back at her and then step toward the window.

“I’ll, uh, go get your car, Lois, and your purse.”

“My...car?” She straightens up, pulling away from Clark slightly, but he tightens his hold on her.

“We drove your car to Bill’s house to look for you,” Clark explains. “When we realized you’d been there and saw signs of a struggle, he flew us back into Metropolis to find you.” He buries his head in her hair and refuses to let her move away from him. He’s very effectively blocking his thoughts and feelings from me right now, which is probably a good thing. I swallow hard as Lois nods at me.

“I’ll be back in a few minutes,” I say again, and then I take off out the window.

The Sun shines brightly in the sky still, feeding my growing power, but I feel lousy right now. And I still have to get to the Planet to write up whatever parts of the story we’re able to tell.

And then there’s still Luthor to worry about... I have no proof of the link between Luthor and Nigel, which means that Luthor is still out there with his kryptonite stash, intimate knowledge of my physiology, and probably now a grudge against me, Lois, and Henderson. I drift onto

my back as I fly, staring up into the sky, and I close my eyes for a moment as I breathe deeply.

One day, one moment at a time. My first task is to return Lois's car and purse. I can worry about everything else after that. I flip back over and descend rapidly as I approach Bill Henderson's house.

Chapter 42

Groaning, I roll over in bed and pull the comforter up to cover my face, blocking the sunlight filtering in through the window. It's too early to move, especially considering I was up most of the night redirecting the lava flow from a volcano that erupted in Iceland and considering the multiple kryptonite exposures of the previous two days.

The clock on my nightstand reads 6:49 a.m. — I'd managed an entire hour of sleep — and I groan again as I drag myself out of bed, resigned to the fact that there's no way I'm getting back to sleep now.

In a daze, I stumble into the kitchen and start a pot of coffee, then head back into the bedroom to get dressed. I haven't gone running in a few days. Maybe a quick five miles will help me wake up and organize my thoughts. My plan decided, I pull on my running shorts, a T-shirt, and socks and then dig my Nikes out of the closet. I slip the shoes on, run a quick hand through my tousled hair, and grab my glasses from the nightstand.

The coffee won't be done for several minutes, and I'm suddenly feeling an urgent need to get outside. So I decide I'll just have coffee when I get back. I adjust my glasses and jog up the steps to the door. As I unlock the deadbolt, I sense Lois's heartbeat, strong and steady, just on the other side of the door. I hesitate only momentarily before I pull the door open, pasting a fake smile on my face.

She stands there, her hand half raised as though she is about to knock. Her well-fitted running pants and long-sleeved compression shirt hug the delicious curves of her figure, and I have to force myself to keep my eyes on her face. A small smile graces her lips.

"Good morning, Clark. I wanted to join you on your run this morning. Is — is that okay?" she asks tentatively, shifting back from the door a step. She bites her lower lip as she awaits my response.

Gosh, she's so adorable when she does that.

I mentally shake myself. *Careful with your thoughts, Kent.*

"Oh, of — of course. Anytime," I fumble, dropping my eyes as I exit the apartment.

I turn away from her and take my time with locking the door. She hasn't joined me on one of my morning runs since I brought Clark back out of the Sun, and her nervousness concerns me. Does she really want to go running with me, or is she here for another reason?

Yesterday morning, I was certain both she and Clark wanted me gone — she'd become incredibly angry with me when I'd told her about Bill Henderson being the one who had exposed me to the deadly modified kryptonite, and Clark, well... Clark had lost his cool with me several times.

I shake my head to avoid thinking about Clark's misguided rage and terrifying thoughts of the previous day, and as I turn around and force a smile again, motioning for Lois to go ahead of me down the steps, I wonder whether he had told her how close he'd come to making a huge mistake yesterday — how much he'd wished I'd simply let Nigel fall to his death, and how he'd wanted to take matters into his own hands. If I hadn't been there...

"The normal five-mile loop?" she asks, moving into a fast jog. I copy her, effortlessly keeping up with her moderate pace.

"That works for me," I agree. I glance at her briefly, taking in the details of her features. Her heartbeat is more rapid than it should be, and the muscles in her jaw twitch slightly with tension.

However, she remains silent, and I allow myself to simply enjoy her presence as we turn left and head across the street along the edge of Centennial Park. Her breath is visible in the chilly morning air, and a slight breeze picks up, moving high clouds over the Sun and creating rapidly changing shadows across the path in front of us.

For a few minutes, I imagine we're back where we were just over a week ago — before things got undoubtedly much more complicated.

She'd become my best friend.

But now...

We follow the path off the sidewalk and through the trees, and to my surprise, she slows to a walk and then stops altogether in the cold shade of the forested trail, breathing heavily. I stop just a few paces ahead of her and turn back to face her. She squats down just off the edge of the path, her eyes downcast. Then, she stands back up and raises her eyes to mine. She no longer hides the apprehension from her expression.

I gulp in a lungful of air and start off again down the path, but her hand on my arm stops me.

"Can we walk a moment and...talk?" she asks hesitantly. My stomach drops.

"Of course," I answer dispassionately.

I allow her to set the pace, and she starts off again at a slow walk. I keep my eyes on the path ahead of me, focusing on her heartbeat, still strong and steady. After a moment, I feel her hand slip into mine, and we continue to walk side by side in silence for several minutes. Her skin feels so soft, so smooth, and without meaning to, I find my

thumb rubbing gentle circles on the back of her hand. She doesn't seem to mind.

"The last week has been crazy, huh?" she starts, her voice trembling slightly. The question seems a bit rhetorical to me, so I simply murmur my agreement and continue walking alongside her. "Clark, he, uh... God, why is this so hard?" She stops again and pulls her hand away from mine as she turns away from me. Her hands settle on her hips, and she takes a deep breath.

I stuff my hands into my pockets to keep them from shaking. Here it comes. I should just head on back and start packing up my things. I swallow hard and close my eyes. But when she speaks up again, it's not what I was expecting.

"Uh, before Tuesday night, you know — when we came to help you at the high school —" She turns back toward me, and I open my eyes to meet hers. "Clark, he finally told me everything. Well, probably not everything, but he did open up to me about what happened on New Krypton. What — what he had to do." She lowers her eyes, and her voice drops to almost a whisper. "Who he had to become."

I nod slightly in response to her admission, but I don't otherwise interrupt her.

"And you know all of it. Probably more than I do," she says, eyeing me expectantly. I grimace and nod again. "Right. So, like you told me... There is no way he could ever be, um, you-know-who, again. And then yesterday..." She moves her arms from her hips to wrap around herself as she visibly shivers. "Clark, he admitted to me yesterday that he wanted Nigel dead for what he did to me."

I step closer to her and, tentatively, as though asking for permission, I reach out and wrap my arms around her. She allows the embrace and rests her head gently on my chest.

"He said he was angry with you for saving Nigel's life. And he was ashamed of his reaction, but he couldn't control it." I nod into her, tightening my arms around her slightly as I feel her shiver again. "He — he said if you hadn't been there..." She allows her voice to trail off.

"I know..." I say quietly. I don't move, and she shifts a bit in my embrace to look up at me.

"He calmed down considerably after you left yesterday," she explains, her eyes holding back tears. "And he was horrified by his actions and words."

"That — that's good." I keep my tone light, but she shakes her head.

"But he's still terrified now. He doesn't want to let me out of his sight, and that's why..." She closes her eyes and pulls herself out of my embrace, backing away from me a bit. "He wants to return to work with me. Starting today."

Oh. I see.

I don't say the words out loud. My jaw sets tightly, and I drop my chin to my chest as my hand lifts to rub the back of my neck. I knew this was coming, eventually. But it's too soon. He's not ready. Hell, I'm not ready for him to be ready. I shake my head and raise my eyes to hers.

"He's not ready, Lois," I warn her, trying to keep my voice steady.

She again wraps her arms around herself and turns away from me. "I know that." She reaches up and wipes a tear off her cheek. "I tried to tell him. But he insists. He — he insists that he needs to be near me at all times and that he can...control himself if I'm around. And honestly, I...I think I would feel better too — knowing he's with me. I wouldn't have to worry..." Her voice trails off.

And a deep numbness spreads through me.

"He'll, uh, n-need some suits — w-work suits that is," I note absently as I start walking again, slowly, down the path. She follows reluctantly. "I'll bring some over. And..."

She reaches out and takes my hand again, walking along next to me. Her touch gives me a little strength, but I falter as we walk along.

I will not get to see her every day.

I will not get to touch her like this.

And why should I get to anyways? She is not mine. She is his. I've been pretending. And it's time for the pretense to end.

No. I squeeze her hand gently, and she looks up at me with a weak smile. No, it's really not like that. I'll still have her as a friend. I'll still be Superman. I'll still be able to help keep and build peace in this welcoming world.

It will still be better than my world.

"If — if he won't let you out of his sight, how'd you convince him to let you come over here alone?" I ask, almost teasingly, flashing her a weak smile.

She laughs, though there is only a hint of amusement in it, and she leans on me slightly. "Don't you know by now that no one, not even Clark Kent, tells Lois Lane what to do?"

My smile grows a little. God, I love her. I mean, as a friend. Right.

"It wasn't an easy conversation," she says more seriously. "I just... I told him that I needed to talk to you, and that it was something I really needed to do alone. He wasn't happy with it. But I promised you'd escort me home."

"Oh, I will, will I?" I glance sideways at her, and she finally smiles at me — a real, beautiful smile that makes my heart jump.

"Yep, that's right."

I look ahead again as we exit the trees and navigate back onto the sidewalk. I lower my voice a bit, hesitating.

“And that made him feel better? He’s not exactly my biggest fan right now.”

“Well...” Her hand tightens in mine. God, Lois, what is this? Her touch makes me feel alive, loved, and safe. Why do I allow myself these feelings? I push them away, and she continues, seeming to choose her words carefully. “He knows that you care about me and that you won’t let anything hurt me.”

I more than care about you, Lois. I suspect she knows this. And I suddenly get a strong sense that she more than cares about me too.

“I definitely won’t let anything happen to you,” I agree quietly.

We continue along the sidewalk, hand in hand, and my mind wanders as the silence between us grows. I try to picture my life as Superman, without working at the Planet. Life might be simpler, I reason. I have always thought, as I told the other Lois from the other universe, that life is so much less complicated as Superman than as Clark Kent.

But will it be enough? It will have to be, I suppose.

Next to me, Lois lets out a sigh. She leans into me as we walk. The faint scent of her strawberry shampoo almost intoxicates me, and I allow myself a quick glance at her. A tear falls silently down her cheek, and she reaches up to brush it away. I stop and step in front of her, raising my hands to rest on her upper arms. She wipes away another tear and snuffles as she avoids eye contact.

“Lois?”

She doesn’t answer. Or she can’t. She shakes her head and steps around me to keep us moving down the path.

“We should get back.” Her voice is shaky, and she snuffles again as she picks up her pace to a slow jog.

I close my eyes for a moment before following after her. My heart is breaking. I swallow my feelings and jog after her.

Chapter 43

A week’s worth of suits and ties, a couple belts, and a couple pairs of shoes. Plus his cell phone and wallet. And three pairs of glasses. I’ll keep one pair, though I doubt I’ll need them much anymore. I survey everything, carefully laid out on the bed in front of me. This should be enough. At least for now. I pick up a duffle bag and several garment bags that I’d found in his closet and start packing everything up.

