

## Anchor: Part II – Kal-El

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Rating: PG-13

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Summary: In this second installment of *Anchor*, Kal-El makes the ultimate sacrifice to save the people of New Krypton from the atrocities of Lord Nor's attempted coup. His return to Earth, made possible through a series of chance events involving his doppelganger from another universe, lands him back home with those who care about him most. Will he be able to recover the life he once had? Or will his experiences on New Krypton prove to be too much to handle, even for Superman? An alternate universe story. Part two of three.

Story Size: 113,080 words (594Kb as text)

Read the previous story in the series: [Anchor: Part I Clark Kent](#).

*Author's note:* When I started writing *Anchor*, I did not intend for it to be more than a one-part story. However, about half way through, I realized I wanted to explore more than was possible from the first-person narrative I'd created; I wanted to see the events as perceived by the other two main characters. Thus, even as I finished writing part I, I started working on part II and then part III.

I'd like to think that this story is quite different from part I, even though it covers many of the same events as part I. And although there is a lot of overlap, there are also many parts that are *not* shown in part I.

The story is rated PG-13 for depictions of violence.

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### 1

Three months has seemed like an eternity. And I guess it may as well have been. I've changed. Hell, almost everything has changed, except how much I love her and miss her.

Today is the day, however. Today is the day we are expecting to finish this war. And if I'm able to complete my mission — the mission I was brought here to do — then I'll get to go home. After three long months, I'll finally get to hold her again and tell her how much I love her.

*My lovely Lois. I miss you so much. My fingers trace along the chain around my neck, but I stop myself before I can relive our final day together in my apartment, when*

she gave me this precious gift. It seems like a lifetime ago. And it's too painful.

A firm, decisive knock comes at my door. I don't move from my seat at my desk, but I know it's Lieutenant Ching.

"Lord Kal-El, our troops are all in position, and we are ready to go," he says in crisp, clear Kryptonian. As always, his tone is direct and emotionless. They are all like this, the Kryptonians. In fact, everything here is bland, cold, and detached.

I miss colors and laughter and smiling.

Without turning around, I answer him in his native tongue, which still feels foreign to me. "Thank you, Lieutenant Ching. I will meet you at the transport vessel shortly."

My voice is impersonal and detached now too. I've learned that this is how they prefer it. Emotions confuse them. Anger and fear are to be kept concealed, and even kindness and love must be hidden. Zara assures me that this is Kryptonian nature — my true nature. Although I disagree, I've realized that I'm taken much more seriously if I act like them. Emotionless, logical, direct, and impassive.

I close the journal in front of me and set my pen next to it on the desk. My entry for this morning is short, and a nagging feeling in the pit of my stomach warns me that I won't be back to finish it later. However, that feeling has been haunting me for several weeks now, and I've gotten pretty good at ignoring it. After all, I have to come back later. There is no other option. I can't die here on this barren, hot, desolate planet. I have to return to her. I made her a promise, and I intend to keep it.

I close my eyes and try, as I do every morning, to project my thoughts across galaxies and light-years of empty space. I try to reach her with a simple message. *Lois, I love you. I will be home soon.* And just like every morning, I cannot sense her. It's not surprising. After all, telepathy doesn't work between Kryptonians and humans. However, a great emptiness fills me, and with desperation, I try one more time.

Something different happens. For a moment — a very brief moment, only milliseconds maybe — I'm hovering in a familiar red, yellow, and blue spandex suit over a brightly lit city, a regal red cape billowing out behind me. The city is Metropolis. But something is off. I can't pinpoint the difference I perceive before the vision ends abruptly and I'm back in my sterile white room, sitting in my rigid white chair at my plain white desk. My eyes open, and I scan the room. Nothing has changed here. But what was that vision? And how did I do that? It was me hovering in the sky. But at the same time, it wasn't me.

I shake my head and stand. My gaze falls on my journal and pen sitting in the middle of my desk. Quickly,

because I know they are all waiting for me at the transport bay, I move the journal to the corner of the desk, where its two predecessors sit neatly, and I place the pen into a drawer. I have one task today, and I need to finish it. I have to be successful. Everything depends on it. Everything depends on me. I clench my jaw and force the unease out of my mind.

I will not fail.

And I will not be distracted by...whatever that vision was.

I pull a plain, well-fitted white tunic over my usual black suit, emblazoned with the familiar ‘S’ shield of my family group, the House of El. Ching insists that I wear the white tunic; it is woven from a special material that he says will protect my thoughts from intruders as long as it remains undamaged. He’s probably right that I need it. Although I’m quite skilled at telepathic communication by now, everything is more difficult in the heat of battle when you’re trying to avoid getting stabbed or shot or blown up from multiple angles. But the tunic also blocks out friendly contacts, so now I’m unable to communicate with Ching, Zara, or any of my other officers.

I tug the tunic straighter and then strap my dagger onto my right hip. The rest of my weapons will be given to me when I reach the transport bay. The dagger has already saved my life more than once. Like the tunic, it has some special protective type of energy, though I don’t completely understand it.

I glance around the room one more time. I feel like I’m forgetting something, which isn’t an unusual feeling for me, but it is a bit disconcerting right now. I swallow hard and turn toward the door as I clear my mind and force myself to focus on my task at hand.

Today is the day. I will meet Lord Nor on the battlefield, and I will kill him.

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## 2

The long corridors of the palace are white and sterile, like my room. I walk at a brisk pace through the passages, occasionally passing someone walking the opposite direction. As is prescribed by my position, anyone passing me stops, kneels, and bows their head with respect. And as is prescribed by my position, I continue walking without acknowledging them. This usually bothers me. However, right now, I’m too fixated on my goal to allow myself to worry about this awkward formality.

I make the final turn around a corner, and the space opens up into a massive room — the transport bay. The gray walls of the room rise up maybe thirty meters, accommodating a variety of transport vessels, equipment, and machines. However, most of the transports are closer

to the battle front right now, ready to move troops and prisoners as needed, and the huge room seems somewhat empty. To my left, several officers kneel and bow their heads as I stride in. I continue on straight toward the front of the huge room, where my personal transport vessel will be waiting.

As I pass another row of officers, who again kneel and bow as I pass, I notice Lieutenant Ching waiting for me up ahead, an unusually taut expression on his face. I carefully control my own expression to avoid showing any concern. I nod a greeting to him, and he bows formally before joining me on my march.

“He is there,” Ching says quietly in English. Not everyone here speaks or understands English, but Ching will sometimes use my native language to make me feel more at ease, I know. And I need that little bit of home right now. His words send a chill down my spine.

“You are sure?” I ask, switching back to Kryptonian. It is a dumb question, I realize, and Ching doesn’t answer immediately. I know him well enough by now to know that he wouldn’t say something like that if it weren’t true. We stop in front of a silver-colored pod, about ten feet tall and large enough to transport maybe fifteen soldiers. Or one commanding officer and his lieutenant.

“My Lord Kal-El, yes, Lord Nor and his officers have been spotted by our drones. They are atop Ganadar Plateau, as we had postulated,” Ching explains. He reaches into a container next to the transport vessel and pulls out a long broadsword, which he hands to me carefully. The heavy three-foot-long blade glistens black and, as always, feels alive and malevolent in my hand. He then pulls out another blade for himself, which he sheaths in a scabbard attached to his belt, and motions me toward the transport vessel.

I begin to follow him up the ramp into the transport. From behind me, rapid footsteps approach, and I stop one step from the top of the ramp and turn around. A woman about my age with dull green eyes and long brown hair tied up in a neat braided bun halts at the base of the ramp. Her dark gray dress is tied with a woven cord around her waist, and a green sash drapes over her right shoulder. She kneels and bows her head.

“My Lord, peace be with you.”

I close the distance between us and place my hand on her shoulder, the signal that I have acknowledged her and that I will speak with her. I swallow back bile at this custom, as I always do, but Zara stands up solemnly, emotionless and looks up at me expectantly.

“Lady Zara,” I greet without a smile. I clasp my hands in front of myself formally, and my jaw tightens as I watch her lower her eyes submissively. “To what do I owe this visit?”

“My Lord, my husband, I have come to see you off,” she explains quietly. My shoulders tense; she knows I do not appreciate being addressed as ‘husband,’ and yet, she has deliberately done so. Her eyes dart past me to Ching and then back to the floor in front of her. I bite back a retort and turn away from her.

“I appreciate your taking the time, Lady Zara,” I say brusquely.

I immediately hate myself for the hint of anger in my tone, but I can’t help it. I march back up the ramp and shoulder my way past Ching, who stands staring at Zara with a carefully controlled expression. I pause next to Ching and add quietly in English, “Be quick about it. We have somewhere to be.”

And then I step forward to the weapons container and press my palm to the sensor. It beeps as it recognizes my signature and opens to reveal a mass of guns, grenades, drones, and other gadgets. I pretend to search around the weapons, keeping my back to them, but I hear Zara step onto the ramp and Ching approach her. They keep their voices low, as always, but as I’m only a few feet away, I hear every word of their brief verbal exchange.

“Lieutenant Ching, peace be with you in your quest today,” Zara whispers. Her tone is softer than normal, though still formal.

“Lady Zara, peace be with you. Lord Kal-El and I appreciate your support,” Ching responds in a low voice.

There is a pause in their verbal communication, though I know they are communicating silently with each other now. I pick out a lightweight nanoray gun to complement my broadsword as I wait for them to finish their conversation. Even before we’d left Earth, I’d realized Zara and Ching were in love — or at least as ‘in love’ as Kryptonians can be. Since Zara was already betrothed to me at birth, they’d both hidden their feelings from everyone, including each other, until I’d given them permission to be together, albeit covertly. The Elders and Council would never understand or condone such a relationship, particularly because Zara is my ‘wife’ and I’m their leader.

I’m not angry about this; on the contrary, I’m glad they have each other. But their timing today is terrible, and I’m in a bit of an irritable mood. Also, Zara’s use of ‘my husband’ to address me feels like a purposeful attack. To her, it is just a word for our formal relationship as the ruling couple. To me, the word means much, much more. It means love and commitment and trust. She and I have had this conversation. She usually respects my preference to not be addressed in this way. Yet today of all days, she decides to use the two words I’ve asked her not to use. I angrily holster the gun on my right hip next to my dagger and close the weapon container.

“Lieutenant Ching, we must go now,” I say firmly, turning around to face them. They stand about two feet apart, their eyes locked on each other. At my words, Ching blinks once and then nods.

“Of course, my Lord.”

Zara lowers her eyes again and bows slightly. She glances at me through long eyelashes, a trace of concern hidden in her eyes. My jaw tightens again.

“Lady Zara, stay safe. We will meet you back here when our task is complete,” I tell her, and I turn back toward the control panel at the front of the transport vessel, next to the weapons container. I click a couple buttons, and the vessel hums to life. A string of white lights brightens up the space, and the front surface of the pod phases out into a transparent material, revealing the open doors of the transport bay. A reddish hue from the mid-morning sunlight illuminates the path toward the outside world, and my stomach churns slightly as I imagine the blazing heat we’ll be stepping into out on the battlefield.

“I appreciate your words, my Lord,” Zara answers formally. I suppose she actually means it. She knows I will do everything in my power to see the end to this bloody war, despite what that means, and she knows I will protect my people, including Ching, to the best of my ability. I hear her footsteps retreat behind me, and Ching steps up to the control panel.

He addresses me in English as he presses several buttons to close the ramp and get the vessel moving forward. “Please accept my apologies, Lord Kal-El. Lady Zara and I intended to meet earlier this morning, but I was held up in a meeting with the Council.”

“You don’t have to apologize to me, Ching. Let’s just get going,” I say, also in English, my tone much less formal now that it is just the two of us. Without waiting for him to respond, I press a green button etched with a diamond-shaped symbol, and the vessel rises off the ground several feet and then launches off out of the transport bay.