Behind me, Lois knocks lightly on the doorframe, and I turn to look at her over my shoulder. Her arms cross over her chest, and she leans up against the wall.

“Almost finished?” she asks quietly. She can’t quite meet my eyes.

“Yeah, just packing it all up now,” I reply. “I packed enough for about a week, I think. But that’s just for now. I can bring more over soon. Or he can even come over and pick out what he wants. That would be fine, too. Maybe he’ll want something different, you know — different, I dunno, ties or...” I realize I’m rambling, and I let out a sharp breath to reset myself. “Sorry, uh, just give me one more minute, and we can go.” I turn back to my task. I feel her step up behind me, and a small hand rests on my back. My shoulders tense.

“I’m sorry about this, Clark,” she whispers.

“It’s fine, Lois, really,” I tell her, moving the pairs of shoes and belts to the duffle bag. I pack everything away with an air of indifference. With a certain degree of numbness. I’m trying. I really am. But then, her hand presses into me a little stronger. And I forget myself for a moment. “Lois, I —”

I spin around to face her, and my hand immediately reaches up to lift her chin. I want to look at her now. I want to see her beautiful, deep brown eyes. Without smiling. I study her, memorizing the features of her perfect face, and then I lean down and kiss her cheek softly. Maybe I shouldn’t. But I feel compelled to, and she doesn’t pull away. I want to tell her, *I love you, Lois. I will miss seeing you, working with you, being around you.* However, this time I stop myself from acting impulsively, and I swallow back my strong emotions and force a smile. I really don’t want to see her cry again. So I will pretend to be okay. I will pretend to be strong.

“I don’t want you to worry about me. Please.” And it’s the truth.

She lowers her eyes as her hand reaches up to touch the spot where I’d kissed her. An aching in my chest forces me to turn away, and I busy myself again with packing up the suits into several garment bags.

I will be fine. It will be fine. I will still be here, nearby, and I will still be Superman. For her and for this world. And I will be fine.

Maybe if I repeat it enough, I’ll believe it.

“I-I’ll just...” Her voice trails off, and she quietly steps away from me and back out of the room. The tension in my shoulders fades; however, a chill seeps into my bones as the distance between us grows. I hear her sit at the kitchen table and sip her coffee, and I hang my head in defeat as I finish packing.

A few minutes later, I heft all of the clothing bags into the back of her Jeep and then take my spot in the front seat next to her. She starts up the car, and we ride along in an uncomfortable silence. I stare outside and watch the other cars go by, my fingers tapping absently on my knee. The drive to her apartment is too short. Can’t we take the long way, Lois? Or get stuck in a traffic jam? Or maybe a flat

tire? That would work too. But no, nothing exciting happens to prolong our drive, and within only a short time, we pull into an open parking spot outside her apartment building.

She shuts off the car but doesn't move to open the door. Instead, her hand reaches over and settles on top of mine, stilling the nervous tapping of my fingers on my knee.

"Clark, I need to tell you..." I shift in my seat to face her and raise my eyes to hers. But she stares at her hand on mine. Her lower lip trembles slightly. "I know I've said this before, but I really, really can't thank you enough for everything you've done for me, and for him, in the last month." She pauses and then looks up at me. Tears moisten the edges of her eyes again, and I frown.

"Lois, it's why I'm here," I say quietly.

"I know, but..." Her voice trails off, and she blinks back her tears as she seems to be looking for the right words. I hate to see her struggle. My hand turns over to grip hers. I will be strong, so she can get on with her life without worrying about me.

I will be whatever she needs, just as I've thought all along, since the first night I came here.

"This isn't goodbye," I continue, allowing myself a weak smile. "Lois, in the last month, you've shown me so much kindness. You've welcomed me here and helped me, so much more than you even know... You've become my best friend, Lois, and I've never...I've never had a best friend before."

The admission is too much, I suppose, because she can no longer hold back her tears. She pulls her hand away from mine to wipe her cheeks.

"Oh, Clark, I was going to say —" She snuffles loudly and blinks again to help stop herself from crying. "I was going to say the same thing — you've become my best friend, Clark." She reaches over and places her hand back on mine. "And, I love you, Clark."

I know she doesn't mean romantically. Her tone makes that perfectly clear. But my heart fills with joy like I've never known before, and I quickly lower my eyes to avoid giving myself away. *I love you, too, Lois.* I smile, but keep my eyes down.

"Lois, I love you, too," I repeat, this time out loud, trying to make my words sound as though I mean 'I love you like a best friend.' I feel her hand tighten in mine, and I allow myself to look up at her. Her beautiful smile soothes my soul, and I squeeze her hand back. "I — I really appreciate your friendship, Lois. And I hope we can still be good friends."

I feel him tugging at me, trying to inch into my thoughts, but I block him; I've gotten better at it now, and he certainly doesn't need to hear this conversation right now. I glance out the window, though, and up toward her

apartment. The curtains are pulled back, and he stands with his arms crossed over his chest, watching me. I turn back to Lois.

"But I, um..." I shake my head. What are the right words? "Um, I...I want you to know that I respect your decision and his decision to have him go back to work. I know he needs you right now. He still has a lot of healing to do..." She nods in response, brushing away another tear with her free hand, and I continue. "And for that, he needs your help and guidance, and he needs for me to be...less present." My voice is quiet now. "He needs for you to be *his* best friend again. And I respect that."

I hope she understands what I mean. Her eyes close for a brief moment, and I hear her rapid heart rate slow just slightly.

"You're amazing, you know that?" she says finally, reaching out toward me and adjusting my glasses, which had skewed a bit. She smiles at me, and my heart jumps in my chest.

"Sure, but you can tell me more often," I joke in response, returning her smile. I glance back out the window again. Clark still stands at the window. He looks worried. My smile fades a bit. "He's, uh, waiting for us. We should..."

"Yeah," she agrees. Her hand slips out of mine, and she pulls the keys out of the ignition. Quickly, I jump out of the Jeep and hurry to the driver's side to open the door for her. She laughs at my actions. "Boy scout."

I shrug and close the door behind her after she exits the car. Then, I open the hatch and remove the duffle and garment bags. I hear Clark's voice in my head as I drop my guard a bit.

"Is she okay?"

My eyes drift upwards, toward the window. He's watching her as she makes her way slowly up the steps in front of the building.

She's fine. I told you I'll protect her. And this will not change that. His eyes shift to me abruptly, and I feel a sudden jolt of apprehension from him. I soften my tone a bit. *Sorry. She's fine, really. She's still the strongest woman I know.*

I see him nod and then step away from the window. Ahead of me, Lois holds the door open. I paste a smile on my face again and trot up the stairs, balancing all of the bags.

"Thanks."

She dips her head in acknowledgement. And we head down the hallway to the elevator.

Chapter 44

The dark, cold apartment feels unwelcoming as I step in from the balcony. It's been a really long day, and I'm

tired. I quickly spin out of the suit, my nose turning up from the stench of oil and smoke, and I wonder briefly if the blue and red spandex is even salvageable. After a quick shower, I move to the kitchen. Liquid dish soap and baking soda will usually do the trick for oil stains, but this looks excessive. I start scrubbing.

The huge oil spill off the Alaskan coast had taken me hours to clean up, pulling me away from my primary task of the day: tailing Lex Luthor. I glance at the clock. 8:43 p.m. He'll be meeting with Bill Church Jr. at the warehouse where the new Costmart store is to be built in New York City very soon, and I suspect they will be discussing more than just plans for the store's layout. I scrub faster.

From the table behind me, my new cell phone buzzes with a notification, and since Lois and Clark are the only ones with my new number, I quickly set the soapy spandex in the sink, wipe my hands dry, and pick up the cell, unlocking the screen with a swipe of my finger. I frown as I note that the notification is several hours old; Lois had texted me just after I'd left for Alaska.

"Give me a call when you get a chance. We've got a lead on Luthor and need your help."

It's quite a short, impersonal message. I wonder if everything went okay with them at the Planet today. Or if she'd even tell me if it hadn't. The events of the morning flash through my mind again, and I rub my neck with a weary hand before dialing her number. After a very brief hesitation, the line rings once, twice, three times before going to her voicemail. Hmm. I dial Clark's number, but also get his voicemail. Uncertainty ripples through me. Trust your instincts, Martha had told me. And right now, my instincts are saying something is wrong.

Reluctantly, I reach out to him telepathically, opening my mind up. *Everything okay? I just got in from Alaska and saw Lois's message. Tried to call but no answer.* I cannot sense his mood, but I know he hears me. It is a moment before he answers, however.

"We need you in New York City at the new Costmart warehouse right now. Luthor is meeting with Church. Lois insisted we drive ourselves here when we couldn't get a hold of you earlier. I don't like it. I have a bad feeling."

My whole body tenses. *Be there momentarily.* And I am. Within three seconds, I've dressed in a clean suit and flown north to New York City. Lois's black Jeep is inconspicuously parked along a road lined with other vehicles, just outside a chain link construction fence, which surrounds an expansive parking lot and large warehouse. The Jeep is empty, of course. I hover several hundred feet overhead as I survey the area below me. Two large black SUVs are parked near the entrance of the warehouse, and the drivers of each SUV stand outside

chatting quietly. Using both our telepathic link and my special vision abilities, I easily locate Lois and Clark, who crouch behind a row of boxes toward the back of the warehouse. Lois's heartbeat is rapid but regular. Clark's, on the other hand, is erratic, and he nervously glances through a crack in the stack of boxes. The objects of his concern, Luthor and Bill Church, amble leisurely between two sets of industrial shelving not fifty feet away from them. My keen hearing picks up their conversation.

"I'm glad you see things my way, Bill," Luthor says with his characteristic air of unshakable confidence. They stride closer to Lois and Clark, and I feel a panic rising in Clark, along with the beginnings of strongly nauseating pain. Realization hits me. The kryptonite in Luthor's ring. Dammit.

Thinking fast, I fly around the back of the warehouse and through an open window. I stay in the shadows, safely away from Luthor and the kryptonite, and I make my way silently toward the front entrance. I then blow a strong breath of air at a stack of boxes along the opposite wall, eliciting a loud crash as the boxes topple over.

Luthor's voice cuts off, and Bill hisses, "What the hell was that?" as two sets of footsteps start my way.

Almost immediately, I feel Clark's relief, the painful sensation fading, and I float carefully in the shadows along the wall as Luthor and Church march purposefully toward the front of the store.

"Thank you. I assume that was you."

Yes, it was me, I answer shortly. A second later, I land lightly next to them, but my focus is on Luthor and Church at the front of the warehouse.

"I don't see anything, but maybe we should wrap this up, Luthor. I do have places to be, you know," Church rasps uneasily, his eyes darting around the darkness of the old warehouse.

"Indeed, as do I," Luthor agrees. I watch as he pulls several large stacks of \$100 bills from the pocket of his coat jacket and hands them dismissively to Church. "Consider this your retainer. When your father is out of the picture, by whatever means you decide appropriate, I'll quadruple that. Then, after you sign over everything to me and officially relinquish control of all of Intergang's... assets, I'll give you the remainder of the amount we agreed upon."

Church nods, still warily glancing around the room, and, after stuffing the money into his coat pocket, he pulls out a large manila envelope.

"The documents you requested," he explains, handing the envelope to Luthor.

Quickly, I scan the papers in the envelope. Listings of Intergang's assets, profiles of heads of the various branches of the crime organization, and a calendar of

shipping schedules fill the pages, along with a signed agreement between Luthor and Church Jr. describing the details of their arrangement. Solid evidence that Church is planning to pass the torch to Luthor as head of Intergang.

“Everything is here?” Luthor’s tone is accusatory and untrusting. Church nods and pales slightly, although I doubt it is visible to anyone but me in the low light of the warehouse.

“Yessir.” Church backs away a step from Luthor and pulls his coat around himself tighter.

“One last thing, Bill,” Luthor adds, his voice low and serious. He pulls a small black box out of his pocket, and my jaw clenches as I recognize the box Henderson had two days prior. “I’ve decided I need Superman gone. I thought maybe he could be persuaded to join my growing empire, but no, the goody-two-shoes has morals to uphold, and I’ve decided that the only way to ensure that we succeed in our goal here is to get rid of him. An associate of mine attempted and failed, and he will pay dearly for this failure. If you can take care of this problem for me, I’ll double my earlier offer.”

I swallow hard as Luthor opens the box momentarily to show Church the deadly green glowing rock inside. Next to me, Clark tenses as well. He senses my alarm, I suppose. My eyes dart down to meet his.

We have a big problem.

He nods. Lois silently shifts closer to him, and I hold my breath as I watch Church take the box from Luthor with a sneer.

“Consider it done. I’ll personally take care of it.”

“We have a deal then,” Luthor states. Both men shake hands briefly and then exit the building.

Once they’ve climbed into their vehicles, I exhale sharply and back up a few steps away from Lois and Clark to give them space. For a moment, I keep my senses tuned in on the retreating vehicles, which turn opposite directions out of the parking lot. Then, I lower my eyes to the two kneeling on the ground in front of me.

“They’re gone. Are you both okay?” I ask in a hushed tone. I offer a hand to Lois, but she waves me off and stands up without assistance. Clark pushes himself up stiffly and dusts his hands off on his pants. I feel his heart rattling and a dull aching in his chest. Maybe he was the one I should have offered to help. Our eyes meet briefly, but he looks away quickly, and the pain sensations of his fade as he blocks our connection. I swallow hard and turn back to Lois. “After I get you two out of here safely, I’m going to follow them,” I say hastily.

“No, we should all follow them,” Lois corrects. Clark and I both eye her nervously.

I’m not comfortable with this, I communicate to him silently. I don’t want her anywhere near Luthor or Church.

“Me neither.”

I decide I’ll be the bad guy here.

She’s gonna be really mad at me. I cast a glance at him, but he carefully ignores me. It’s self-preservation, I’m sure. If he pretends that he didn’t know my plan, she can’t get angry with him for it.

“Let me get you guys to the Jeep,” I say, stepping up between them before she has a chance to argue. I wrap one arm around each of their waists, instinctively extend my protective aura out around them, and then swiftly fly out and set them down next to her car. Lois pulls the keys out of her pocket.

“Which way did they go? We’ll follow and you can tell Clark where they are headed using your little telepathic gizmo thing,” she suggests. She unlocks the Jeep and then looks up at me expectantly.

I scan the direction Luthor had gone and easily locate the large black SUV turning onto the highway, headed toward Luthor Tower in downtown New York City. He’s going back to his penthouse, I assume. Shifting my focus, I locate Church heading south, back toward Metropolis. It’s a good three-hour drive.

“Luthor is headed back to his penthouse, and Church is headed back to Metropolis,” I respond.

I quickly explain what I heard and saw in the warehouse, and Lois pales at the mention of the kryptonite. She looks at her fiancé, her lower lip trembling.

“Here, get in,” I propose, reaching in front of her and opening the driver’s side door.

“Oh, good idea, you can fly us there to catch up. We should tail Luthor, since Church will take some time to get back to Metropolis. Maybe we can get our hands on those documents he has. That should be enough proof to take to the police. Or the FBI, I think,” Lois rattles off, the glint in her eye changing from fear to excitement.

“Uh, right, yeah, something like that,” I reply, my eyes darting to Clark’s. He looks guarded. He knows my plan, without even reading my thoughts.

I swallow anxiously as I usher her into the car. He gives me one more furtive glance before climbing into the front passenger’s seat of the Jeep. I shut the door after Lois takes her seat, and, after I hear both seatbelts click into place, I easily lift the Jeep, launch up into the dark night sky, and speed south toward Metropolis as quickly as I can without damaging the vehicle.

The darkness saves me, I suspect, because it isn’t until we’re descending toward her street that I hear her mutter several expletives, followed immediately by, “You knew about this, didn’t you?” And then, “Clark, don’t even think about it. Turn this car back around and get us back to New York, now! You can’t do this alone!”

Maybe she's right. I don't know. But there's no way I'm going to put her in danger. Not after what happened yesterday.

I'm sorry. Please tell her I'm sorry.

"It was the right thing to do. But do be careful."

She is fuming. I hear her seatbelt retract as I set the Jeep carefully on the ground, and before she can jump out, I take off into the sky again, speeding back toward New York. I hear a strangled cry from her as she slams the door to the Jeep.

"No fair, you know I can't fly!" I almost laugh, but then I hear her next words, filled with fear. "God, Clark, please, please be careful." A small sob escapes her lips, and I shut off my superhearing.

I'm so sorry. I didn't want her to cry.

I feel him hesitate again, and I know he's comforting her.

"She cares about you. Don't be stupid, don't get yourself caught or killed. And she'll eventually forgive you. Maybe."

I sense that he's trying to lighten the mood, and I allow myself a weak smile. I reach New York City just as Luthor's SUV pulls up to his private entrance at the back of Luthor Tower.

I'm here. Luthor just arrived back at his penthouse, I tell Clark silently.

He doesn't respond, so I focus my attention on Luthor as I land lightly on top of a high-rise nearby. He is escorted to his private elevator by two bodyguards, the manila envelope stuffed under one arm. Moments later, he emerges from the elevator on the top floor of the building, a lavish penthouse walled with ceiling-to-floor windows and decorated with expensive antiques from around the world. He steps into what looks like a combination of a library and an office and sits heavily at his desk. He briefly opens the envelope and peruses the contents before slamming a hand down on the desk. Then, Luthor stands, the envelope in one hand, and moves to a small painting on the northmost wall in the office. He shifts the painting upwards, revealing a hidden combination safe set into the wall. After entering a combination of numbers, which I easily commit to memory, he opens the door to the safe and stuffs the envelope inside. Then, he closes the safe and heads out of the room, yelling for his servant as he marches down the hallway toward his bedroom.

It can't be that easy.

I try to scan the safe, but it is lined with lead. Of course. However, the door to the balcony is unlocked, and Luthor and all of his bodyguards and servants are several rooms away and otherwise occupied. But I hesitate.

There are security cameras. And it would be breaking and entering and stealing.

If I were just going in to take the kryptonite back, I wouldn't feel conflicted. However, this seems wrong. And probably inadmissible in court anyways. At least, it would be on my world, and I think things generally work the same here. Don't they?

I try to connect with Clark, but he seems to be blocking me out for some reason. I scan the room again. The security cameras can be dealt with easily; a quick burst of heat vision could short them out. And I don't see any kryptonite anywhere in the room. Luthor is far enough away that the small stones in his ring wouldn't affect me. As I continue contemplating my next move, I sense Clark.

"Sorry, I was still calming Lois down. She's hysterical. You're okay, right?"

I'm fine. Just trying to figure out how to get the envelope in a way that will be legally admissible.

He seems confused for a moment. *"Legally admissible? Do you know where it is?"*

Yes. In a safe in Luthor's penthouse. I have the combination.

"Good. Assuming it's safe for you, grab the envelope and then take it to Dan Scardino at the New York FBI office. It's late, but he'll still be there. I don't think the man ever sleeps. Superman's word is, as you say, legally admissible. Tell him everything that happened and where you got the documents. As long as the documents are sufficiently incriminating, they'll be able to use the evidence in court."

I can't hide my surprise. *Seriously? They just take Superman's word?*

I stand up from my perch on the ledge of the roof and gaze out over the city. That would never happen on my world. In fact, Superman's involvement had caused so many cases to be thrown out of court that I'd lost count.

"Yes." I feel him hesitate, and then there is the slightest hint of sympathy in his words as he adds, *"Superman is a trusted figure here. They will believe you. Even against a man as respected as Luthor."*

Unbelievable.

I scan the penthouse again. Luthor sits in a lounge chair in the corner of his room, reading a novel while smoking another of those expensive cigars he had at the hotel in Metropolis. His servants seem busy preparing a light meal in the kitchen. The two bodyguards who have shadowed him all day are down on the lower floor of the building, where the elevator is located, looking bored. The coast is clear, as they say.

Clark's voice once again inserts itself into my mind. *"Lois insists that I ask if you've checked everywhere for kryptonite and that I tell you to please be careful. Though I'm sure you have and you will."*

I have, and I will, I repeat.

I triple check, and then, possibly faster than the speed of light, I swoop down through the unlocked balcony door and carry out the heist.

Chapter 45

An hour later, from the safety of a hundred feet away, I watch as Luthor is handcuffed and unceremoniously shoved into the back of a police cruiser. The scowl on his face is unnerving, and I turn away from him as I again locate Dan Scardino.

Just as Clark had said, Scardino had been working at his desk at the New York FBI office, despite the late hour, when I'd shown up earlier with the envelope. Many tense minutes later, after listening to my descriptions of the conversations I'd overheard and the evidence Lois Lane and Clark Kent had gathered and skimming the contents of the envelope, he'd assembled a large group of FBI agents, SWAT teams, and police officers and led the way over to Luthor Tower. I'd supervised the raid and arrest from outside the penthouse. And although I'd expected a huge struggle, maybe even ending like Nigel's arrest had, with Luthor deciding he didn't want to live in jail and taking a flying leap off the side of the building, the arrest had gone smoothly; no one, not even Luthor, had been injured.

Police and FBI now continue to search the entire premises looking for additional incriminating evidence, and Scardino is on the phone with the Metropolis FBI field office, directing them to arrest the Churches. I step toward him as he hangs up the phone, and he looks up at me, a serious expression on his face.

"Superman," he greets me, reaching his hand out in a familiar gesture. I reciprocate the handshake and watch him as he gazes toward where Luthor sits in the police cruiser. Luthor's eyes narrow at me, and I frown and turn back to Scardino.

"Thank you for your help with this, sir," I say formally.

"Are you kidding, Superman?" Scardino grins at me and claps me on the back. "Call me Dan. We've known each other long enough. Thank you for your help. And please thank Lane and Kent for me when you see them next. This is huge. We knew that Intergang recently expanded into New York, and we've been trying to infiltrate the organization for several months now, without any success. Once we have the Churches in custody, maybe I can take a vacation."

His grin grows, and he laughs heartily. His cell phone rings at that moment, and his smile turns into a scowl as he glances at the screen. "Please excuse me, Superman. My wife."

I nod, and he moves away from me to take the call. I survey the scene one more time before lifting up into the sky and flying south again, toward Metropolis.

Immediately, as though he had been monitoring my thoughts and waiting, I hear Clark's voice in my head — a question summarized in a single word.

"Luthor?"

Done. Arrested. Scardino is happy. I'm tired, so I'm succinct and to the point, and I feel that he understands.

"Lois has been writing the article. Can you stop by to answer some questions? Sorry, it feels weird to ask."

Despite my exhaustion and the seriousness of the day's events, I laugh to myself. Clark Kent actually interviewing Superman for a story. This new reality of mine is so weird.