I shudder inwardly and close my eyes as I focus on my goal. We have about ten minutes until we will reach our destination, and I’ll need that whole ten minutes to prepare myself mentally. Ching navigates the vessel silently as I run through my usual routine of visualizing the battle to come.

I see myself and Ching at the battlefield, leading the way through the last stronghold of Nor’s troops to finally reach Lord Nor himself. In my visualization, we move through the enemy lines with ease. Those standing in my way are an afterthought. This does not upset me; I am beyond that now. Killing in battle is a necessity I have accepted.

At least, that is what I must tell myself.

I tighten my hold on my broadsword as I imagine Ganadar Plateau, a barren hill overlooking the once-great city of New Kandor. I feel the heat and wind atop the hill, and I screw my eyes shut as I imagine how Nor will look in person. I've only ever seen him through holographic projections, but I expect him to be tall, confident, hostile, and condescending. Ching has told me he is agile and extremely skilled in battle, and I expect nothing less. After all, he has trained for this moment his entire life. My shoulders tense as I try to avoid reminding myself that I've only been training for less than three months.

I am strong. I can do this. I will do this.

These are the reminders I need.

I visualize my deadly nanotech-coated broadsword slicing through Nor's armor with ease. Blood spills on to the ground in front of me, and Nor falls to his knees and then collapses completely. And cheers erupt from my soldiers behind me, celebrating the death of a would-be tyrant at the hands of their leader.

I feel nauseous.

My eyes fly open. No, I can do this. I will do this. I have to do this.

*"He must die, Kal. That is the only way."* Ching's clear words from a heated conversation we'd had nearly two months ago echo in my head, fueling my determination.

Of course, I had argued with him at the time, shakily insisting, *"There has to be another option. We have to break this cycle of bloodshed. There needs to be peace."*

But he had raised his voice in an odd moment of passion, switching to English for my benefit. *"Killing him is the only way to bring peace, Lord Kal-El."*

He must die. That is the only way. Killing him is the only way to bring peace. Death is a necessity.

I will kill Nor today.

I am no Superman.

Not anymore.

"I am ready, Lieutenant Ching."

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### 3

Next to me, Ching stands up taller and slows the vessel as we approach the battlefield. Our army stretches out around us, gathered and at attention.

"We have arrived, my Lord," Ching says.

I nod and sheath my sword on my left hip, and together, Ching and I step over to the ramp to exit the vessel. Ching takes his customary place one step behind me on my righthand side, and I swallow hard and fix a controlled, detached expression on my face as the ramp lowers. A line of officers waits just outside the vessel, and as I step out onto the top of the ramp, a blast of hot air bombarding me, the officers kneel in unison. Behind them,

the entire army — over one thousand men — follows suit, bending down to rest one knee on the hard, unforgiving ground.

"Lord Kal-El!"

The sound that erupts from the massive battalion is deafening, and I have to force myself not to flinch. I look out over the soldiers gathered in front of me and raise my own voice, the language of my ancestors rolling easily off my tongue.

"Stand and fight with me, great warriors of New Krypton! Today, we shall finish what we started and return peace to this planet — to our home! Today, we shall defeat Lord Nor and his followers!"

The troops all push themselves back to their feet and begin chanting, "Kal-El! Kal-El! Kal-El!", stomping their feet in unison. The ground under my feet shakes, even as a dry, hot wind whips around us. I feel Ching's presence at my back, and he motions to me. The row of officers splits off into groups, moving quickly into position with their platoons as the chanting dies down.

Ching and I march toward the leading edge of the group, up a slight slope overlooking a vast valley bathed in red sunlight. I gaze out over the land as I pull my sword out of its sheath and my nanoray gun out of its holster. About five hundred meters ahead of us, across the barren, dry land, a large army marches toward us, creating an orange-tinged cloud of dust that envelops them. Farther away, Ganadar Plateau rises above the valley. I cannot see anyone atop the flat hill because of the distance; however, a heavy line of soldiers and artillery at the base of the hill suggests that it will not be easy to get through to the top. Beyond Ganadar Plateau, the city of New Kandor is on fire, flames and smoke billowing up from the two twin towers at the city's center.

Next to me, Ching pulls a small quarter-sized black chip out of his pocket and presses his thumb into its middle. The chip morphs into a large, sleek multi-laser blaster gun — his weapon of choice — and he rests the gun on his right shoulder as he removes his sword from its sheath. He turns toward me, and his eyes meet mine as he straightens up to his full height. His short curly brown hair is already covered in a thin layer of dust, and sweat drips off his brow from the intense heat, but his expression is determined and fierce.

"We will get you through to the plateau, and there, you will defeat Lord Nor. Remember your training, my Lord. He is skilled, but so are you. You will be victorious," he assures me.

He shifts his gaze to the distant plateau, maybe five kilometers ahead. I follow his eyes, squinting slightly as I now am able to register movement on top of the hill. My jaw tightens.

“I will be. We will be,” I agree. “Peace will be brought to this land when Nor dies today.”

Out of my peripheral vision, I see him nod, and in unison, we turn back around to face the army amassed behind us. Five platoons, each with just over two hundred soldiers, are lined up at the base of the hill, standing at attention. As I’ve often found I must do, I spend a brief moment meeting the eyes of the closest soldiers, and I remind myself that these men are my responsibility. I want as few injuries and fatalities on our side as possible. One man standing tall in the front row of the second platoon blinks as our eyes meet, and I realize, not for the first time, that I’ve got it backwards. These men are here to protect me — to get me up to that plateau and see that I get a chance at defeating Lord Nor in one-on-one combat, as is prescribed by Kryptonian war code. They will gladly give up their lives to protect me. I swallow back nausea for the second time already this morning and refocus out over the entire battalion.

“We fight for New Krypton! Join me in our final day of victory!” I shout, thrusting my broadsword up into the air toward the approaching hostile army. In my hand, the nanotech particles on the sword seems to quiver, sending a shudder down the sword and into my arm.

I ignore the sick feeling in the pit of my stomach as the army behind me shouts, “Victory! For New Krypton!” And with Ching and I in the lead, we sprint off down the slope toward the enemy.

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#### 4

Sweat pours down my forehead, and I suck in a deep breath of hot, dusty air as I wipe the perspiration out of my eyes with my right arm. My legs burn as we continue our sprint, but I don’t slow or pause. Ching keeps pace with me, occasionally shouting orders to the officers now also running alongside us.

Ahead, the enemy lines erupt in a chaotic mix of gunfire, laser blasts, and yelling as the hostile soldiers begin their counterattack. Soldiers from the third platoon move up alongside and then in front of me, reaching the front line and taking the brunt of the first attacks. I try not to let this bother me as I parry a heavy blow from an enemy scythe. Ching steps in and stabs his sword into the enemy’s gut. He then pushes the man back into two other hostiles and yells at me in Kryptonian, “Keep moving!” He fires his gun ahead of us, taking out three more hostile soldiers, and we forge ahead, skillfully dodging explosions and gunfire as we push on.

We reach another group of hostiles, and both Ching and I raise our swords as we are surrounded by six enemy soldiers clad in black armor. I fire a blast at one hostile,

and he falls to the ground as blood seeps out the fresh wound in his neck. Two others jump at me, and I expertly parry one attack while dodging the other. My sword lashes out with incredible speed and slices into the side of the nearest enemy. He growls in pain and falls to his knees as the nanotech particles coating my sword do their job, infiltrating and shutting down his system. He is no longer a threat. From behind me, I hear Ching grunt as he takes on three soldiers, his sword clinking loudly as he deflects an attack. I sweep my sword around to block another attack and then jab the point into a hostile’s shoulder and shove him back away from me and Ching. A blast from a laser gun whizzes past my ear, and I drop down to the ground just in time to avoid a second blast. I then kick my leg out to trip another nearby soldier, and Ching fires his gun directly at the downed soldier, killing him instantly. A trickle of blood slides down Ching’s face from a cut just above his right eye, but he ignores it and grasps my arm, pulling me back to my feet. We push on deeper into the chaos.

Our progress toward Ganadar Plateau is slow, and we continue taking down enemy soldiers around us as we go. Leaving enemy soldiers alive is a bad idea, as Ching has told me many times, and I remind myself of this as I push my sword deep into a man’s chest, watching as the life leaves his eyes and he falls onto his back on the dusty ground, blood pouring from his wound. The harsh wind howls around us, blowing reddish dust over the corpses littering the ground; I see all of this — I see how the death toll is rising by my own hand, how the enemy ranks are thinning as we approach victory — but I no longer feel the pain of taking someone’s life. Instead, my vision is clear and focused on the hill rising ahead of me, where Nor waits. Ching grabs my arm and pulls me back a step as a laser blast hisses inches from my face. I don’t even pause to thank him. I fire my own nanoray gun to take out another two soldiers in front of me and break into a fast jog, Ching right at my heels.

Several soldiers from our first platoon move into a formation ahead of us as we approach a line of enemy troops at the base of the hill — the final barrier between me and Nor. My soldiers leap into battle as wind whips up the earth around us, bathing us all in a fresh coating of orangish-red powder. Ching, who has somehow lost both his firearm and sword, swings his fists and kicks out with his feet in a skillful display of martial arts-type moves to continue clearing the way. The howling wind roars in my ears, but I hear Ching yell, “Lord Kal-El, I am with you! Keep moving!”

And I oblige, my dusty boots digging into the ground as I push myself up the hill to the plateau. Every muscle in my body screams at me as I reach the top of the crest.

Although he had been at my side only a moment ago, I hear Ching shout a warning from some distance behind me now. His words are incomprehensible, however, lost among the loud explosions, thunderous winds, and general ruckus on the slope below me. With a jolt, I realize that he has fallen behind; I have reached the barren plateau alone. The sword in my hand feels heavy as my arms ache, and my chest heaves with every breath, the hot air stinging my lungs. I am exhausted.

Ahead of me, a tall, thin man in clean, untarnished black armor emblazoned with the symbol of the House of Zod stands confidently, flanked by three guards. My eyes narrow as I rest the tip of my sword in the ground and straighten up to my full height.

This is bad.

Lord Nor grins mockingly at me and takes a step toward me. His guards advance with him, but he casually waves them off. Scowling, they halt and retreat one pace each, their eyes remaining trained on me. Like Nor, the guards appear fresh and well rested; they have not been engaged in intense fighting for the last several hours. My jaw tightens as I shift my eyes back to Nor. Leisurely, as though he has all the time in the world, he tilts his head sideways and moves another step closer to me. His right hand reaches to unsheathe his sword, a sleek black blade similar to mine. He holds the sword in front of him and seems to study it for a moment, his icy blue eyes running up and down the blade. Almost as though it is aware of his scrutiny, the blade vibrates, catching the light of the red sun. Nanotech. I suppress a shudder as fear grips me. But I resolve to not let him see my apprehension, and I exhale carefully to control my expression as my left hand grips my own sword tighter.

Nor moves yet another step closer. He is now probably less than five meters away. His face contorts into a malicious scowl as he says, in clear, perfect English, “Kal-El, the abomination — the alien. You are not one of us.” The sword shifts in his hand, and he changes his stance, the balls of his feet settling into the ground about shoulder width apart, his left foot slightly ahead of his right. His eyes gleam cruelly, and the sword again vibrates as though feeding off his malice. I lift my own sword at the ready as he continues his diatribe. I must stay focused. “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.”

Despite all my training, despite my intense focus, his unexpectedly abrupt advance catches me off guard. And, just as Ching warned, he is fast and agile. He feints to my right, but as I attempt to dodge, lifting my blade to counter the attack, he shifts in the opposite direction. His sword swings with incredible speed and cuts deeply into my left

side. Pain radiates from the wound, and I stagger forward, barely managing to stay on my feet.