No problem, of course. Let me just make sure they get Bill Church Jr. He's still on the road.

I easily find the black SUV, and I begin following it from several hundred feet in the air. Church has taken the kryptonite out of the black box and is studying it. I cringe involuntarily and rise up a few hundred more feet. Yep, I'm scared of a glowing green rock. Especially *that* glowing green rock.

The familiar sound of police sirens — a lot of them — catches my attention, and a quick scan shows that the highway ahead of the SUV is blocked off. Then, from behind, a multitude of marked and unmarked law enforcement vehicles appear and surround the SUV. I smile to myself as I watch Church hastily stuff the kryptonite back into the box, shove the box into a compartment under the seat, and then panic as his driver begins to slow down. Many curse words are muttered. Moments later, the SUV comes to a complete stop, and the driver and Church step out, their hands held up high in the air, as the police draw their weapons. Another uncomplicated arrest.

I execute a smooth barrel roll in the sky and then land lightly down next to the woman who appears to be the commanding officer. She tips her head to me as though not surprised to see me and finishes addressing the other officer next to her before turning to me.

"Superman, I hear we have you to thank for this arrest. What can I do for you?"

"Good evening, ma'am. I'm just here checking in. Mr. Church seems to be in good hands." I cross my arms over my chest and make a show of glancing toward the cruiser where Church now sits, a grimace on his face. His driver is standing next to another police cruiser, answering questions.

"Indeed, Superman, thank you for checking in. They just arrested Church Senior in Metropolis as well. It's been a productive night," she says, a hint of amusement in her voice. "If you'll please excuse me, Superman, I need to check on a few things. Thank you again. We're all very glad to have you back, you know."

I give a small smile and nod as she turns and walks away toward one of her colleagues. Then, as fast as I can to avoid being seen, I speed toward the SUV, grab the lead-lined box from the hidden compartment under the seat, and launch up into the air, away from the chaotic scene.

The box seems to hum in my hands, the deadly rock inside making my stomach churn. I know I'm safe — it's locked away behind a generous layer of lead. But I cannot control the sense of dread growing in my gut.

Clark feels it too, and he reaches out to me with alarm. "What is it?"

Nothing. I'm fine. I have the kryptonite box is all. The stuff terrifies me. Yep, I'll admit it. To the one person in the world who might actually understand. *Do you want — can I destroy it?*

"Please do. Into the Sun works."

Yep. And tell Lois I'll be by after. Just a couple minutes.

"You got it."

And the connection fades as I streak toward the Sun, carrying a deadly box containing a glowing green rock.

Chapter 46

Is she still mad?

"Very."

I sigh as I hover outside the window to Lois's apartment. She is typing almost furiously at her computer, sometimes pausing to check her notes. Clark sits next to her, his shoulders tense as he follows along. Tentatively, he reaches out and points to a few words on the screen, suggesting a minor change to her wording for clarity, and she glares at him a moment and then lets out an exasperated breath, wipes a tear from her cheek, and fixes the error. He then makes the mistake of glancing toward the window, and she immediately twists in her chair and jumps up.

"Is he back? Is he here?" she asks anxiously.

Clark hesitates and then nods and stands up after her. He reaches out and places his hands on her shoulders, but she shrugs him off and hurries over to the window. I swallow hard and then push the window open and descend into the room. My eyes meet hers, and I see a confusing mixture of anger, fear, and relief in her expression.

Oh, boy, I'm in trouble.

I smile weakly and turn around to shut the window, gathering myself for whatever onslaught she throws at me.

She stands there for a moment, her hands on her hips and a scowl on her beautiful face. Then, she shakes her head and rushes up to me, wrapping her arms around me in a tight embrace. I'm so confused that I don't move right away; my arms remain stiffly at my sides, and my eyes dart up to meet Clark's as he lingers a few feet back. He

sort of shrugs at me, almost as though to give me permission to hug his fiancée, and he turns back toward the table, taking the seat where Lois had been a moment ago and resuming where she left off on the article. Some of the tension in my shoulders eases, and I return her embrace, closing my eyes briefly to savor the moment.

And that's when she loses it.

Her hands move to my chest, and she pushes back against me hard. Unprepared, I stumble backwards into the window, barely reacting fast enough to prevent myself from shattering the glass. She then steps up to me and pokes her finger in my chest.

"Don't. You. Ever. Do. That. To. Me. Again."

Each word is punctuated with another poke to my chest. I glance desperately at Clark, who has twisted in his chair to watch the exchange, but his expression is unreadable, and he offers me nothing telepathically as well. I lower my eyes back to Lois. Her eyes are ablaze now, and her mouth is set in a tight frown.

"I-I'm sorry," I fumble, scooting around and away from her. "I-I thought —"

"I don't even want to hear it," she interrupts, throwing her hands up in the air. She turns back toward the table, angrily motioning for Clark to move out of her chair. He jumps out of the way, and she sits heavily, almost immediately resuming her typing where Clark had left off. She pauses only long enough to steal a quick glance up at him, her expression still angry. "And don't even get me started again with you," she hisses. He holds up both hands and recoils a bit, moving to the chair where he'd been sitting earlier. She points at me. "Sit," she instructs tersely.

I immediately obey, moving to the empty seat at the table across from Clark. I push the cape out from underneath me as I sit, and my eyes stay downcast. Clark taps his fingers absently on the table, and I reach out to him telepathically.

She's been like this for the last hour and a half? I feel his eyes on me, but I don't look up.

"Pretty much. I mean, we sort of conspired to go against her wishes. I don't regret it, but I understand why she's mad."

Yeah... Man, I'm sorry.

"Don't be. I didn't want her anywhere near Luthor just as much as you." I feel him hesitate, and then he admits, *"I would have done the same thing if it were me with the superpowers."* I nod slightly at his admission.

Lois types for a few more minutes before reaching over and picking up her notebook and pencil with a long, sharp exhale. I raise my eyes to look at her. The anger is finally gone from her expression now, replaced by an intense, determined look, which I'm more familiar with. She clicks her tongue before launching into a barrage of questions

regarding the documents I'd found, the law enforcement agencies involved in the arrests, and the arrests themselves. Her focus and attention to detail remind me that she's a brilliant journalist, and I do my best to answer her questions clearly and accurately. Clark occasionally cuts in with a question or clarification of his own, though he mostly leaves it to her. At some point during her questioning, Clark moves into the kitchen and pours all of us fresh cups of coffee, and I thank him with a nod. The hot liquid is comforting, and I sip it slowly as we continue talking. Finally, she finishes with her last line of questions and begins typing again.

I swallow the last of my coffee and then rub my eyes wearily. I almost feel stiff; it's been a long day after all, and I haven't slept enough, even for me. But I still have my night patrols to do, including my overseas appearances, so I have several hours before I'll be calling it a night.

I clear my throat, and Lois and Clark look up at me in unison. "Um, if you don't have any more questions for me, I should probably —"

"Oh, no," Lois interrupts, anger returning to her eyes. Clark swallows nervously and places his hand on her shoulder, but she shrugs him off. "No, you can't just leave again. I'm not done —"

"Lois, he needs to go," Clark says quietly but firmly, his hand returning to her shoulder. She tenses and glares at him before lowering her eyes back to her computer. Clark's hand moves to her back, and he rubs gentle circles to soothe her. She takes several deep breaths.

"Fine, go," she hisses, her voice low. Her hands move back to her keyboard, and she resumes her typing with shaky fingers.

I watch her for another second, and then my eyes meet Clark's. He gives me a weak smile and tips his head toward the window, indicating I should go ahead and get going.

"I take it you've never seen her angry like this before." *Definitely not like this*, I respond silently, dropping my chin. My eyes close briefly.

"Then trust me when I say you should probably just leave. I'll talk to her more after we get this story done."

I raise my eyes again. He's looking back at the computer screen now, still caressing her back softly, and I see some of her tension ease. I nod almost imperceptibly, though he's not looking at me to see it.

Okay. I stand up, move my coffee cup to the sink, and then step over to the window. I hesitate, and he glances over at me, sensing my reluctance. *If it's okay with you, I'll stop in tomorrow morning, just to check in. And to give her the birthday present I bought her. It's nothing big, but...*

His eyes widen in alarm, and I frown as I recall that Lois told me he was terrible with remembering dates and

numbers. I'm sure there's also a certain degree of disorientation he's feeling as well since he had been "dead" only a few days ago. With an inward sigh, I remind myself that I'm here to help them both, and that includes helping them rebuild their relationship. I give him a small smile as I push open the window.

I had made reservations for dinner tomorrow night at 8 p.m. at Le Chêne, the French restaurant she likes downtown. I was going to call and cancel, but it's yours if you want it.

I feel his surprise, and he blinks several times.

"That would be really great. I appreciate it. Thank you, very much."

I nod to him again, and he scoots his chair a little closer to hers, his arm wrapping around her shoulders.

"Goodnight," I say quickly, and I step out the window, close it behind me, and launch up into the sky.

Behind me, I hear Lois let out a sharp breath, followed by a quiet, "Goodnight. Be careful out there."

Chapter 47

The world finally gives me a break, and everything is quiet on my nighttime patrols, even overseas. I make it home around 1 a.m., shower, and crawl into bed, exhausted. I fall into a deep, dreamless sleep almost immediately and don't wake again until 6:30 a.m. An entire five and a half hours of sleep.

I don a baseball cap for my quick morning run, now cognizant of the fact that I need to be careful who sees me coming and going. After all, I'm really no longer 'Clark Kent.' As I wend along the shadowed path of the trees and out the other side of the forest, striding easily along at a swift pace, my mind races with the implications of all of this.

Who am I now? I can't just wear blue, red, and yellow spandex everywhere I go. But at the same time, 'Clark Kent' can't simultaneously be at work at the Daily Planet and swiping his debit card at the supermarket. No, I'll definitely have to be more careful now, to avoid being recognized. With a start, I realize I may also need to move. Or at the very least, avoid using the front door as much as possible. Maybe do my grocery shopping out of the area. And the simple logistics of it all are daunting — in particular, the fact that I've already given Clark back his wallet, driver's license, and cell phone. I have some cash, but it's not going to last very long. What will I do then?

My feet stutter slightly on the pavement, but I easily catch myself and keep up my pace. I suppose I'll have to have him lend me the driver's license so I can open a new checking account. The advance from the memoir will be enough money to last for a long time, especially if properly

invested. But this is a conversation he, Lois, and I have not yet had.

I jump over a small puddle in the path, startling a pair of gray and black pigeons pecking at crumbs near the edge of the sidewalk. They flap their wings and launch up into the sky with an indignant flutter, then land again after I've passed by. I nod to a fellow runner, who passes me heading in the opposite direction, and then I follow the sidewalk around to the right. A moment later, my apartment comes into view.

An idea pops into my head, and I let it stew for a moment as I maintain a steady pace for the final few hundred yards of my run. I'll invite them to dinner at my apartment next week. I'll have the memoir finished by then, so I can give Clark the draft to review. Plus he can pick up more clothes if he wants, and we can discuss all of these logistics. I nod to myself as I take the steps up to my apartment two at a time and pull my keys out of my pocket. Then, I hurry inside to shower and change before heading to drop off Lois's birthday present.

Despite all of this uncertainty and a small lingering unease about whether I'll be able to live here like this going forward, something inside of me feels hopeful and... safe. It's almost like a little tickle in my chest, like my breathing is no longer weighed down by the constant barrage of self-doubt and insecurity that would normally be assaulting me at any given time.