*No, no. Dammit.*

From the hidden sheath on my right hip, my special dagger hums, reminding me of its protective power. What had Ching told me about the dagger? Something about the blade repelling nanotech particles, I think. Maybe? My mind is fuzzy with exhaustion, but I shake my head as I spin around to face Nor, lifting my sword with both hands on the hilt now to increase my dexterity. I cannot lose my focus.

He seems slightly surprised that I’m still standing, but the expression quickly fades as his self-assured air returns.

“Your version of justice involves enslaving and torturing those who don’t see things your way. That is not leading. That is not morality. You are not fit to be a leader, Nor.” My voice is strong and clear. I ready myself for another attack as the pain from my wound spreads up from my side and into my left arm. Nor laughs.

“You are severely injured, Kal-El,” he sneers, gliding his finger along the edge of his blade. He then turns his palm up and rubs his thumb over his fingers, examining the dark red blood with disdain. “Even if you have some sort of protective aura, the nanotech will find a way to overcome it. You are as good as dead already.”

I don’t falter at his words, though I know them to be true. I can already feel the power of the dagger fading, and my side is on fire now, pain pulsing with every beat of my weakening heart. I must find a way to end this — to end him — now. My hands tighten again on my sword, and I lunge at him. He anticipates my move and dodges to my left as I swing the blade, just as I have predicted. Ignoring the intense throbbing in my side, I spin around quickly and raise my right elbow, landing a striking blow to his jaw. He goes down with a grunt, but so do I as a wave of pure white-hot pain reverberates through me.

My knees hit the rocky surface of the plateau, and my sword clatters out of my hands, landing several feet away. I close my eyes briefly and press my left hand into my side, a sticky warmth seeping into my fingers. The wound is deep, I realize. A strong gust of wind blows dust into my eyes, and without thinking, I lift my left hand, now dripping with blood, away from my side to block the dust and wind. Another wave of pain courses through me, and I fall forward, my hands scraping against the solid, rocky ground.

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

It is the first time I’ve thought of her since leaving my room at the palace. I had to stay focused, after all. But it seems like I’ve lost, so I allow myself to picture her, only for a moment. Her beautiful smile and long, dark hair that smells like strawberries. Her soft skin and kind eyes. Her

joyous laugh that brightens any room. God, I love her.

*I'm so sorry, Lois. I tried.*

The metallic taste of blood in my mouth brings me back to the present. Nor has recovered from the blow to his face, and he now stands in front of me, the tip of his sword pressed into the ground. He laughs as a gust of wind nearly blows me over, and a strong hand reaches down, grasps the front of my tunic, and hauls me roughly to my feet. I stagger, nausea nearly overcoming me, and grip my left side. Risking a glance down, I see that my once-white tunic is now torn and stained dark red with my blood. I raise my eyes to Nor's and move my left hand to grasp the base of his blade, which presses into my chest. Anger fills me, even as a disconcerting numbness spreads from the wound in my side and up into my chest and arms, and I allow myself to feel it welling up, boiling over. My desire to kill him is overwhelming.

I sense Ching behind me, albeit too far away to make a difference. There is no time left. I must make my final move now.

*Ching, I will not fail New Krypton. Please tell Lois I love her.*

I hope the message reaches him. My tunic has been damaged, so it should; however, I remain intensely focused on Nor, and I do not sense any response from Ching.

Nor hoists me up another few inches, my feet leaving the ground, and the tip of his blade penetrates my skin as he pushes it into me slowly.

God, the pain.

My vision blurs, but I force my eyes to stay open.

His face is only inches from mine now, and I can feel his hot breath as he snickers and says, "Nice try, Kal, but now, you die."

With the last of my energy, I hold tight onto his blade in my left hand, the sharp edge cutting into me as my other hand flies to my hip. The hilt of my dagger burns as I grasp and unsheathe the short silver blade. As Nor's sword pushes deeper into my chest, blood oozing down the front of my tunic, a blinding white light emanating from my dagger envelops us, and I feel a momentary surge of power enter me. Channeling that energy and ignoring the piercing pain in my chest, I thrust the short blade deep into his neck. His eyes widen with realization, and his lips move as though to speak, but only a raspy gurgling sound comes out. Blood dribbles out the corner of his mouth, and my feet touch the ground again as he staggers forward. My head swims and my vision blurs. Together, we stumble and fall, his sword lodging the final few inches into my chest.

I am vaguely aware of Nor's now lifeless body draped over top of mine and the cloud of dust rising up around us. I try to breathe, but it is as though there is a massive

weight on my chest, and my lungs refuse to fill with air. A pair of solid hands pushes Nor off me and reaches out to the sword still embedded in my chest.

You are too late, Ching. I am as good as dead.

But so is Nor. I have done my job.

My eyelids are so heavy that I can no longer keep them open. Darkness welcomes me as my eyes close. Distant voices seem to be calling out to me in a foreign tongue, but I can't make out the words. Numbness spreads all the way down to my toes, and the pain I felt earlier is gone.

Through a fuzzy haze that swathes my thoughts, I reach out telepathically, but I cannot connect with Ching or anyone else nearby. In a final act of desperation, I try to contact Lois again, reaching out across vast empty space. I picture her beautiful face and bright smile. *Lois, my love, I'm sorry.* Instead of her, I feel a fleeting connection with the same man I'd envisioned earlier that morning, and I have the same perception of hovering over a Metropolis that is not quite mine late at night, taking in the sights and sounds of the city with supersenses.

A cold fog enshrouds the vision, the lights of the city growing dimmer, and I communicate one final thought, directed at this Superman that I've never met.

*Take care of her for me.*

\*\*\*

## 5

Death is warm and bright. But painful.

Intense, overwhelming pain.

Unrelenting.

There is no sense of time. Just pain.

Then, I see a glimpse of her face. Her smile, compassionate and beautiful. She tilts her head slightly. *"I'm usually right about things."*

Yes, you are, Lois.

Pain. Radiating from my chest. And reaching every cell in my body.

At least I'm warm. Almost comfortably warm.

Like my mother's hugs. And her freshly baked chocolate chip cookies. Her voice invites me to visit. And I see a memory. Mom stands next to me on the front porch. It is the day that I left for New Krypton. My new black suit feels heavy and itchy. Mom hugs me, filling me with love and warmth. *"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."* I wrap my arms around her to steady myself. I will not let her see my uncertainty. I lean down and place a gentle kiss on her cheek. *"I will, Mom."*

Promises broken. Intense aching and darkness.

Blood. Spilt on the dry, dusty earth by my own hands. I have let them all down. I hate myself. So much.

Pain.

More blood. Bodies on the ground below me. My sword stabbing, slicing, slashing.

Terrible. I am awful. An awful person. No, not even a person. A monster. I deserve this death.

My chest aches.

Then warmth and brightness return. Surrounding me. And I see her face again. She is looking into my eyes, smiling. Her eyes are so kind. So full of love. My own love for her pulses through me. I want to hug her. Instead, I'm pulled into another memory. I stand behind her at her desk, my hands resting on her shoulders. She is typing. I move one hand to the back of her chair and lean over toward her computer screen. *"It should read 'A spokesperson for the FBI' here."* She gives me a crooked smile and swats at me before resuming her typing. *"Don't edit my copy, Kent, you know better."* I feel a familiar tug in my stomach as my hands settle back on her shoulders. God, I love this woman. I bend over behind her, brushing my lips lightly against her cheek. She shivers at my touch. *"Okay,"* I say as 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."* Her heart races as I brush a stray lock of her hair back, my fingers grazing the soft skin of her neck. With a smirk, she repositions her cursor and corrects the error that I'd pointed out. I rub her shoulders. *"Mmm, better now,"* I whisper in her ear, my lips again brushing her cheek.

A fog fills the room, and my vision darkens.

No. Please don't fade away. Lois.

Pain.

I shift. My chest burns. Where am I? Oh, right. I'm dead.

Death is warmer and brighter than I expected.

But the pain. It fills me. Is time passing? I don't even know. It just all hurts. So much.

I am briefly Superman again. I hover over Metropolis. It is my Metropolis. I recognize it instantly. I listen out beyond the city, sounds bombarding my sensitive ears. The world is chaotic. War is breaking out. Sirens blare. People lash out at one another. As though they have forgotten hope.

Darkness and pain. And then, I am flying over an open ocean. Ahead of me, across the water, I sense explosions, screaming, and confusion.

Wait. I'm not me. I mean, he's not me. He's him. The other me.

Confusion and pain course through me.

But then, the brightness and warmth surrounding me provide a small amount of comfort.

What is happening? Who is he?

Again, I hear sounds of senseless death. Civilians and children are in danger. No. They cannot die. Too many have already died.

Whoever he is, I feel his thoughts, and I communicate with him. *Help them all,* I tell him. *Help them all.*

And then darkness enshrouds me again as I feel him acknowledge my words and race off toward the conflict.

Her beautiful smile brings me back to the brightness and warmth. Ah, yes, death is okay with her here. She smiles at me. I must have said something funny. Something about not jinxing it. Oh, right. Superman has had the day off. Her laugh fills my ears. I want to hear her laugh again. Maybe if I say it again. Say it again. Say it. *"Don't jinx it."* That's right. Her face falls into a frown. Why isn't she laughing now? She's upset. What did I do? Lois?

Darkness and pain.

You did it wrong. You can't make her upset. You, you other me. I see the bullpen at the Planet. Yes, through his eyes. She walks ahead of him. You, you other me. You hurt her. He stops and grabs the railing. Pain engulfs me, and I'm back on New Krypton, a glistening black blade pressing into my chest. It pushes deeper. Are you feeling this too, other me? I should be there with her, not you. But I failed. I failed. Despite all I did. All the deaths at my hands. God, I'm terrible. Anger fills me. The tip of the sword disappears into my chest, blood oozing down the front of my tunic. Pain and anger. It is my fault she is upset. Not his. It's mine. I failed. And now she is alone. My chest throbs. Her soft voice echoes in my head. *"Clark, are you okay?"* No, Lois, I'm dead. I'm sorry. God, I hate myself. Blood spills on the ground in front of me as I stab my sword into a faceless enemy. Rage. Overwhelming, seething rage.

*"Kal, please, stop!"*

His voice trembles in my head. My anger dissipates into exhaustion. And the brightness fades. I am cold and isolated. And I cannot feel her. She is gone.

Death is no longer bright and warm.

No. This Death is Hell. And I deserve it.

I reach out to empty space. I cannot feel her. How much time passes? Does time pass in death?

Then, echoing of loud gunshots. Children screaming. Through his eyes, this other me, I see children crying. Injuries inflicted by an assault rifle. I feel his pain now mixed with my own. Grief. Intense and overwhelming. Superman is not fast enough. He is not fast enough. I was not fast enough. A car wreck — a silver hatchback that flipped over five times before landing upright against the median — my cape wrapping around the lifeless body of a three-year-old girl with a broken neck as I pull her out of her car seat. Panic as my mind races — how can I get them



all out? I am not fast enough. The explosion. Fire. Rubble. Dead bodies. My fault. I'm not fast enough. Hot flames dancing around me as I step through what used to be a doorway. I kneel down, trembling. She didn't make it. The woman is dead. I lift her slowly, ash falling from the burning roof above me and onto her unmoving face. I am too slow. Pulling a school bus out of the river — the bodies of twenty-one children shifting as the dirty water drains from the bus. Failure. I failed them. I failed at it all. Not fast enough.

*"Whatever you can do, it's enough."*

Lois.

I feel her hand on my arm. I see her kind, beautiful smile. I feel the warmth of her arms wrapping around me. Soft words whispered into my ear. *"You are enough."* I cry into her shoulder. The warmth and brightness returns.

Lois.

Thank you.

My chest aches. It is warm and bright here. But still, the pain. I cannot escape it.

Why is there so much pain?

I groan as a black blade slips through my sternum and pierces my heart. My own thoughts echo. *I can't die here. No, no, no. Lois, I love you.*

*Lois, I love you.*

It is warm, but I slip into darkness.

Her voice brings me back to the light. *"Better hurry."*

Hurry, Lois? But it's warm and comfortable here. Why hurry? I miss you. Her eyes smile at me. God, I miss you. She grins at me.

Wait.

Not me. Him.

And her tongue darts out of her mouth. Chocolate? He knows to feed her chocolate. What else does he know?

Lois, I'm here.

*"Not now, Kal."*

What?

Darkness. My chest aches now. The pain grows more intense.

Lois, where did you go? The shower. Lois in the shower. Hmm. Water droplets sliding down smooth skin. Her lips smiling against my chest. My fingers tracing down her back. Now she is dry and clothed. And beautiful. Her smile. I love her smile.

Lois, I love you. *"I know."* You do know. She moves toward me and reaches out to straighten my tie. My tie? No, his tie. Lois, he's not me. You know that, right, Lois?

*"Be careful."*

Why is she sad? Hugs fix everything. Please, you, you other me. A hug will help her. I feel the hug. Even though it's him, not me. I feel her body pressed against mine. Her head on my chest. I rub her back. Her hair smells of

strawberries.

He tells her something. He tells her she is incredible and strong. I feel his words. He loves her. But she cries into him. No. She shouldn't cry. I hate to see her cry. It's my fault. Please, other me, don't let her cry. *Why is she crying? I hate to see her sad. Please, Lois, don't cry.* Tell her that. Tell her I love her. Tell her not to cry. Please. *"Please, Lois, don't cry."* Her arms tighten around his waist. I feel the embrace. Warmth and brightness envelop me. I love you, Lois. She looks up at me. At him. The tears on her cheeks, wipe them away. I want to feel her, please. Her skin is soft, and her lips — inviting. I want to kiss her. I miss her lips. He backs away.

My vision darkens, and I feel cold.

Where did she go? Anxiety tugs at my gut. I'm dead, I remember. I died. But he is there with her. And he loves her. He should be taking care of her. She should not be crying. I reach out to him.

*Is she okay? Tell me she is okay. She should not be crying.*

Disbelief. He knows I am dead. But he replies.

*"She is okay. She is strong."*

Relief. And exhaustion.

And again into darkness. Where did the bright go? The warmth? Is it still here? Where am I? Oh, right, I'm dead. So does that mean I'm nowhere?

Mom. I'm sorry, Mom. I promised you. And I failed.

I see her. Through his eyes. She is crying. I've caused them all so much pain.

Stupid me.

Stupid death.

Mom, I'm so sorry. Her arms embrace me. Such a warm, comforting hug. Please don't ever let go. This is better now. Mom, I'm so sorry.

*"Clark, it's good to see you again, honey."*

You too, Mom. I miss you so much. An apple orchard stretches out around us. I shoulder my backpack. She smiles at me, holding an apple to her nose. I feel her love, and I smile back at her as she takes my hand.

*"I love you, Clark. I'm so proud of you."*

*"I love you too, Mom."*

Comforting, warm hugs.

Back at the kitchen table. What? Lois's apartment. Yes, that's it. Mom is sad again. Why is she sad? It's my fault. Please, other me. Please, tell her that I love her.

*"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."*

That's right. Thank you, other me. You understand. Your mom must be amazing like mine.

So tired now. Death is exhausting. I allow the darkness to embrace me. Almost like falling asleep this time. I still feel warm. But it hurts. Everywhere.

Now we're flying. Alone out over the open ocean. I miss the ocean. He is anxious. The world wants to be at war. But he wants peace.

Every life saved.

No compromising.

He is a good Superman. Not like me.

*Save my world for me. Stop this war. Please.*

*"I will do my best, Kal. I will do my best."*

Exhaustion.

Pain is overwhelming. But at least again it is bright and warm.

I shift around in the brightness. Are my eyes open? Can my eyes be open in death? It is so bright. Everything is pure light around me. And so warm. My fingers curl into a ball. I can feel them. When did my fingers come back? The aching in my chest grows. I try to move my arm but it feels so heavy. So heavy. So tired.

*"Lois... I'm so sorry."*

Lois. He's sorry. About what? She is sad. And lonely. He touches her shoulders. I can feel her soft skin under his fingers. He hugs her, and she cries. He is confused.

*"Whatever you need, Lois. If you need me to move away. Just tell me."*

No, please don't do that, other me. I need you to be near her.

*"No, you can't leave. I need you."*

I need you too, Lois. God, I love you.

Please, let me touch her.

I need to feel her.

I need it.

The pain in my chest is amplified as I force myself into his body. I hear his rattled thoughts echoing distantly in my head, but I block him out.

I stand next to her now, my hand cupping her cheek. So soft. So beautiful. I slide my hands down her bare arms. She is cold. I can warm her. My hands glide back up to her shoulders again, and I then wrap my right arm around her waist. She is pliant and willing, and I pull her in close to me, her hips pressing up against mine. My Lois. I stroke her cheek with my left hand, reveling in the familiar feel of her smooth skin under my fingers.

*Lois. My lovely Lois. God, I've missed you.*

Briefly, I hear his panicked thoughts, but he is distant still. *"No, no, no!"* But all I want is a kiss. One kiss. I've missed her so much.

I lean in toward her, and our lips meet, gently. So warm. I press her up against me tighter, feeling the warmth spread through my body. She invites me in, her tongue tracing my lips, and I gladly part for her. I feel his thoughts

again.

*"Incredible."*

Yes, she is. Thank you for letting me have this moment with her. I taste her. Coffee. Mmmm. I've missed coffee too.

*"No, no! What is happening?"*

Don't worry, other me. I just need this kiss. This wonderful kiss. Lois, I've missed you so much. She deepens the kiss this time, and a quiet moan escapes her as I again explore her mouth with my tongue. Mmm, chocolate too. Lois, you taste good.

*God, this feels good.*

Yes. It does.

*"No. This is wrong. Kal, please stop!"*

I hear him stronger now, but I push him away. Just give me one more minute. It's been so long. And I miss her so much. I love her.

God, the pain. My chest throbs. And I'm so tired. No, I can't leave her now.

Both of my arms tighten around her waist now, and she moans again as her arms move up and around my neck. Her breasts press into my chest, and her hips... Mmm. Her fingers in my hair. Oh, God. More, I need more of her. I pull her against me.

This is better.

The best feeling.

*"This is wrong. Kal! Clark! You're not here — get out of my head!"*

His voice is loud in my head now. I'm not here? But I am here. Aren't I?

No, wait. No, don't...

I am far away from her now. Across the room.

No, wait.

I'm dead.

I'm not here. He's here.

No. I just need... I need her. Lois, please, come back.

Pain explodes in my chest. And I'm so tired. So exhausted.

The room spins, fog rolling in and blocking the brightness. She fades away. But his thoughts still echo in my head, and I can almost hear her. Maybe if I try really hard.

*"Lois, God, I'm so sorry. That wasn't me."*

*"No. It was him."*

She knows. They know.

Oh, God, the pain. Why is it so much worse?

I feel him with me, a presence, stronger than any telepathic connection I've had in the past. He is so confused. He feels me too.

And he feels the pain.

But he is confused. He thinks I'm alive.

I'm not alive.

I'm dead.  
 Aren't I?  
 I hear him talking to her, echoing his jumbled thoughts.  
 He stammers a lot. I don't do that.  
 "L-Lois, w-w-what did they do w-with — with...his...  
 body?"  
 My body? I'm dead. Why does that matter?  
 Lois is confused too. He asks her again.  
 A stabbing pain in the middle of my chest pulses  
 through me, and I hear myself groan.  
 There is sound here, in death?  
 Am I...am I not dead?  
 "The Sun. They took him to the Sun."  
 The brightness around me seems to pulse, as though  
 saying, "Yes, that's right. I'm the Sun." The Sun? The  
 brightness and warmth.  
 Isn't this Death?  
 I feel him again. He is reaching out to me. How?  
 Something is not right. I'm supposed to be dead. Am I  
 not dead? Am I not...? I don't understand. Dammit,  
 please, can you please help me understand?  
 Please help me, I think again, this time using all of my  
 strength to send him the message.  
 He knows. He thinks I'm not dead. He has heard my  
 heart beating. In the Sun.  
 "God."  
 I feel myself drifting away now. The brightness fades.  
 Pain engulfs me. No. Please help me. Other me. Other  
 Clark.  
 He is closer now. He feels the Sun's power. It is warm,  
 isn't it? I thought it was Death. But maybe I was wrong.  
 Maybe I'm somehow not dead.  
 Please help me.  
 God, it hurts more. I feel darkness coming again. No. I  
 don't want the dark. Please. But it consumes me.  
 He is here. I feel him. Pain. It hurts. I groan. Please  
 help me.  
 I want to speak to him, but no words will come.  
 I want to see him, but all I see is brightness.  
 A hand touches my shoulder. I'm sorry, Lois. I died  
 somehow. Nor's blade thrusts into my chest, and the pain  
 is immense. I stagger and fall backwards onto the hard  
 ground. I cannot breathe. I tried, Lois. Please forgive me.  
 It is dark and cold. And I drift away.

\*\*\*

## 6

I suck in a deep breath of air, and pain radiates from  
 my chest as my lungs fill. Exhaling is equally as painful.  
 But I'm breathing. I'm breathing. I remember the last time  
 I'd tried to breathe, after Nor's sword had pierced through  
 me — the disconcerting feeling of a weight on my chest

and my lungs unable to fill with air. How is it that I can  
 breathe now? Where am I?

"Urgh." I think I made that sound. I cough a little, and  
 the pain becomes so intense that I feel nauseous. I take  
 another deep breath.

My hands grip a familiar soft material that is wrapped  
 around me, and I feel a solid but forgiving surface beneath  
 me. A mattress maybe. I need to see. I try to open my eyes,  
 but my eyelids feel so heavy. And my chest hurts so much.

"Shhh," a quiet voice next to me soothes. I recognize  
 the voice.

"Lois?" My own voice is hoarse and raspy. I force my  
 eyes open. Dim light filters in, but I see her outline through  
 it. She sits next to me, a gentle smile tugging at her lips. I  
 close my eyes again as a dull aching grows in my head.  
 "Lois."

"Shhh, yes, it's me, my love," she answers. I feel her  
 hand on my forehead, brushing against my skin.

"First freeze the fuel rods. Right."

What? Fuel rods?

Oh. The other me. The other Clark. He is also  
 Superman.

I open my eyes again. It is not quite as painful this  
 time. I focus for a moment on Lois's hand, gently  
 caressing my forehead. I'm home. I inhale again — sweet,  
 sweet, wonderful air — and I block the telepathic  
 connection I have with this other me, this other Superman,  
 who is apparently trying to freeze some fuel rods.

"Lois," I say again. I swallow with the effort of using  
 my voice. How long has it been since I've spoken? "Lois."  
 The word sounds so good, so right.

She laughs quietly and then leans over and kisses my  
 forehead. "Clark."

No one has called me that in a long time.

Ignoring the pain in my chest and the heaviness of my  
 limbs, I push myself up into a sitting position. My vision  
 swims, and I close my eyes. Maybe a bad idea. I should lie  
 back down. That would be better. And she agrees with me.  
 I feel her carefully pressing her hands into my shoulders.

"Just lie down, sweetheart," she instructs.

"But I want to hug you," I argue weakly. My voice still  
 sounds foreign, and the effort it takes to sit up is draining. I  
 allow her to help me lie back down on the soft bed. The  
 material that had been wrapped around me — a bright red  
 cape embroidered with a yellow 'S' shield representing the  
 House of El — falls off my shoulders, and cold begins to  
 seep into me. I shiver. As though she'd anticipated this,  
 Lois reaches over to the end of the bed and pulls a soft  
 white comforter up, draping it lightly over me. The slight  
 pressure of the blanket is calming, and I close my eyes a  
 moment. She presses her lips to my forehead again.

"I'm alive? I'm...The other me, the other Clark — he

is...?” My question isn’t fully formed. Her hand strokes my cheek, distracting me.