It is liberating.

Fifteen minutes later, I hover above Lois's apartment building, her silver-wrapped gift tucked safely under my arm. I land lightly in the alleyway next to her building; spin into gray jeans, a black long-sleeved shirt, and tennis shoes; pull on my old baseball cap; and jog up the front steps. The elevator ride to her floor is fairly quick, and a moment later I find myself standing in front of her door. Swallowing nervously — although, why am I nervous? I'm just here to drop off her gift — I lift my free hand and knock lightly on the door.

From inside the apartment, I hear Lois's voice call, "Just a minute!" The deadbolt then clicks unlocked, and the door inches open as I shift back a step. Lois peeks her head from behind the door. Her hair is twisted up in a towel, and she holds her toothbrush in one hand. She looks surprised to see me; I guess he had neglected to tell her I would be visiting this morning. I hold my breath as I smile tentatively at her.

"Good morning, Lois," I greet.

She bites her lip and stares at me for a few seconds before responding.

"Come in," she says shortly.

I nod and drop my eyes to the floor as I trudge inside. The door shuts behind me, and I raise my eyes and turn to

face her. Her gray terrycloth robe is tied tightly around her midsection, and she wears a pair of matching fuzzy slippers. A drop of water trickles down just in front of her ear, and she reaches up with her free hand and brushes it away. She then gives me a small smile and retreats back toward the hallway.

"Sorry, I'll be right back. Just a minute."

I nod and move farther into the apartment as she disappears. The gift in my hands feels heavy, as though weighed down by the awkwardness of this odd relationship we now have. Breathing deeply to steady myself, I take a seat on her couch and wait patiently. Several minutes later, a now fully clad Lois Lane emerges from the bedroom, her damp hair falling down to frame her face. She wears a dress suit that is one of my favorites — a burgundy jacket and skirt that falls to just below her knees, with a white, slightly low-cut blouse.

As I stand to greet her, I remember why I have a good reason to be nervous. Last night. Right.

"Clark is still getting ready for work," she explains as she moves to the kitchen and begins to pour herself a cup of coffee. Her voice is level and unemotional, and her expression is unreadable. "How are you doing this morning?" She leans back against the counter and sips her coffee. I swallow anxiously and lower my eyes.

"I'm good, I think," I say quietly. With slightly trembling hands, I lift the gift up a bit and step toward her in the kitchen. "Um, I just — I just wanted to stop by and wish you a happy birthday. I, uh, got you this gift. It's not much, but I hope you like it."

I consciously stop myself from talking to avoid babbling, and I close the rest of the distance between us and offer her the gift with a lopsided smile. Her expression softens a bit, and she sets her coffee mug down behind her on the counter.

"Oh, Clark, you didn't have to..." Her voice trails off as our eyes meet.

God, she's so beautiful, I think to myself, staying aware enough to block my thoughts from Clark.

Her dark brown eyes seem to study me for a moment, and I allow myself to hold her gaze. I see no anger in her, but she is guarded, cautious. My chest constricts slightly, and I bite my lip as my eyes close. I promised I'd never betray her trust, but that's exactly what I did yesterday when I went against her wishes and took her and Clark back to Metropolis rather than let them follow Luthor with me.

I feel her take the package from my hands, and I open my eyes again. A small smile graces her lips as she scrutinizes the silver wrapping paper.

"Can I open it now?" Her voice is soft and tentative, and her eyes peek up at me expectantly.

I nod. “Yes, please do. I-I hope you like it, I — ”
Again, I stop myself. “Please do.”

Lois smiles at me and then seems to blink back tears as she lowers her gaze to the gift. Gently, as though to avoid ripping the wrapping paper, she slides her fingers under an edge of the paper, releasing the tape holding the edge closed. She repeats this process for the other side and back and then turns the package over. Her mouth opens slightly as she recognizes the light gray hardcover book. It is well worn and smells of old library shelves, as though it has been sitting unopened for decades. A small smile tugs at the corners of her lips, and she flips the book over to the front cover, her fingers running over the etched letters.

Classical Poetry Anthology, Volume 1.

“I...I can’t...” She lifts her eyes to meet mine briefly and then looks back at the book again. I grin as I watch her expression change from surprise to awe. “How did you find it? I’ve been looking for this book for years.” She opens it up and skims the page.

My right hand reaches up to rub the back of my neck. “Um, well, I came across it at a tiny used bookstore in Bristol, and I knew you had been trying to find it because you mentioned it when we were investigating the death of that poet a couple weeks back. So when I was over in the UK one afternoon, I, uh, popped into a few bookstores. This one was pretty out of the way and tiny. The old man who owned it —”

She raises her eyebrows at me, and I screw my eyes shut as I stop talking abruptly. Her joyous laugh fills the void my silence left, and I slowly open one eye and then the other. She is clutching the book to her chest, her eyes lit up with amusement.

“You are incredible. Thank you, so much, Clark. I love it. This means a lot to me.”

“Well, I —”

She closes the book, sets it next to her coffee mug on the counter, steps toward me, and wraps her arms around my waist in a hug. Her head rests on my chest, and I return the embrace hesitantly.

God, this feels so good, just being so close to her. Just having this friendship. Just having her be in my life.

It is infinitely better. Yes, this...whatever we have here...it is infinitely better than my previous life.

With this realization, I allow myself to relax into the hug, and her arms tighten around me just a little bit more. After a moment, however, I feel Clark’s presence and then hear his footsteps coming from down the hallway. Swallowing, I pull back away from her, and she smiles up at me again as she steps away.

“Good morning!”

His voice sounds cheerful, and I nod to him as I back away from his fiancée a bit. Clark strides confidently into

the kitchen, kisses Lois briefly on the cheek, and then turns to me and offers his hand.

“Good morning,” I reply, returning his handshake. He feels stronger still this morning, and I absently wonder if his powers are coming back.

“*A little bit, I think.*” His thought resonates in my head. “*Slowly though.*” My eyes hold his gaze for a moment, and I nod slightly.

Good. I feel a sense of unease from him, however, and I silently ask, *It is good, right?*

“I should probably be going so you two can finish getting ready for work,” I say quickly, not waiting for his answer. I turn to Lois and smile. “I hope you have a great day, Lois. Happy birthday again!”

“Thank you, Clark.”

To my surprise, she reaches out and gives me another brief hug. I close my eyes as I again allow myself to enjoy the comfort of the embrace.

For a fleeting moment, I remember Lana, my fiancée before my world was turned upside-down by the other Lois Lane, who visited from an alternate dimension and convinced me to use my powers for good. Lana’s hugs — or any touch or kiss or embrace, for that matter — never felt anywhere near as good as this hug. There was always something stiff about her when she was near me. *Freak, alien, abomination.* She’d used all of those words to refer to me at one point or another. Oh, she’d usually try to mask it in a way so as to not make her seem like a terrible person. But her words still haunt me sometimes.

I push away those memories and refocus on the present. Lois has never had any of those thoughts. She accepts me — and her Clark — for who and what we are. And this hug is proof of that. But it is over much too soon, and she steps away and back into her Clark’s arms. I give them both a nod again and turn toward the door.

“Hon, uh, why don’t you go finish up in the bathroom, and I’ll walk Clark out,” Clark suggests. I hear Lois answer with a quick, “Okay, sure,” and her footsteps retreat into the hallway as Clark trots up behind me.

I open the door, shifting toward him as I do, and the unease I sensed earlier is now plastered all over his face.

“What’s wrong?” I ask hastily, my hand gripping the door handle a little harder. I feel the metal bend slightly under my grasp, and I steady myself with a careful breath.

He tips his head out to the hallway, and we step outside the apartment together. The hallway is empty and quiet this early, which is good since the neighbors might not quite understand seeing two Clark Kents standing and chatting together. I can also see the tension in his shoulders more clearly now, accompanied by a slight tick of the muscle in his jaw. He runs a hand through his hair, another nervous gesture that he and I seem to share.

He glances up and down the hall, and then, keeping his voice low, he explains, “Nothing is wrong, per se, but I’m a bit worried about my powers returning.” He hesitates. I wonder why we’re communicating about this verbally and out in the hallway, but I don’t let him hear these thoughts. He must not be ready for Lois to hear his concerns. I frown, and he senses my confusion. His confidence falters, and his voice trembles as he speaks. “I don’t trust myself right now. I...I don’t want to hurt anyone, and I —” He shakes his head, almost violently, and his eyes squeeze shut.

I understand his apprehension. His reaction when Lois accidentally startled him awake and his uncontrolled rage when Nigel had tried to kill Lois are clear indicators that him getting his powers back could be a bit worrisome. And if I am not around, and he loses control of his anger... The thought lingers in my mind, and his, I realize as our eyes meet.

“What can I do to help?” I ask carefully. “And have you talked to Lois about this?” I add softly. I feel him tense up. Guess that’s my answer.

“I...haven’t, yet. But I will,” he promises, lowering his eyes to the floor. “I’m not sure how you can help, except that, uh...” He trails off and shakes his head. “We’re already asking too much of you, Clark. It’s not fair to you to ask more.”

“No,” I interject quickly, shoving my hands into the pockets of my jeans. “No, whatever you need, especially this, I’m here to help. Please tell me what you’re thinking.”

He still stares at the floor, and his weight shifts restlessly from foot to foot. When he answers, his speech is stuttering, which I’ve never heard from him before. “I-I think if you c-could just k-keep yourself open to our, um, connection... You can sense when things are wrong, I think.” He looks up at me, and I nod in response.

If you don’t deliberately block me out.

I don’t know why I switch to telepathic communication to tell him this, but for some reason, I can’t say the words out loud. He seems to understand, however. His jaw tightens, and he lowers his eyes back to the floor.

Quietly, he adds, “I-I don’t trust myself, but I trust you. If I do or seem like I’m going to do anything that I shouldn’t...I trust you to step in and stop me. At least, until I...” He shakes his head again.

Until you...? I press him gently.

“Until I stop having these panic attacks, or anxiety attacks, or whatever they are.”

He knows my thoughts right now, and I know he also understands the flaws in his plan. First and foremost, since he’s been behaving as though he has a form of PTSD, when and whether he is triggered may be unpredictable — it may be hours, days, weeks, or months until another

incident. What actually concerns me more, though, is that once his powers return, I’m not certain my strength would be enough to stop him.

His body shudders slightly, and he switches to telepathic communication. “*You are stronger than me. You will always be stronger than me. I trust in that. And I know you will always do the right thing. You’ve proven that to me.*”

The door opens then, and Lois pokes her head out, her hair now dry and her makeup applied. She looks at us curiously and then addresses her fiancé.

“You okay out here? We should be leaving now if we’re going to be on time for the staff meeting.”

He smiles weakly at her.

“Yes, of course. I’ll be ready in just a minute.”

“Okay,” she answers. She shifts her gaze to me and smiles again. “Thank you again, Clark. I’ll see you around.” And then the door closes again as she disappears back inside the apartment.

“I should probably...” His voice trails off as he motions to the apartment.

“Yeah, of course,” I say quickly. My hands fidget in my pockets. “And, uh, don’t worry about — you know... I’ll stay nearby as much as I can, and I’ll keep an ear out.”