“It’s a long story,” she replies quietly. I feel the bed move as she shifts next to me.

“I’ve got time,” I say reflexively. I don’t actually know if I have time. I don’t really know what’s going on. I look up at her, swallowing as our eyes meet. God, she is beautiful. I don’t care if I’m alive or dead, as long as she is here. I reach up with a heavy arm, and my fingers brush back a strand of her hair. My hand shakes badly. I feel so weak. She smiles at me. That helps a bit.

“Right now, he’s in Japan — something about a nuclear reactor meltdown, he said.”

“Ah, fuel rods, right.”

Her brow furrows in confusion, but she continues her brief explanation of my doppelgänger. “He’s from an alternate universe,” she starts. She shifts almost uncomfortably, her features contorting for a moment as though she realizes the absurdity of what she’s about to tell me. “He was brought here by H.G. Wells shortly after you died. This world needed a Superman. It was really bad after you left.”

“H.G. Wells... The dead writer?” My head hurts.

She nods. “I know it’s hard to believe, but it’s true. He’s not actually dead, and he can travel through time and across interdimensional boundaries. He brought Clark from an alternate universe in which New Krypton didn’t exist.”

Alternate universes. Time travel. Other Supermen. And zombie me, returning from the dead. How unreal.

Lois gives me a half-smile, as though she knows what I’m thinking. “It’s crazy, I know. I didn’t believe it at first either.”

I screw my eyes shut briefly as I try to wrap my head around it all. But I’m so tired, and I feel sleep tugging at me. One nagging thought bothers me, however, and I ask her quietly, “This other Clark, he didn’t mind leaving his world?” It seems outrageous to me, after all. How could he leave his friends, family, job, life — drop it all and come here, to help a world he doesn’t know for a man he’d never expect to meet? My jaw tightens as I realize I’d basically done the same thing when I’d gone off to New Krypton. Stupid sense of moral obligation to help those in need. It had gotten me killed.

“His world was...different,” she says carefully. I wait for her to explain, but she doesn’t. Her eyes study mine for another moment, and the small smile on her lips fades. “He’s been busy as Superman — much busier than you were. The world...it got really messy,” she repeats, and her eyes fall to my chest, now covered by the white comforter.

I remember the brief vision I’d had where he’d been

flying across the ocean toward a growing conflict with a lot of civilian casualties. And another where he’d been thinking of how to stop a war and bring peace. The world had indeed gotten messy when I’d been gone. A wave of gratitude washes over me. He cares so much about my world and the people in it, including my Lois. He is a good Superman; I know this instinctively, even though I don’t really know him at all.

I exhale as a sharp pain pulses at the front of my forehead, and I close my eyes and clear my throat. My short-term memory is terrible, as usual, and I question again to remind myself, “And right now, he’s in Japan, stopping a nuclear reactor from melting down?”

“Yes. He left maybe thirty minutes ago,” she answers. Her hand once again brushes against my forehead, and I lean slightly into her touch. I thought I’d never feel this again. God, Lois, I missed you so much.

I should thank him.

I reach out telepathically and immediately sense him. He is working diligently, blowing freezing air on the containment unit of the nuclear reactor while also using his heat vision to weld the cracked reactor vessel. A complicated repair. He is quite skilled with his powers.

I struggle for a moment with what to say to him. But once I start, the words come easily. *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.*

Although he continues working attentively, he manages to respond with short, simple sentences. “*You’re welcome. And I look forward to meeting you as well.*” His words are sincere, but his tone is carefully controlled and a bit guarded. Understandable.

I open my eyes again. Lois is leaning over me, watching me curiously. A single tear moves slowly down her cheek. With effort, I reach up and wipe it away. My hand then moves to her shoulder and around her back, and I press gently into her. I need a hug, please, Lois. She understands, and very carefully, she lowers herself over me, propping up on her elbows so her weight doesn’t rest on my chest. But I want her to be closer; I don’t care about the pain. I move both of my arms to wrap around her and then pull her into me. Three months. Plus whatever time I was dead. That’s how long it’s been since I’ve held her like this. I tighten my arms even more, and her body shakes as she lets out a sob, her head burying into the crook of my neck.

“I love you,” I whisper, my eyes closing. “I love you, so much, Lois.”

“God, Clark, I missed you,” she whimpers in response. Her tears wet my shoulder.

I’m so tired again, and I feel myself fading out of

consciousness. I don't want to leave her. But I'm so tired. I try to speak again. My words are jumbled, even in my thoughts.

"Tired now, sorry, Lois," I mumble. Her hand strokes the side of my face, and I feel her lips on mine. I try to respond, but I don't have the energy.

"Shhh, it's okay." Her voice is so comforting, soft, assured. "Just rest, my love."

My love. My Lois, I love you. Everything fades away, and I drift off into sleep.

\*\*\*

## 7

When I wake up, she is still there next to me on the bed. She's underneath the white comforter now, and one arm is draped across my abdomen, reaching underneath the cape to touch my bare skin. She breathes quietly, but not regularly; she is not asleep. I open my eyes and turn my head toward her slightly. My head throbs, and my chest aches. But I smile as I remember that I'm alive. And I'm home.

She feels me move next to her, and she shifts carefully, tilting her head to look up at me. Her full lips are inviting, and I lean toward her and kiss her gently. Her fingers press lightly into my stomach as she deepens the kiss, and a quiet moan escapes her lips. The pain in my chest intensifies, however, and I pull away and lower my head back to the pillow, closing my eyes.

She rests her head back on my shoulder and scoots her body closer to mine. The material of the cape is thin, and I can feel her pressed up against me almost as though I'm naked. Oh, wait. I move my right arm under the cape, feeling along my side and then to my chest. I am naked. I laugh and immediately regret it as the discomfort in my chest spreads.

"Oh — ow — ugh." I close my eyes.

"What's funny?" she asks quietly. Her left hand caresses my stomach in a small circular pattern.

"I didn't realize I'm not wearing any clothes," I admit, choking back another laugh. It would hurt too much.

"Oh, right, well, he did pull you out of the Sun," she giggles, stilling her fingers on my abdomen. I place my right hand over hers and close my eyes again. "You were wearing clothes when they..." Her voice trails off. I squeeze her hand in mine and turn my head to watch her. She snuggles up closer against me and buries her head into my bare shoulder. "Zara and Ching, they, um, they brought me to their ship, to you — to your body. They asked what I wanted to do. Bury you here or something else... I asked them to take you to the Sun. I didn't want..."

"Another Superman clone?" I guess, my voice low. She nods into me. "So I guess whatever I was wearing

probably burned up."

"Right," she agrees. Her hand moves up toward my chest, and I inhale sharply as a stabbing pain shoots through me. "Oh, gosh, I'm sorry, Clark."

She pulls her hand away abruptly and shifts away from me a little, and a cold sensation washes over me. No, come back, Lois. Ignoring the pain, I move my left arm to wrap around her and pull her back to me. "Please, stay close. I need you," I say shakily. She buries her head back in my shoulder.

A light knock at the front door jars us both. She doesn't move right away, but she lifts her head off my shoulder.

"That's probably him," she explains. "He's supposed to bring clothes and food."

Food. My stomach growls at the thought, and I feel my cheeks turn red with embarrassment. I guess I'm hungry. "Food sounds really good. And clothes would probably be a good idea too," I joke. She smiles as her eyes study mine, and then she sits up slowly, careful to not touch my chest.

"I'll be right back," she promises.

She brushes my cheek with one hand and then pulls away and pushes herself up off the bed. I feel cold again, uncertainty growing in the pit of my stomach. Please hurry back, Lois. I watch anxiously as she saunters out of the room, leaving the door open behind her. Then I close my eyes and try to slow my racing heart. Quiet voices echo from down the hall, and I can sense his presence. And smell...cheeseburgers? My stomach growls again.

She returns a short moment later, shutting the door behind herself. A large gray duffle bag is slung over her right shoulder, and I recognize it as one of my own. I push myself up into a sitting position, grimacing with the effort, and I swing my legs off the bed as she unzips the duffle and rifles through the contents. Nausea hits me, and I screw my eyes shut for a moment to stop the dizzying spinning of the room around me. Her hand gently touches my shoulder.

"Are you okay?" Her voice is soft and low.

I nod. "Just a little dizzy," I explain. The bed compresses next to me as she sits, and a gentle hand rests on my knee.

"If you're not ready to get up, you can still rest. There's no rush," Lois tells me. She scoots closer to me, her arm wrapping around my shoulders. Her hand on my skin feels warm and comforting. I could just sit here all day; that would be fine. I lean into her. And my stomach growls again.

I suppress a laugh. "My stomach disagrees with you." I feel her tighten her embrace.

"Let's get you dressed then, huh?" she suggests.

Her hands work quickly, but she is gentle and careful. Within a few minutes, I'm dressed in a plain gray long-

sleeved shirt and black pants. My head still spins as she tugs a pair of plain white socks on my feet. When she is finished, she kneels in front of me, and I slowly open my eyes. She smiles up at me, a cheerful, optimistic expression brightening her eyes. I can't help but smile back. Her eyes shift briefly to the long red cape next to me on the bed, and a flash of something I can't quite decipher flickers in her expression. Before I can react, she stands and picks up the cape almost tenderly, and she begins to fold it meticulously, her nimble hands and fingers deftly working the creases out of the material.

Superman.

Will she love me less when I tell her I'm not Superman anymore?

I will never be him again.

I know this.

I drop my head into my hands and groan as a wave of pain flares through my chest. She is immediately at my side again.

"Sorry," I mumble. I don't like her worrying about me. It is just residual pain from...from when I was dead, I suppose. Her lips brush across my cheek.

"Here, let's see if we can get you up, and maybe you'll feel better after you've eaten," she says. Her arm loops around my waist, and I nod weakly and lower my hands to the bed. "Okay, here we go."

I try, I really do. But the pain intensifies with the effort, and I'm just too weak. My legs won't work, and my arms are not strong enough. I cannot stand, even with her help. No cheeseburgers for me. After two attempts, I shake my head and close my eyes as I try to steady my breathing.

"Sorry," I repeat.

"It's okay, sweetheart." I hear the concern in her voice. She plants another kiss on my cheek. "I'll go get Clark to help. I'll be right back."

Before I can protest, she jumps up off the bed and hurries out of the room, the red cape clasped in her hands. I close my eyes again, and my shoulders hunch as the throbbing pain in my head pulses insistently. Maybe I should just rest again. Maybe those cheeseburgers can wait. I sigh heavily. No, I've waited long enough.

Two sets of footsteps approach, but I don't look up right away. I sense him and his feelings, although I keep my own thoughts carefully guarded. He's as anxious as me right now. Lois sits next to me, and a comforting arm slips around my shoulders.

"Here we go. Are you ready?" Her voice is kind, as always, and she again leans into me as her lips graze my temple. She knows. And her silent interaction is imploring me to accept his help.

I swallow my pride and lift my eyes to him, clenching my jaw as I straighten up. Pain radiates from the center of

my chest outward, but I control my expression as best I can. God, he's me. But not me. Wow.

This other Clark — this other me — he stands in the doorway, clad in gray slacks, a white dress shirt, and a simple blue tie, as though he'd come from work. His dark eyes hide behind a pair of glasses, and his sleeves are rolled up almost to his elbows, his hands shoved deeply into his pockets. He shifts uneasily as our eyes meet. I shake my head. This is crazy. This is...

"This is too weird," I say, holding his gaze. He's rattled, like me, but he hides it well. He's used to hiding things. I understand that. In a quiet voice, I add, "You're me. But not me."

He gives me a half-smile and steps over toward me and Lois.

"Tell me about it."

His voice is just like mine. Uncanny. But he is quite different from me. I can feel it. Something in his past. He drops his eyes to the floor and adjusts his glasses, almost like a nervous habit. The insight I'd gleaned a moment before is lost. I suppress a shiver.