I want to say more. I know we should talk about what he’s doing to reduce his anxiety or understand the root of his panic attacks so we can avoid them all together — and so he can feel better and more stable mentally. We should discuss which of his powers are surfacing. We should talk about all of this with Lois, and probably also discuss whether he’d consider seeing a therapist. But he’s got to get going, and it’s a tough conversation that could be a trigger in itself.

I’ll be nearby, I repeat silently, and then I wave and tip my head to him before retreating down the hallway toward the elevators.

“Thank you.”

I feel the gratitude in his words, and I imagine how scared he must be to have confessed all of this to me. A feeling of hope also grows in me as I realize that, despite everything the three of us have been through together, he has learned to trust me, not only with his own struggles but also with her safety.

He knows I will help him *and* keep Lois safe.

He trusts me with the one thing that matters most to him in this world. And given everything that he has been through — all of the trauma from New Krypton and all the ups and downs since he’s been back — that trust, that friendship, means so much to me.

As I’d told Lois, I’d never had a best friend before. Yet, somehow it seems I may now have two.

After a quick ride down the elevator, I duck into the alleyway next to the apartment building, spin into the suit, and take off into the chilly morning sky toward my apartment, smiling gratefully for this new life I've been gifted.

Chapter 48

The young boy reaches his arms up toward me, tears spilling out of his wide green eyes. Carefully and slowly, I slide my hands under his tiny body. His eyes squeeze shut, but he doesn't make a sound. A quick scan reveals two cracked ribs and a hairline fracture in his clavicle. *Brave kiddo*, I think to myself. He feels almost weightless in my arms, and as I lift off and fly upwards, I adjust my grip on him to ensure I won't cause him any more pain. From about twenty feet above us, his mother cries out to him, but he doesn't respond. *Brave and smart*. He knows not to move. His mother, a young woman about 25 years old with dark blonde hair pulled back into a high ponytail, edges away from the cliff's ledge as I reach her level. I step lightly onto the ground next to her. Her son doesn't move in my arms, and her wild, frantic eyes shift nervously from him to me.

"Is he okay?" Fear causes her voice to tremble.

"Yes, ma'am, he will be," I say gently. "However, I need to get him to a hospital as soon as possible. He has two broken ribs and a fractured collarbone."

"Oh, thank goodness," she sobs. Her hands reach up to wipe the tears from her cheeks. "I-I was watching him so carefully, but he took off chasing a bird and then slipped and —" She shakes her head, presumably to rid herself of the memory. I imagine how terrified she must have been; they'd been hiking alone on this quiet Wednesday morning in a fairly remote region of the Adirondack Mountains, without cell phone reception or other hikers around to help. I'm so glad I'd been flying over on my way home after helping with a runaway train in Montreal when I'd heard her scream.

"He will be fine, ma'am, but I need to get him to the hospital now," I repeat firmly. The young boy shivers in my arms, and I can feel his temperature fluctuating. He may be going into shock. "What is his name, ma'am?"

"Oliver," she answers quickly, brushing more tears off her face. "We call him Ollie."

I nod. "I'll get him to the hospital and then come back for you," I explain. Seeing her alarm, I add, "I will only be two minutes at most. Stay right here, and I'll be right back." She blinks back tears and then nods a quick response. Her son groans in my arms and buries his head into my chest, and I tighten my grip on him ever so slightly and lift off smoothly into the sky, heading back north toward the nearest hospital.

"Mama?" he murmurs. "Where is mama?" We're flying quickly, and the hospital comes into view just ahead of me. Oliver opens his eyes as we descend.

"Your mom will be here in just a minute, kiddo," I reply. My feet land lightly on the ground outside the emergency department doors, and I carry the boy inside. I'm met almost immediately by a nurse, who seems quite stunned to see me.

"Superman, wow, I — what do we have here? John!" she calls over her shoulder. A young man, also a nurse, jumps up from his desk and rushes over to meet us.

"Oliver here took a tumble over the edge of a cliff near Algonquin Peak," I explain in a low voice. Oliver is shaking now. "He fell about twenty feet. He's got two broken ribs and a hairline fracture to his clavicle."

Honestly, he's lucky to be alive, I think. But I don't voice this. The boy is scared enough already.

I lean in toward the nurse, whose name tag reads 'Mandy,' and I say quietly, "He's going into shock. Please hurry and get him stabilized while I fly back to get his mother."

Mandy nods and turns to John. "Go get a gurney, would you, please?" A moment later, John returns, pushing a gurney, and I set the boy down gently. He feels quite cold now, and I warm him with a quick burst of low-energy heat vision. His eyes open partway, and he sees me watching him.

"Ollie, I'm going to go get your mama, okay, kiddo? And these nice nurses are going to take you to see a doctor. Your mama will be here in just a minute, okay?" He doesn't move, but his eyes close again.

"K, Superman. Thank you, Superman," he mumbles, almost sleepily.

I frown. He should be wide awake, not sleepy. I scan him again and am alarmed to find he may have a moderate concussion.

"Nurse, I see now that he's got a head injury as well," I state, keeping my voice steady. I describe what I saw, and the nurse nods.

"We see a lot of those types of injuries here, Superman," she assures me. "Our on-staff ER doctor is also a neurologist. I will pass on the information to him. Oliver is in good hands here."

"Great. I'll bring his mother."

Nurse Mandy nods, and she takes Oliver's hand and begins speaking to him gently as she and John push the gurney back through the double doors to the ER. I turn and jog out of the hospital, then launch myself back into the sky.

Finding his mother again is easy, but she's hysterical when I get there. She is pacing back and forth, too close to the edge of the cliff for my comfort, and her hands grip the

straps of her hiking pack so tightly that her knuckles have turned white. Tears stain her cheeks, which are flushed red. I land a few feet away from her, and she hurries over to me.

“Ollie, is he...?”

I smile tightly at her. I don’t want to worry her, but the head injury has me a bit more concerned than I was earlier.

“He is in capable hands at the hospital,” I say, trying to keep my voice level. “He does have what appears to be symptoms of a concussion in addition to the injuries I mentioned earlier. But the nurses assured me that their doctors specialize in brain injuries just like his.” Her heart races as I describe this new development, but I continue. “Let’s get you there so you can be with him.”

She nods and steps up to me, and I carefully lift her into my arms, extend my protective aura around her, and fly quickly back to the hospital. Nurse Mandy is waiting for us as we land outside the emergency room, and Oliver’s mother almost jumps out of my arms and rushes over.

“My son, Oliver, please take me to see him,” she begs. She is shaking now. Nurse Mandy glances at me briefly and then takes the woman’s hand and starts leading her inside. I watch and listen for a moment as the two women head deeper into the hospital. Mandy is calm and gently explains what is going on with Oliver.

When I’m satisfied that I’ve done all I can, I jump up into the sky and continue on my way back to Metropolis. The mid-morning sunlight peeks through the clouds hovering over the city, and I do a quick sweep of the major freeways on my way back to my apartment.

All is clear, and the city is quiet.

I smile to myself as I float lazily along and remember the loud, unsettled Metropolis I’d encountered when I’d first arrived here. The difference is incredible, and a sort of contentedness grows in me as I realize how my presence here has helped, just like H.G. Wells had said it would.

As I have every morning for the last week and a half since Lois’s birthday, I check in with Clark via our telepathic connection. No words are exchanged; it’s more of a basic wellness check. He is bored, still sitting in a staff meeting, and wishes Perry would wrap it up so he and Lois can get to work. I chuckle and float down onto my balcony.

I spin out of the suit and into my regular clothes as I enter the apartment. Several minutes later, I settle into my chair at the kitchen table with a fresh cup of coffee and a bagel and open my laptop to finish up my work on revisions to the memoir.

As I’d planned, the three of us — Clark, Lois, and I — had met for dinner Friday last week, and in addition to learning a few things about our ‘unique’ family history,

we’d also had a long discussion about the logistics of me living in their world while essentially being Superman full time. Everything had come together just fine; I’d managed to open a new checking account, and we’d gotten a duplicate driver’s license and made plans for going forward. I’d also given Clark the draft of the memoir to review, and he’d returned it with his comments and revisions late last night. Although he said it had been difficult to work his way through the content without dredging up painful memories, he seems to have agreed with the direction I’d taken, and his suggestions are for fairly minor changes. I figure I can finish up the revisions today, assuming that Superman is not needed for any major rescues.

I close my eyes for a moment and listen out around the city and beyond. All is still quiet. Good. I take a long sip of my coffee and get to work.

An hour and a half later, I stand to stretch and refill my coffee as I reach out to Clark.

The memoir is done. I’m sending the draft to your email now.

I can feel agitation on Clark’s end, but no clear response. I wonder what has caused his mood to change from bored and eager to get to work to unsettled and tense in the short amount of time it took me to finalize the draft. I click the send button on the email and then close the laptop as I reach out to him again.

Everything okay? Do I need to stop by?

This time, there is a moment’s hesitation before he answers.

“I’m okay, sorry. This assignment we’re on is frustrating. I’ll check out the changes to your draft and get back to you later today.”

And then I feel our connection drop.

He’s not okay, that much is clear. But is it just frustration? And can he manage himself?

He’s been pretty open with me about his powers returning this last week; mostly, he’s told me about incremental increases in strength and speed, and his freezing breath has returned as well. He’s also been forthcoming about his anxiety and any disconcerting emotions or thoughts he’s had. He seems to feel most anxious or worried when he’s not near enough to Lois or when he’s unsure about her safety. He also had one incident earlier in the week where he struggled to control his anger after his colleague Ralph made an inappropriate comment directed at Lois; Lois mitigated that by removing him from the situation, and he was able to calm down.

But this seems different.

I stand up and spin into the suit. I’ll do a quick fly-by just to check on him, I decide, and then I’ll do my early afternoon patrols.

A few seconds later, I hover over the Daily Planet building. A light rain has started to fall, which makes focusing my superhearing just a little bit more challenging. But I manage.

Clark and Lois are sitting at her desk, immersed in a conversation about the current story they are working on — something about a strike by the dock workers at Metropolis Harbor. Like he told me, they both seem frustrated, and they can't seem to agree on which direction to take with regard to the story. As I watch, he takes a deep breath, rubs the bridge of his nose under his glasses, and nods.

“Okay, Lois, that's fine. We'll —”

I feel a sharp pain in my head, and I close my eyes instinctively. This intense pain, which I quickly realize is his, not mine, is centered at the front of his forehead and is accompanied first by confusion and then fear.

“Clark...?”

I force my eyes back open at Lois's concerned tone, and I watch as he shakes his head, his eyes screwed tightly shut.

“I-I'm fine, Lois. It's just a headache,” he says shakily.

But I know he's not being completely honest with her. I know this feeling he's having and the fear that goes along with it. His heat vision is returning, and if it's anything like my experience of getting my heat vision for the first time many years ago, I know it can be painful and hard to control without clear, strong mental focus, which he definitely doesn't have right now. I can sense that he knows this too.

I want to give him space — to allow him to let me know if he needs my help. So, I stay hovering several hundred feet up above the Planet and watch. However, I feel him start to panic, and I have a sense that he knows he may be about to lose control.

I'm here, I tell him. No response.

“Lois, I need to —” He groans as the pain intensifies. Lois grabs his arm and pulls him to his feet, and they head toward the conference room. She shuts the door behind them and helps Clark to a chair. He quickly removes his glasses and rubs his eyes. I sense rather than see a slightly red tinge to his vision.

“What's going on, Clark?” Lois asks. She pulls up a chair next to his and places her hands on his knees.

“Can't control it. Need help,” he mumbles. His hands grip his head strongly, and they then shift to cover his eyes. There is definitely a slight red glow now.

That's my cue, I suppose.

I fly down through the unlocked window to the newsroom and straight into the conference room. Several people gasp at the sudden breeze as my blue-and-red blur

blasts through the room, but I ignore that and focus on Clark.

“*I can't control it. I don't want to hurt anyone.*,” he communicates to me. His palms are pressed tightly against his eyes now, and his eyes remain shut, but I know he's only got seconds before he can't stop it.

Lois stands up and moves out of my way instinctively. I glance at her briefly and nod, but don't have time to explain. Looping Clark's arm over my shoulders and my arm around his waist, I speed us back out of the building through the open window and veer to the north. A few seconds and several thousand miles later, I land us in an isolated region in the Canadian territory of Nunavut. He almost sighs in relief as hot red lasers blast from his eyes and onto the open ground, which is covered in a thick layer of snow and ice. The ice and snow instantly melt as his heat vision creates a growing crevasse in front of us. A growl escapes his lips as I feel him trying to control the deadly heat.

I move back a step and watch. I know there's nothing I can do now to help; he has to remember how to control it himself.

Although... Maybe I can remind him.

I sense his panic as the heat continues to pour from his eyes, and I place my hand on his shoulder and close my eyes as I concentrate on my own control over my abilities. I feel him connect with me at a deeper level, almost like the very first day he'd been back, when I was able to help take away his pain temporarily, and he seems to tap into my steadiness and certainty. Slowly, the red beams shooting from his eyes lose their intensity, and he blinks several times as his heat vision finally shuts off. He falls to his knees in the snow and drops his head to his chest with exhaustion. My hand slides off his shoulder, but he maintains control. We rest there in silence for a couple minutes. He then exhales sharply and looks up toward me.

“Th-thank you,” he stammers, pushing himself back to his feet. “I thought I could handle it by myself, but...” He allows his thought to trail off as he brushes the snow off his pants.

“No problem,” I reply with a tight smile.

He runs a hand through his hair. “I was 14 when I first got my heat vision,” he says. He crosses his arms over his chest and stands a bit taller, but his voice falters. “I remember I was in the barn, doing chores. I was angry because I wanted to be at the high school football game with my friends, but my dad — he insisted that I finish all of my chores first. We had company, so I couldn't use my speed to get done quickly. My anger triggered it, I think. And then...I couldn't stop it.” He pauses, a grimace clouding his expression. “I nearly burned down the barn. Scared my parents to death.”

I nod. I have a similar story, but I don't know if I want to share. He looks up at me expectantly, however, and I purse my lips and lower my eyes.

"I was 12," I start hesitantly. "The foster family I was staying with at the time, uh, they..."

I shake my head as the memory replays in my mind, and rather than tell him about it, I allow him to see the memory through our telepathic connection. The wife Penny, she yelled a lot. She yelled at her own daughter, and at the dog, and at her husband Bill, and at me. And Bill drank a lot. This particularly evening, he'd come home late, reeking of alcohol. Penny had started screaming at him about being late and drunk, and he'd shouted right back. The noise was too much for my sensitive ears, and I'd tried to leave the house — to go outside to the barn — just to get away from the noise. Bill had grabbed my shoulder and yelled at me to go back to my room, and an intense anger had filled me — anger directed at him and Penny, and at the world and my situation, and at whoever was responsible for my parents having been killed — basically, all of the pent-up feelings I'd had since my parents died. I'd felt heat growing in my eyes, and a sharp pain had erupted right at the front of my forehead. I'd shoved Bill away from me and run outside to the barn. And just as I'd barely made it inside the barn doors, red beams of intense heat had blasted from my eyes. The stacks of hay in the barn had erupted in flames, and the fire had quickly spread through the rest of the barn. Yelling and shouting from the house and frantic footsteps approaching the barn as Bill and Penny ran out to see what had happened had jolted me out of the daze I'd been in, and I'd managed to calm myself somehow and control the heat vision just before they'd busted open the barn doors. I'd suffered minor burns on my hands when I'd tried to stop the heat beams by covering my eyes, but I was otherwise unscathed. They'd pulled me out of the barn and called the fire department and police.

The next day, my social worker had removed me from their home and placed me in a new foster home — my fifth in only two years. No one had believed me that the fire had been an accident, and I was only able to avoid being sent to the juvenile detention center because my dad had been a friend of the judge handling my case.

I swallow back the painful memory and close my eyes.

"Oh, man, that's rough," Clark says quietly.

I laugh bitterly and nod in agreement. "Yeah, it wasn't my best day." I shift the focus back to him. "Are you good? In control now? Maybe you can test it."

He scowls and turns away from me toward an undisturbed patch of snow. A second later, a faint red glow narrows from his eyes to a single point in the snow, and the

snow begins to melt. He blinks it away and turns back to me.

"I'm good now," he says. His arms cross over his chest again, but this time, he tucks his hands under his arms and adds, "Although I'm still not completely invulnerable, and it's freezing out here, so maybe we can get back to Metropolis?"

"Right, of course," I reply with a crooked grin. I step toward him, wrap one arm around his waist, extend my protective aura to include him, and then launch us up into the air, heading back due south.

Chapter 49

Lois is waiting for us when we get back to the Planet, pacing the length of the conference room. Since Clark is not wearing his glasses, I again fly straight into the conference room, and a collective hush falls over the whole newsroom. I set Clark down carefully, facing away from the windows, and he quickly reaches out to grab his glasses, which sit on the conference table. Lois hurries over and shuts the door behind us.

"What was that about?" she blurts out as soon as the door clicks shut. She rushes over to Clark and wraps her arms tightly around his waist. He returns the embrace as he adjusts his glasses and then rests his head gently on top of hers.

"Sorry, hon, we didn't have time to explain," he responds hesitantly. I can sense that he's choosing his words carefully. He murmurs a quiet explanation of our unexpected outing into her ear, and she listens silently, nodding into his chest on occasion.

Outside the conference room, the other reporters gather in small groups, whispering to each other. I suppose they may not be used to seeing Superman in the newsroom, and my sudden hasty flights through their domain were not exactly subtle. Now somewhat self-conscious, I stand up a little taller and cross my arms over my chest, maintaining a stern expression quite different from Clark's. My eyes meet Perry White's as he approaches the conference room, and I give him a tight smile and nod before turning back to Lois and Clark.

I clear my throat quietly. "Perry is coming. I should probably be going," I say. Lois shifts in Clark's embrace and glances toward the door to the conference room as it opens slowly. Perry pokes his head in first and then steps all the way into the conference room and closes the door behind him.

"Superman, well, I'm a bit surprised to see you here," he drawls, shoving his hands into his pockets. He eyes me and then looks at Clark and Lois, his gaze lingering on Clark just a moment longer than it probably should. "Is, uh, everything okay?"

Neither Clark nor Lois responds right away, so I straighten up a bit taller and clear my throat. “Hello, Mr. White. Yes, everything is just fine. I apologize for the commotion.” Without pausing, and still maintaining my air of confidence, I continue, “I needed to consult with Clark on something, and time was of the essence. I should be going now. Excuse me.”

Clark moves away from Lois slightly and adjusts his glasses again. I tilt my head toward them and Perry, and I then head toward the door.

“Thank you again, Superman,” Lois interjects before I exit the room. I stop and give her a carefully controlled smile and nod. Her eyes meet mine briefly, and I see a sincere gratitude in them.

Clark’s voice in my head echoes her thoughts. “*Yes, thank you very much. We’ll touch base with you later today.*”

Sure thing. I’ll be around if you need anything else.

Then I fly out the open window of the newsroom, mindful to not make such a disruption as when I had entered and exited earlier. Behind me, I hear Perry exclaim, “What in the Sam Hill was that about?” I chuckle to myself as I soar up over the clouds to avoid the rain, which now pounds down into the streets of the busy city, and I scan the area to see if I’m needed. As usual, the sudden downpour has caused several car accidents, which could use super help, and I swoop down through the clouds toward the worst of the wrecks — a pile up involving four cars and an eighteen-wheeler.

Several trips to the hospital later, the wreck is cleared, and traffic is moving again. I work my way around the region, preventing multiple other accidents, moving cars out of ditches, and transporting injured drivers and passengers to the hospital when necessary. Finally, about an hour after leaving the Planet, the rain lets up, and the Sun again peeks through the clouds.

I spot another impending accident as a driver hydroplanes and loses control of his red sedan. The vehicle skids sideways and begins to flip; time seems to slow around me as I speed down out of the clouds and catch the car mid-air. From inside the car, the driver’s eyes widen as he sees me. I smile at him and nod as I slowly lower the vehicle back onto the road. Around us, the other cars have stopped, their drivers gawking at my feat of strength and speed. The car’s tires touch the ground, and the man inside rolls down his window and mumbles a quick, “Thank you, Superman.”

“You’re welcome, sir. Please drive carefully,” I respond formally.

As I move to the edge of the road so traffic can start up again, a sudden intense feeling of unease hits me. I glance around, but nothing seems amiss in the immediate area. I

launch up into the sky, instantly hovering hundreds of feet above the city, and I scan through all of the sounds reaching my ears. Nothing.

“*What’s going on?*” Clark’s voice has an urgent undertone, as though he senses my unease as well.

I don’t know. I just —

The sound then hits me, jarring me so deeply that I drop about fifty feet straight down. It is a heartbeat. An irregular, weak heartbeat. Growing weaker. And coming from the southwest. I turn in the air as I stabilize my altitude. Jonathan Kent.

At a speed I’ve rarely used within the Earth’s atmosphere, I fly toward Smallville, Kansas, my keen senses scanning ahead of me. I’m there in less than a second, and I slow down abruptly as I land on the porch to the old farmhouse. I don’t bother knocking; instead, I jog in through the front door, my red boots squeaking on the freshly cleaned wood floors. Jonathan Kent lies on his back in the kitchen, and Martha kneels next to him, tears streaming down her face.

The heartbeat I heard just seconds earlier is now silent.

Oh, God, no.

“*Dad?*” Clark’s alarm is palpable.

“Clark, please, please help him,” Martha begs, her voice hoarse.

“Clark, what is going on?”

A thousand thoughts run through my mind. The most important one is the one I latch onto. He cannot die. He will not die. No, I will not let him die.

My eyes meet Martha’s briefly, and I kneel down next to her and do a quick scan. There is a blockage in his coronary artery, and his heart has stopped. He needs to get to the hospital right away. I hurriedly lift him into my arms and stand.

“He’s gone into cardiac arrest,” I say quietly but firmly. “I’ll get him to the hospital and then come back to get you.”

Martha pulls herself to her feet and then into a chair at the kitchen table as she nods in response. There is no time to waste; I extend my protective aura around him and fly as fast as I dare toward Wichita. Jonathan remains limp and deathly silent in my arms. Within seconds, we arrive at the emergency department of Wichita Hospital, and I fly right in through the open double doors of the entrance and up to the nurse’s station. The nurse on call jumps to her feet.

“Superman!”

“This man needs a doctor immediately,” I say, struggling to keep the emotion out of my voice. “He’s gone into cardiac arrest. His heart stopped less than a minute ago. He has a blockage in his coronary artery and a history of heart disease. Please hurry.” As I explain this, two

doctors and another nurse hurry up to me with a gurney. I set Jonathan down gently, and they immediately open up his shirt and get to work trying to restart his heart. My jaw tightens as I watch them roll the bed away down the hallway, the head doctor yelling instructions.