Next to me, Lois shifts her arm from around my shoulders and clears her throat. I tilt my head slightly toward her.

"I think if you just help him stand up, I can support him the rest of the way to the kitchen."

I can tell she really doesn't believe this. I don't even have the strength to stand; there's no way I'm getting to the kitchen without much more help. But I love her for trying to make me more comfortable with the thought of having him help me.

How much has he already helped me? Besides just bringing me home from the Sun. God, he flew to the Sun for me. I'd never flown that far into space. And taking care of my world. And my fiancée. And maybe my job, based on how he's dressed. I owe him a lot.

My shoulders tighten as he moves to my side, slides his arm under mine, and grasps my waist. I know he's trying to be careful. They both are. But the pain as he hoists me to my feet is intense, spreading from my sternum outward. I forget for a moment to hold my thoughts in, and I feel him falter next to me as my pain transmits through our telepathic connection. Dammit, I can do better than that.

"Sorry," I mumble as I force my mind closed again.

"Don't worry about it," he says quickly, steadying himself and me again.

My feet tingle as my weight settles on the floor, and my knees feel weak; nope, there's no way I'm holding myself up right now. I allow him to take most of my weight, and he understands. On my other side, Lois also supports me, though I think it's more moral support than anything else.

He is strong. I can feel the power radiating from him, and for a moment, I remember the feeling — the feeling of having immense strength and energy. But his seems like... even more. More power than I've ever known. He is stronger than I ever was.

And then, as we move methodically, one step at a time toward the doorway and then down the hallway, I feel him opening up to me in his mind. What is it, Clark? An intense feeling of warmth and strength fills me, and my pain...my pain fades into the background. So deep I barely feel it. I can stand up straighter, and I can breathe easier. Sweet air. I inhale to fill my lungs completely and then let the breath out slowly. My chest expands and then falls without discomfort. It feels like magic.

"Oh, wow, that's..." I'm at a loss for words. I know it is him. He's helping me somehow through this weird connection we have that is more than just Kryptonian telepathy. But I've never experienced anything like this before. I take another long breath, again drinking in the air. "I didn't know you could do that," I admit.

"Me neither," he says tightly. He is concentrating hard, I realize. Despite all of his strength, managing this connection is not easy for him.

My steps do become easier, however, and soon, we approach the kitchen table. Lois moves away from me first, hurrying ahead to pull out a chair for me, and Clark supports me for the final few steps. I reach forward and grasp the back of the chair and then slowly sit down. As I settle in the chair, Clark moves away, and almost instantly, our connection is lost. Sharp pain flares up in my chest. God. I screw my eyes shut.

Guilt. It fills him as he backs away from me another step. I shake my head slightly. Don't feel bad. But it hurts. I suck in another breath through clenched teeth as Lois sits next to me and takes my hand.

"Clark?" she asks with alarm. I feel her fingers rubbing the back of my hand.

"S-sorry," Clark stutters. I feel his guilt again, overwhelming him. "It's hard to —"

"It's fine," I interject. I squeeze Lois's hand and turn toward her, opening my eyes. She studies me with concern, her lips pursed in a tight frown. No, Lois, it will be fine. Please, don't worry. I force a weak smile and add as jokingly as I can muster, "He learns quickly, this guy."

She is confused, and she glances at him briefly before looking back to me. But I close my eyes and drop my chin to my chest as I attempt to steady myself again. Her hand trembles slightly in mine. With a quick laugh to hide her unease, she lifts my hand to her lips and kisses me gently. She then raises her voice and states rather insistently, "You boys know I have no idea what just happened there."

I open my eyes again and shift to face her.

"Sorry, hon," I apologize. I manage another deep breath, which seems to be getting easier now, and I lean over and press my lips to her forehead. "He figured out how to take my pain away temporarily."

Clark turns around, balancing three mugs of hot tea. The smell of mint wafts up as he places one cup in front of each of us and then sets his own across the table. Lois smiles up at him, and their eyes meet. Something passes between them, and I look away, down to my tea. They have some sort of connection too. Not telepathy, no. That is only possible between Kryptonians. But something else... I feel a flicker of jealousy. No, she wouldn't have. Right? But she did think I was dead. Because I *was* dead. Her voice pulls me out of my introspection.

"Oh, that — that's great. Good, Clark."

She smiles at him again, a bright, brilliant smile that makes my heart skip a beat. But Clark seems to retreat. He nods stiffly and then turns around with the guise of serving lunch. He's mad at himself. He shouldn't be. No, that's not right. He helped me so much, even just for a few moments. I clear my throat.

"I've never known anyone to use a telepathic connection to do that before. I didn't know it was possible," I admit. "Thank you again."

He shakes his head as he turns back around toward us, a plate in each hand.

"I'm just sorry it was so temporary," he says in a low voice.

"Even just that short respite... I'm very grateful."

He moves closer to us, his eyes downcast, and his thoughts now more guarded. He does learn quickly.

I can't hide my enthusiasm as he sets a plate down in front of me. Cheeseburgers. Oh, God. I feel my mouth water, and my stomach rumbles, albeit a bit quieter than earlier. Real food. Not plain, bland, tasteless, textureless mush. I let go of Lois's hand and reach forward to the plate, forgetting any manners my mom might have taught me. The french fry tastes like heaven. Salty, substantial, and just so good. Next to me, Lois giggles, her hand moving to my back. I open my eyes sheepishly and glance at her and then him. They both look at me curiously. Yeah, I must look a bit crazy — rapture over a french fry.

I smile crookedly. "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," I explain, shoving another fry into my mouth.

Lois laughs, and Clark steals a glance at her. His eyes tell more of a story than reading his thoughts probably would. Yes, he loves her. I suppose that is okay. As long as they never... No, she wouldn't. He sits across the table from us, and I distract myself again, using both hands to pick up the massive cheeseburger on my plate. Oh, man.

The burger seems to weigh a hundred pounds to my weak limbs, but I manage to lift it to my mouth and take a very satisfying bite. Oh, so good. I close my eyes for a moment and taste the flavors.

I feel him watching me, and I swallow the bite as I open my eyes again. He is concerned, I can sense now. He adjusts his glasses as we hold the gaze for a second. He worries that there is darkness in me.

I don't want to talk about it now, Clark. You can feel that, can't you?

I clench my jaw and look away, to my right, to where Lois sits. She takes a small bite of a french fry and grins at me. She is happy and relaxed. A smile grows on my lips. I love her so much. And even if he loves her too, I trust her. And I'm so glad to be home.

And that was all because of him.

I reach out and take her free hand.

"Mostly, I'm grateful that you brought me back, Clark," I concede, squeezing Lois's hand. If he hadn't brought me home, I wouldn't be here with her right now. Lois is smiling at me again, and my stomach seems to flipflop. She is so beautiful. Her expression softens a bit, and she looks at Clark for a moment, then back to me.

"You mean more than just physically flying you back from the Sun."

I guess I do. She is perceptive, as always. "Yeah," I agree, closing my eyes. I recall the confused state I'd been in, only hours before. For how long I'd been up there, I don't know — it is all a jumbled mess of pain and confusion. But I remember being most at peace, even thinking I was dead, when I was seeing her through his eyes. I address Clark directly. "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."

I am careful to control my expression again, though I think he sees a bit of the wariness I feel as I can't help but question the feelings he has for my fiancée. Possessively — although I'd never have thought I'd have reason to show possessiveness over her — I bring her hand to my lips, kissing her gently. She smiles at me, and I almost feel silly for even considering the possibility that they may have had a relationship more than just friendship. But again, she thought I was dead. No, I was dead. And I still don't know for how long.

I shift my gaze back to Clark. He is staring almost aimlessly at his salad, poking at it with his fork. I narrow my eyes. Is he...? No way. He lifts his fork and takes a small bite of his salad.

"When did you first regain consciousness?" he probes hesitantly, raising his eyes to me.

I barely hear him though, as I'm staring at his right

hand, which now hovers just over his plate. No way. I glance sideways at Lois, but she doesn't seem to recognize the cause of my confusion. Shaking my head, I look back to him.

"You're right-handed?" I blurt out.

And he laughs loudly. Swallowing the bite he'd taken earlier, he nods emphatically. "Yes, I am," he replies, adding, "It's a weird difference, I know."

"He also doesn't drink alcohol at all and prefers salads and veggies to burgers and fries," Lois comments, biting into another french fry. I tilt my head toward her and open my mouth as though to speak, but no words come out. The alcohol confuses me. Does he know it won't affect him? Lois just grins at me again and leans in closer, resting her hand on my back. In a teasing tone, her eyes darting mischievously toward Clark, she taunts, "And, he can cook." She stuffs the rest of her french fry in her mouth.

I remember seeing him here, at her apartment, and watching her as she licked chocolate off her lips. He'd not only known to feed her chocolate, but he'd also made the dessert himself.

I carefully control my reaction and guard my thoughts. Lois is relaxed and at ease; I copy her, smiling at Clark and joking, "Well, then, maybe I have some competition now that I'm back. It seems you have none of my character flaws, Clark!"

Next to me, Lois laughs. She leans into me, her arm tightening around my shoulder. I feel her brush her lips against my cheek. Really, do I think I have anything to worry about? No, this woman loves me.

"Seriously, wait until you taste his chocolate cheesecake," she says, licking her lips. "Mmmmm." She flashes a quick smile at Clark across the table, and he grins back at her.

My stomach drops. There is something more there. How long was I gone? How long has he been here? I feel my hands start to shake, and I hide it by picking my burger up again. A painful throbbing in my chest also distracts me. I swallow hard against the pain as I chew my burger. The taste is gone, however, and the burger now seems cold and bland.

I feel Lois's hand on my knee under the table. I tilt my head toward her. She sips her tea, her eyes watching me carefully as though she feels my agitation. I swallow the bite of burger and smile tightly at her.

"*Empire State Building. Oh, man. Shoot.*"

I look up sharply across the table. Clark is staring off toward the window, his eyes unfocused. He suddenly stands up.

"I have to go. Sorry." Decisively, he backs away from the table and starts to spin, the muted colors of his work clothes morphing into bright blue, red, and yellow.



A sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach hits me hard, and I lower my eyes to the table. I'm glad he's here, I remind myself. Something at the Empire State Building must be serious, and he sounds genuinely worried. But seeing him gearing up to do my job — the job I'd come to think of as the one I was born to do — it stings a bit. Especially knowing I cannot be that hero anymore. Again, Lois senses my unease, and her hand shifts from my knee to wrap protectively around my shoulders as I hear his spin stop.

I lift my eyes to see Superman standing in front of me. It is an odd sensation. I'm almost looking in a mirror. At least a mirror reflecting who I used to be. The cape shifts slightly in the breeze created by the spin, and I absently wonder if that is his suit, or if he's wearing mine. Not that it matters. It's his now. I blink and drop my eyes back down to my plate.

His voice penetrates my thoughts, his tone reserved and a bit sympathetic. *"You haven't told her yet, have you?"*

He understands me in this instance. He has seen many of my memories of New Krypton, I remind myself. So he knows what I've done and what I've become. I'm no longer worthy of wearing that suit.

I don't answer him; I can't. I carefully guard my thoughts as I take another bite of my burger. Just pretend it's fine. It's all fine. I chew and swallow, my eyes focused intently on the plate in front of me. Lois says something to him. *"Be careful,"* maybe. She used to say that to me. Every single time I'd leave. In fact, she said those two words to me before I left for New Krypton as well. My shoulders tense. Sharp pain in my chest. I close my eyes and swallow the tasteless burger. Clark answers her, his voice low. He'll be back later. He's not sure how long. From his unspoken thoughts, I also gather that he's worried; there are hostages. Lois embraces me as a gust of wind blows through the room and the window clicks shut after him. I set down my burger and push my plate out of the way before lowering my head to the table. I close my eyes. I'm tired. Being alive is exhausting. And painful.

Next to me, Lois shifts in her chair. *"Are you okay, sweetheart?"* she asks in a quiet voice. I feel her hand move lower on my back, and she rubs gentle circles as though to soothe me. How am I so lucky? I don't deserve her. Maybe he does. He's still worthy of the suit, after all.

I nod weakly. *"I'm just tired,"* I lie.

*"Okay. Maybe you should go rest then,"* she suggests. She continues to caress my back softly, and she leans over and kisses my cheek.

God, I hate myself. I'd promised her a long time ago, after she'd discovered my secret, that I'd never lie to her again. But now, I'm breaking that promise. I'm not being fair to her at all. I sit up, maybe a little too fast, and pain

shoots from my chest and into my back and arms. It hurts so much.

I manage a deep breath and open my eyes. Lois has repositioned herself slightly and is now staring toward the window. I imagine that she's expecting him to come flying back in, a smile on his face, with news that he'd saved the world.

Geez, what is wrong with me? She's allowed to care about him. I do know she loves me.

I'm just so tired.

I move my hand to her thigh, just above her knee. The thin material of her skirt prevents me from touching her soft skin, but I imagine how it would feel. I want to touch her. I wonder if she will let me. She probably wouldn't if I told her about the monster I've become. I don't deserve her. He does though. He's a good man — a good Superman.

God, I'm so tired. I close my eyes again as a wave of nausea hits, and I settle my head down on top of my hands on the table.

*"He's, uh, going to the Empire State Building,"* I tell her, mumbling into my hands. *"I think there's a bomb threat."*

Wordlessly, she moves away from me, and a moment later, I hear the television click on to the news. She comes back and sits next to me again, her hand finding the same spot on my back and rubbing slow circles. In the background, the newscaster mentions that Superman has arrived on the scene and is speaking with the police chief. I don't listen to the rest. I know he will save them. He's a good Superman.

*"Lois,"* I say, letting her name roll off my tongue. It feels good. I laugh, making the pain in my chest flare up. I must be really tired. *"Lois, I think I..."* Her hand stills on my back as I force myself to sit up. The lights in the room and the light from the Sun peeking in through the windows dance around as my vision swims. Yep. I'm really tired.

*"Maybe you should go lie down for a bit while I clean up here. How does that sound?"*

Oh, how I love her sweet voice. I nod. *"Yeah, good idea."*

I don't know how we get to the bedroom, but it seems I blink and I'm lying on my back on the warm bed. She pulls the comforter up over my chest carefully, leans over me, and kisses my lips. I close my eyes as I feel her fingers trace along my cheek.

*"You rest, and I'll be back in just a couple minutes. Okay?"*

*Do you have to leave me? Can't you just stay?*

*"K,"* I force out, allowing my head to relax into the pillow. I fall into a deep, dreamless sleep almost immediately.

\*\*\*

## 8

Strawberries and chocolate and coffee. The combination smells so good. So familiar. My Lois.

A soft hand caresses my cheek, and then her lips touch mine. “Mmmm.”

“Mmmhmm,” she agrees, and her lips and warmth disappear.

“Mmm, no, get back here,” I growl. My eyes open, and I shift my arms around her small frame next to me and pull her back to me. I feel her bare shoulders, her soft, cool skin. She’s changed out of her work clothes and into a tank top. But she’s on top of the comforter, and there is too much material between us. I tug at the blanket as our lips meet again, more needy this time. She presses into me, smiling, giggling.

“Clark — mmm — ”

“This is the best way to wake up,” I mumble into her, my lips leaving hers to trail kisses down her throat.

“Mmm, you’re so soft.”

She wiggles around until she’s underneath the comforter with me and then presses her body up against mine. Much better.

I want to touch her. My fingers brush down along her arm to settle on her waist and then tease under her shirt. Her abdominal muscles tauten under my touch, and a low moan escapes her. I allow my hand to drift upward as my lips continue their path now along her collar bone.

I feel her fingers briefly trace along the waistband of my pants, eliciting a familiar tugging deep in my stomach, but then pull away.

“Clark,” she says quietly. Her hand touches my cheek and firmly pushes me back onto the pillow. I blink and look up at her. She smiles weakly at me, her lips still full and wet from our kisses. But something is wrong. Her eyes are concerned.

I breathe heavily and close my eyes. The pain in my chest is dull compared with earlier. But the aching distracts me long enough that I can get myself under control. She lies next to me, resting her head in the crook of my shoulder, and her hand drops from my cheek, running down my chest and stopping, palm open and flat, on my abdomen.

“Sorry,” I apologize, moving my right hand to cover hers.

She shakes her head and immediately shifts to embrace me, wrapping one arm around my waist and allowing more of her weight to rest on me as she leans in and kisses me again.

“No,” she breathes between kisses. “It’s just — you were pretty out of it earlier.” She pulls away and studies

my eyes. I guess she’s right. I only remember bits and pieces of being awake. “I-I don’t want to rush your recovery,” she adds. I nod and close my eyes again, relaxing into the soft mattress.

“How long was I asleep?” I ask quietly. She presses her lips into my cheek again and then slowly down along my jawline. “Mmmm.”

“Not that long.” Her arm loosens from around my side and once again settles across my stomach. “Maybe a half hour.” Her lips close over mine, and I wrap my arms around her.

“Power nap.”

“Mmmhmm.”

“I feel much better now,” I insist before I deepen the kiss. I don’t want to wait. We’ve already lost enough time. “This isn’t rushing. It’s part of my recovery,” I tease between kisses.

My tongue explores her mouth as though for the first time, and my hand moves from her back to cup her cheek. I feel wetness under my thumb, and I pause and pull back as I brush away the tear. Her eyes are tightly closed now, and she drops her head against my cheek with a sigh.

“Lois?” I lift her chin, and our eyes meet. Beautiful deep brown, just as I remember. My lovely Lois. But her eyes glisten with more unshed tears. “What’s wrong, hon?” I ask quietly. She drops her head against me, and I feel fresh tears wetting my shirt as she clings to me tighter.

“It’s nothing. I just…” She squirms a little and slides one knee up over my thigh, bringing us closer together. I brush my fingers along her cheek again and tuck her loose hair back behind her ear. She continues, her voice low, “I just missed you so much, Clark. I thought you were dead.”

“I was dead,” I say carefully, moving my arm again to wrap around her. I feel her shiver as she nods.

“I know, I-I saw your body. I saw…” She pauses and runs a hand very lightly over my chest, where the scar from my wound pulses. The dull ache increases a notch, but I don’t react. Her hand stops over my abdomen, and she presses her palm into me gently. “Zara and Ching, they told me that you died fighting Lord Nor. That you were brave and strong, and that your courage ended the war and saved many lives.”

I stay silent, but I can’t help the cynical thoughts that form in my head. I ‘saved many lives’? What about all the lives lost to my blade? *Monster*.

“And I… I’m so thankful you’re home now. I just — ” She snuffles and wipes away another tear. “I love you so much.”

“And I love you,” I reply, pushing away my negative thoughts and projecting a steadiness and strength into my voice.

With effort, I shift out from under her and prop myself

up on one elbow, tugging her underneath me with my other arm. She gasps as my knee pushes between her legs, and I bend down over her and suck gently on a sensitive spot at the crook of her neck, eliciting another moan of pleasure. God, I missed her so much. One of her hands ventures under my shirt, and I shiver as her fingers dance along my side. I trail kisses up along her neck and jawline, but her hand on my side distracts me, and I pause and groan as desire pulses through me.

“God, Lois.”

She becomes bolder, both of her hands pushing up under my shirt. My skin burns where she touches me, and my eyes close as she continues her exploration, her hands moving restlessly up my back. I lower my lips to her neck again and flutter kisses along her collar bone. Her shirt is in my way now. In fact, I think we’re both overdressed. Hmm.

“Sweetheart.” Her hands pause on my back, and I realize my arm propping me up is shaking.

She shifts out from under me and gently presses on my shoulders. I take the hint, and my arm can’t support me much longer anyways, so I allow her to help me lie flat on the bed again. The dull aching in my chest has grown to an insistent throbbing now as well, and I close my eyes to hide the pain. Lois again settles next to me, cuddling up against me as my arm wraps around her.

“Sorry,” I say quietly, kissing the top of her head. “I just — I missed you every day. It feels almost surreal to be home. It was all I wanted for three months — to touch and hold you again.” Her fingers, which had started tracing circles on the thin material of my T-shirt, become quite still, and I feel her shoulders tighten.

“Four months,” she corrects softly.

“Hmm?”

“For me, it was four months.” Her voice catches in her throat, and she shifts in my embrace slightly so she can look up at me. There are those tears again, edging at the corners of her eyes. I swallow hard. Please don’t cry, Lois. “You died a month ago,” she explains, her mouth twitching into a frown.

“Oh.”

A month. I had lost an entire month.

And she had been alone, not knowing if she had lost me forever, for four months. Well, that’s not entirely accurate, I suppose. She had been alone, not knowing if she had lost me forever, for three months, and then alone, or with him I suppose, thinking she would never see me again, for a whole month.

“God, Lois, I’m so sorry.”

She shivers and clings to me again, and I tighten my arms around her as well. And we hold each other silently for several minutes. Guilt fills me, and with it, the pain

returns to my chest. I shift uncomfortably, and she scoots slightly away from me and props herself up on her elbow, watching me with concern. She lowers her eyes for a moment, and I sense that she wants to say something. Something important. But she doesn’t speak right away.

I hate that I’ve done this to her. And that she’s still having to worry about me. I force a smile onto my face and reach out to touch her cheek.

“I won’t leave you again, Lois,” I promise.

“You’d better not,” she replies, her tone somewhere between feisty and anxious. She sniffles and reaches up to wipe a tear from her other cheek.

I can tell she’s only half joking. I shake my head.

“Never again,” I say firmly. She leans in and touches her lips to mine. I taste the saltiness from her tears as I return the gentle kiss. My lovely Lois. I don’t deserve you. “I love you.”

A voice that sounds just like mine calls uncertainly from the living room. “Lois?”

I freeze and pull away from her. She laughs almost shyly as she wipes the last of the tears off her cheeks and then crawls out from under the comforter.

“Um, let me go check in with him,” she replies quietly. She leans over and kisses my cheek. My hand lingers on her arm.

“I’ll come with you,” I propose. Grimacing, I manage to push myself into a sitting position on the bed.

“It’s okay. You stay here, and I’ll be right back,” she says with a small smile. She touches my cheek again and then stands and heads out of the room.

As soon as she is out of sight, my stomach lurches and I feel my heart start to race. An overwhelming need to be near her forces me out of bed. I manage to stand, though shakily, and I ignore the pulsing pain in my ribcage as I stagger toward the bedroom door.

From the end of the hallway, Clark’s anxiety radiates off him in waves, and in a stuttering, unsure voice, he mutters, “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.”

My parents. I lean heavily against the wall as I swallow hard. I picture my mom’s kind eyes and hear my dad’s deep laugh. God, I miss them. They must be okay or Lois would have mentioned it. Right? Burying my fear, I continue toward the two figures standing at the end of the hallway, my legs aching from the effort of holding myself upright. I feel Clark’s eyes on me, but I concentrate on Lois as the tugging in my gut pulls me to her. She glances up and back at me, a warm smile on her face, and I wrap my arms around her waist and force a smile in response.

“I told you to stay in bed, and I’d be right back,” she scolds. Her eyes study me for just a moment, and she

seems to find what she is looking for. She moves in my arms until she can loop one arm around my waist, providing an extra bit of support. Can she tell how much I'm struggling? I thought I was hiding it pretty well. I adjust my smile again.

"And I told you that I'm fine and feeling much better already."

My stomach is already settling and my heart rate slowing. The strength of this visceral reaction to her nearness terrifies me, but I bury those feelings and tighten my arm around her as she plants a light kiss on my cheek before turning back to Clark.