“Clark, what is happening?”

“Superman?” I flinch as the head nurse touches my arm. “Sorry, Superman. I just wanted to know if you happen to know the man’s name?”

I nod and again try to detach myself from all of the emotions I’m feeling and those of Clark. He is terrified.

One minute, I think to him, controlling my own fear.

“His name is Jonathan Kent,” I explain to the nurse. “He’s 57 years old, from Smallville, Kansas. I’ll be right back with his wife, so she can tell you his medical history and what type of medications he is on.”

The nurse writes a few notes on the sheet on her clipboard and nods. “Thank you, Superman.”

As I turn and speed back out of the hospital, my superhearing picks up a jolt and then a weak heartbeat, followed a second later by a sigh of relief from the on-call doctor. “We’ve got him back. Now let’s keep it that way. Nurse!”

I ball my hands into fists as I veer toward the Kent farm. If I hadn’t heard it... I shake my head.

“Please, Clark. I’m imagining the worst here, and I’m not sure what to do. What is going on?”

I land on the porch of the farmhouse, where Martha is waiting. Her hands grasp her purse anxiously, and she looks up at me, terror in her eyes.

Your father went into cardiac arrest. I got him to the hospital, and they have already restarted his heart. I expect they will need to do emergency surgery. I’m taking your mom now, and then I’ll come get you. Give me a few minutes. Sorry for the delay.

“Oh, God.” Our connection falters, and I sense he’s feeling lightheaded now. But Lois is with him.

I refocus on Martha.

She stands stiffly, tears still staining her cheeks, and her kind blue eyes search mine for answers. She steps toward me, but her legs almost give out, and I move to her side and wrap my arm around her waist.

“Martha, I got you,” I murmur, supporting her gently. “Jonathan is at Wichita Hospital, and they’ve already got his heart beating again. Let’s get you there to be with him. Okay?”

“Thank you, Clark,” Martha says shakily.

I lift her into my arms. I’ve not known her for very long, but I’ve never seen her seem so fragile. She shivers in my arms, and I tighten my grip around her ever so slightly as I raise us up into the sky and head off toward Wichita, increasing my speed gradually to avoid surprising

her. She closes her eyes and clings to me as we fly, and I hear her heart racing. When we are about half way there, I shift my focus back to the hospital. The doctor and several nurses still mill around Jonathan in one of the procedure rooms. Beeping monitors indicate his heart is beating much more regularly and evenly, and his blood pressure is actually quite close to normal. We approach the hospital as I hear the doctor discussing the possibility of an emergency coronary artery bypass graft surgery.

A nurse meets us as I land lightly just inside the entrance.

“Mrs. Kent?” she asks.

Martha allows me to help steady her as I set her down, and she then turns to the nurse and nods.

“Yes. My husband, Jonathan, is he...?” Martha’s voice trails off as fresh tears fall. I keep an arm around her waist to support her as her legs shake.

The nurse smiles kindly at her. “The doctors have him stabilized right now, but they want to discuss options with you,” she explains in a calm voice. The woman steps up to Martha and takes her arm. “Thank you, Superman, for bringing her here. I’ll help her back to the waiting room now so she can talk with the doctors. Is that okay, Mrs. Kent?”

“Yes, yes,” Martha says quickly. She moves away from me, but then glances back briefly as the nurse leads her away and adds, “Thank you, Superman.”

“You’re welcome, Mrs. Kent,” I respond quietly. My shoulders tighten as I struggle to control my facial expressions and avoid showing too much emotion. Martha turns away again and lets the nurse lead her back through the double doors to another waiting room closer to the procedure rooms.

My job isn’t done, I remember, as I feel Clark’s anxiety building in my mind. I connect with him briefly. *I’m on my way.*

“We’re on the roof of the Planet,” he informs me. From the short communication, I can feel his heart racing as he paces. Lois is next to him, but he almost seems unaware of her.

I hurry out of the emergency room doors and launch into the sky back toward Metropolis.

Chapter 50

I know he’s not my dad, but the apprehension I feel while waiting for the surgery is overwhelming. I sit against the wall on the roof, my red cape wrapped around me tightly, and I consciously block out all sounds except the steady beeping of his heart monitors and the instructions of the head doctor performing the surgery.

Hours pass.

Occasionally, I feel Clark's anxiety as well, feeding my own. He, Lois, and Martha sit in the waiting room, hugging each other and talking in quiet voices. I sense Clark trying to be strong for his mother, and I almost wonder if he's sort of offloading some of his anxiety onto me. I'm glad they have each other, and I wish it wouldn't be so weird for Superman to be seen in the waiting room with them, because I could certainly use a hug as well.

The surgery seems to progress well, although I don't really know much about cardiac surgery. I just know I can hear the doctors' voices sounding steady and upbeat. I communicate this to Clark, and it calms him a bit.

Finally, from the operating room, I hear the head doctor announce, "And that's a wrap. Let's get him closed up. Good job, everyone." And I let out an audible sigh of relief.

They just finished. Doctor says the surgery was successful. You'll probably be hearing from them shortly, I tell Clark.

I glance down through the building and to the waiting room. Clark, who had been sitting with his head in his hands, stands abruptly.

"Thank you. Thank you, so much," he replies.

I watch as he walks over to Lois and Martha, who are standing across the room next to the vending machines. He embraces both of them and whispers the news into their ears. Martha holds him tighter and cries into his chest, and Lois places her hand comfortingly on his back.

I close my eyes and settle back against the wall again. I imagine how differently the day would have turned out if I'd not been around, and I shudder. He's not my dad. But I care about him just as much, despite how he may feel about me.

Several minutes later, I hear the doctor come out to speak to them. He repeats what I'd told them; the surgery was successful. Jonathan is expected to make a full recovery, although his underlying heart disease will continue to remain a problem. The doctor emphasizes that he needs to avoid stressful situations as much as possible. I stop listening for a moment as my stomach lurches. I've caused him so much stress in the last month and a half. Is this my fault?

"No. Not in the slightest. No more than it's my fault for leaving for New Krypton in the first place."

I hadn't realized I was sharing my thoughts with Clark, but I blink several times as his words settle within me. Just knowing that he doesn't blame me for this is encouraging.

Below me, the doctor finishes up his explanation and tells them that Jonathan will be able to have visitors in about an hour, although he may not wake up from the surgery for some time still. Clark thanks the doctor, shakes his hand, and then again embraces Lois and Martha. Lois

kisses his cheek and then steps away to make a phone call. Clark doesn't let his mother go, but I hear his voice in my head again, filled with gratitude.

"You saved his life by getting him here so quickly. I cannot thank you enough." There is a slight hesitation, and then he adds, *"I know you feel like an outsider still, but you are part of this family now. I wish you could be down here with us. I know Lois and Mom feel the same way. Thank you, so much."*

My thoughts are jumbled and lack coherence, but I try to form sentences to respond to him.

I lost my father when I was 10. I wasn't fast enough to save him or my mom. I'm incredibly grateful that I've been given this second chance to do right by them. They both mean so much to me, even though I'm not their son. Please tell Martha for me.

Without words, I feel him agree. I stand, my legs almost feeling stiff from having been sitting in the same uncomfortable position for hours, and I gaze out over the city of Wichita, Kansas.

It is late afternoon by now, and the Sun is beginning its descent in the west. I don't want to face the darkness of nighttime that I'd find back in Metropolis right now; I need the sunlight to fill and energize me. With a quick final glance down at the three people huddled together in the waiting room of the emergency department, I launch up into the sky and head west, following the Sun.

Epilogue

I pull on my old Nikes and a baseball cap and step out onto my porch into the cold December morning. Ahead of me, Lois jumps out of her Jeep and waves. I smile at her and trot down the stairs toward her car.

"Good morning, Ms. Pulitzer Prize winner," I tease, jogging up to her.

Her smile lights up her face, and she zips up her running jacket as she steps around the front of the vehicle onto the sidewalk.

"Good morning, Mr. Pulitzer Prize winner," she replies. She playfully punches me in the arm and then takes off jogging down the street. "Catch me if you can!" I chuckle and hurry after her.

This is my new routine. My new morning routine. And I'm loving it.

I run alongside her as we head toward the park. Her breath is visible in the chilly air, and her cheeks are red with effort. She glances at me briefly and then shifts her gaze ahead again as we turn a corner. I'd almost expected not to see her today, since we'd gotten back from New York late last night after the Pulitzer Prize Award Ceremony. But I'm glad she made time for me this morning.

“Is Clark in Smallville again?” I ask casually, raising my voice just enough for her to hear me as she moves ahead of me onto the single-track trail going through the middle of the park.

“Yeah, he went again this morning,” she says, her breathing labored. She slows to a walk, and I move up beside her as the trail opens up a bit. “Now that he can, you know...fly, he’s been going every morning to help his dad out with the chores around the farm, like you did for the first week after Jonathan’s surgery. And then later today, when he’s done at the farm, he’s going to meet that therapist we found. That one who specializes in PTSD.”

I nod and stop next to her as she turns toward me.

“Good. That’s really good. For Clark, I mean.”

Her eyes light up with a brief smile.

“Yeah, I’m hoping...” She lets out a small sigh and then shakes her head a bit and changes the subject. “He’s doing well, Jonathan is. I know he still hasn’t talked to you, but give him more time.”

I lower my eyes and mumble, “Yeah.”

Her hand grips my shoulder lightly, and I look up to meet her eyes.

“He will come around, Clark. He is just —”

“Stubborn as an elephant?” I interject.

She smiles back at me. “Yes. Martha told you that, I assume?”

“Clark did too. And he said the same as you — to just give Jonathan more time.” I start walking again down the path, and Lois follows me. Her arm loops through mine, and I briefly close my eyes. “I’ll give him as much time as he needs, Lois. It’s just...hard.”

“I know,” she says. She tilts her head to rest on my shoulder as we walk, and we continue for a few moments in silence. She then stops again and turns toward me. “You know, we all are so thankful that you’re here. I don’t tell you that enough. Everything you’ve done for us — I really appreciate...all of it.” Tears shine at the edges of her eyes, but she blinks them back.

“Lois...” Just saying her name, knowing I’m here with her, fills me with hope. I smile — a real, genuine smile that reaches my eyes, like his smile. “I’m grateful to be here every day. Life is strange, I’ll admit. But here, with you and Clark and Martha and Jonathan, I feel more whole and more welcome and more...loved than I remember ever feeling since my parents died.” I pause as my chest constricts. I haven’t voiced these feelings to her before, or to anyone for that matter. Clark knows, thanks to our weird telepathic connection thing, but not because I deliberately told him. “So, I, uh... Thank *you*, Lois.”

Her smile grows, and I study her eyes for a moment. They are filled with kindness, compassion, and something uniquely ‘Lois.’ Fierce determination and loyalty, maybe.

God, she is beautiful. Inside and out.

I drop my gaze to the ground. Clark is probably the luckiest man alive, true. But I’m a close second.

“Come on, Mr. Kent, let’s finish our loop. In fact, maybe we’ll go for that extra mile today. I’m feeling a bit spunky.” She giggles, releases my arm, and takes off again at a brisk jog.

I watch her run for a moment before picking up my pace to catch up. And we race along next to each other, just enjoying the morning and each other’s company. I feel hopeful. And content. And full.

This is my new reality. And it sure is better than my old one. Quirks and all.

THE END