"You're always welcome here, Clark," she tells him assuredly. I feel his uncertainty grow as she adds, "If the window is open, come right on in, okay?"

He nods, but his hesitation is palpable, despite his attempt to hide his concern; I hear his thoughts almost as clearly as though he's projecting the words right into my head. He never belonged on his Earth, but Lois has made him feel accepted and loved for the first time since he was a kid. Now that I'm back, he's worried that things are going to change — that there won't be a place for him here either. But Lois's words help him somewhat, easing his anxiety.

Another thing is quite clear, as I've already seen, that is — his feelings for Lois are quite strong. He shifts his eyes to me momentarily, and my jaw clenches as I sense his conflict. He knows he shouldn't have these feelings for her. I carefully control my expression as I sense the deep respect that he has for me. *No, I don't deserve that respect, Clark. You do. You are the more worthy man. I've seen it and felt it within you.* I don't let him hear these thoughts.

"What about the Kents?" Lois asks, interrupting my silent contemplations. Next to me, she seems to stand up a bit taller, and her face brightens as she grips my arm. "Oh, my, Clark, your parents!" She twists to look at me again, and I blink several times as I shift my focus to her, again forcing a smile on my face.

My parents. Right. They still think I'm dead. I mean, I think they still think I'm dead. Did they know I died? A sudden bout of nausea hits me as I realize how little I know about what is and has been going on in the lives of the people I love the most.

At the same time, another wave of anxiety rolls off of the man standing a few feet in front of us, and his gaze moves back to Lois. I feel him try to block his thoughts from me, but he's not yet completely figured it out. Not when his emotions are this strong. His sense of belonging here — there is something specific about my parents accepting him that is almost more important to him than Lois welcoming him.

"Martha called me just a few minutes ago," Clark says.

His stutter is gone now, but he jumps into an almost incoherent rambling and shoves his hands deep into his pockets. "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. Okay, maybe you do —"

I can't help my reaction. I feel a funny smile growing on my face, and I laugh inwardly. The emotion is almost foreign; I haven't been allowed to smile and laugh in months. "I take back what I said earlier. He babbles just like me when he's nervous. So he does have at least one of my character flaws."

Lois dips her head into my chest, laughing softly, and Clark also laughs, his cheeks turning slightly red with embarrassment. He shakes his head.

"Right, sorry. I just..." He pauses momentarily and reaches a hand up to adjust his glasses. "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..." He drops his chin and runs a nervous hand through his hair. "Sorry, I'm doing it again."

Lois laughs again. I love the sound. So much. I tighten my arm around her waist, and she looks up at me.

A sharp pain erupts in my chest.

"It's your call," she says. The pain grows as she moves a hand to rest across my stomach, and my legs tremble as the weakness I felt earlier returns to my limbs. The smile on my face fades. "I think Clark has a point about it being a much better idea to tell them in person."

He does, of course. A phone call to tell your parents that you're not actually dead seems just a tad bit callous. But why not offer to just fly me and Lois down to Smallville? There's some reason he wants to tell them himself. And maybe I could deduce that reason if my brain weren't so foggy. I blink, trying to clear my vision, which has gone slightly blurry, and raise my eyes to his.

*Why is it so important to you that you be the one to tell them?* I communicate to him silently, projecting my thoughts in such a way as to mask my insecurity and discomfort. I immediately turn to Lois, who is watching me expectantly.

"I agree. In person is much better," I concede as amicably as possible. Lois's smile pulls me in toward her, and I lean in and kiss her cheek as my eyes shift back to Clark. I press him again through our silent link.

"*I don't have an agenda here,*" he tells me, holding my gaze. Out loud, he adds, "I can't wait to see their reaction. They've really missed you, Clark."

He shifts uncomfortably as I study him, and he closes his eyes as a memory of his echoes in his mind. He is playing a game of Scrabble with his parents in the dining room of a farmhouse so much like my parents' home. His mother, beautiful and young, with kind blue eyes and her loving smile, is so proud of him as he bests both of them with a seven-letter word to win the game. And his father, more jovial and carefree than mine, but with the same unrelenting devotion to his family, hugs him fiercely and ruffles his hair. The cheerful images are abruptly replaced with a horrifying scene, playing out almost in slow motion. He stands under the awning outside Smallville Community Library, and a white pickup truck drives toward him. Rain pounds down hard, reducing visibility. But he clearly sees the green sedan racing through the red light at the intersection. I feel his terror and hear his scream as he launches out from under the awning and sprints toward the intersection. But he's only a young child; he's not fast enough. The sedan smashes into the white pickup going much too fast. The pickup lurches sideways, the passenger's side door collapsing inward, and the truck then twists and flips, tumbling over and over until finally coming to a stop upside-down. He races through the rain to the pickup, jumping over debris and screaming for help. The final image I see is his mother strapped into her seatbelt in the upside-down truck, her head bent at an unnatural angle and blood dripping down the side of her face.

With sudden clarity, I understand his motives. I lower my eyes as all the air leaves my lungs. God, I can't even imagine how he survived that.

"It's a fine idea," Lois says enthusiastically.

She has no knowledge of the silent exchange that just happened between us. In fact, I'm pretty sure Clark is not even aware that I shared in his memory. God. My legs shake as the image of his lifeless mother flickers again in my mind, and I lean a bit too heavily on Lois to steady myself. Without hesitation, she shifts to better support me and addresses me again.

"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." I feel her eyes on me, but I keep mine lowered. Her hand presses gently on my abdomen and her lips lightly brush my cheek. In a low voice, she adds, "Maybe you should get back to bed, sweetie."

I nod weakly as the pain flares up again in my chest, radiating into my arms and even down into my lower back. "Yeah," I agree. I raise my eyes to meet his and add quietly, "And yes, I think it's fine for you to go Clark. I look forward to seeing them."

I try to smile, but I can only manage a grimace. The rise and fall of my chest hurts with every breath now, and I feel myself slipping deeper into the fogginess I'd felt earlier. An urgent thought crosses my mind, however, clearing my vision temporarily, and I send a hasty message to Clark.

*Please don't tell them about my injury. I don't want to worry them. My dad...his heart is not good.* The pain in my chest pulses again, and a brief flicker of discomfort in his eyes suggests that he feels it too. In my exhaustion, I've failed again to maintain the barrier blocking my pain from him. I shake my head as I refocus myself to protect him from the aching and then issue a quick apology as my vision gets fuzzy again. *Sorry again. I'm getting tired, and it's harder to control.*

"Got it. I won't say anything about your injury," he promises. I sense he's aware of my dad's heart problems and has his own concerns as well. He quickly adds, "*And don't worry. Get some rest.*"

Rest. Definitely. I think I could fall asleep standing up right here in the hallway. My eyes close briefly as Lois again tightens her arm around me.

"Great," she says to him. Although she's still smiling, I know she's concerned for me. She clears her throat and steps slightly away from me to readjust her arm around my waist. Her eyes dart back to Clark briefly. "Thank you again, Clark. Let me get him into bed, and I'll be right back. Hang on, don't go anywhere, okay?"

She ushers me slowly back down the hall, allowing me to lean into her as I stumble along. When we reach the bed, my exhaustion overtakes me, and I almost collapse into the soft mattress.

"Sorry," I grunt incoherently.

I curl up on my side as the pain in my chest turns into a disconcerting numbness. Lois mumbles something I can't understand and tucks the comforter around me. My eyes close, and I feel myself drifting off to sleep again as her hand gently caresses my forehead. I hear a distant, "I'll be right back," and then her warmth disappears as I fall into darkness.

I fall deeper and deeper, the darkness growing blacker and blacker, colder and colder. Eventually, my falling slows, and I land hard on a rocky, dusty surface. A red glow emerges from far away, revealing a harsh landscape stretching out for miles in every direction. The cold is replaced by a scorching heat, and my skin begins to burn, flakes crumbling off my bare arms and chest and disappearing into the ground. A black sword, glistening with blood, materializes in my hand, and bodies rise up from under the earth ahead of me — lifeless bodies of Kryptonian soldiers. My blade vibrates and begins to glow. It then abruptly shoots forward, pulling me with it across

the valley above the sea of dead bodies. I halt suddenly as the sword lodges itself into the chest of my doppelganger. Blood seeps out of the wound and down the front of the familiar red and yellow ‘S’ shield on his chest as his eyes widen in surprise. I try to scream, but no sound comes out. He falls to his knees in front of me. Lois appears at his side, tears streaming from her eyes. She looks up at me with pure hatred. “What have you done?” Her voice echoes loudly in my head as the scene fades from red to black, and I once again fall down and down and down into a cold, black abyss.

I sit up sharply as I wake into a darkened room. My chest, arms, and hands are numb, and I am alone. A terrifying dizziness hits me, tiny specs of color dancing around in my vision. I screw my eyes shut and call out, “Lois?” My voice breaks as I feel a coldness seeping into me, and I seem to be spiraling down an empty dark pit again.

Immediately, she is at my side, and the falling sensation stops. She embraces me carefully and whispers soft words into my ear. “Shhh, you’re home now, and I’m here, my love.” I cling to her, and her closeness steadies my shaking. My mind clears, and the room brightens as sunlight inches back into the room.

“Lois,” I mumble, burying my head into her hair. We stay in that position for several minutes, and my heart rate and breathing slowly return to normal. Finally, she pulls away, and her arms drop to rest on my thighs as her eyes shift restlessly, studying mine. I force out a laugh. “Sorry, again. Uh, I guess rising from the dead can mess with your mind a bit, because mine is quite...fractured still.”

“You weren’t asleep long, only maybe fifteen minutes this time,” she says quietly. Her hand reaches up and touches my cheek, and I lower my eyes. “Did you have a bad dream?”

I just nod. I suppose that’s all it was. A bad dream. Although it sure felt more real than that.

She doesn’t ask me what the dream was about; she can sense I don’t want to talk about it. Instead, she just pulls me back in for another hug. And it feels so good.

I don’t deserve this.

I don’t deserve her.

But I feel her sigh into me, and I kiss the top of her head as she holds me tighter.

“I love you.” Her tone is subdued and serious. “I’m here whenever you need me. Always.”

Oh, I definitely don’t deserve her.

I cling onto her as though my life depends on it. Because I think it does. I think it always has.

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## 9

Apparently, Lois thinks I smell like welding fumes. And that’s why I end up in the shower, wobbling precariously on feeble legs as I struggle to scrub off the odd odor from the Sun. I had stupidly insisted that I could manage the shower myself, so Lois is waiting in the bedroom, the bathroom door propped open slightly just in case I need help.

The warm water stings as it cascades down my chest, beading up and over the angry red scar. I allow my fingers to brush over the raised blemish, the vivid memory of how I got the wound replaying in my head. My hands start to shake, and I steady myself by holding onto the wall with one hand while I run a washcloth over my skin with the other, faintly scented bubbles washing away the stench of a month of stewing at millions of degrees. My legs are done holding me up by the time I’m clean, and I turn the water off, grab a towel, and wrap it around my waist as I step out of the shower, one hand clinging to the sink for support.

Lois pokes her head in around the edge of the door as I lean on the counter.

“All done?” she asks, stepping into the bathroom toward me. I nod as she picks up an extra towel and begins helping me dry off, gently rubbing the soft cloth over my back and shoulders. My muscles feel achy and stiff, and so I stand quite still while she works. She is careful to avoid touching the scar; she knows it is painful still. When she’s finished, she kisses me on the cheek and takes my hand, and I follow her out into the bedroom. The weakness in my limbs persists, and I sit heavily on the edge of the bed, a towel still wrapped around my waist.

A sudden sense of guilt hits me, forcing the air out of my lungs. I close my eyes as a familiar voice reverberates in my head.

*“There, Clark. I did what you asked. But it didn’t feel good.”*

It takes me a second to realize the guilt is his — my doppelganger. He’s with my parents, and he’s fulfilled my request to avoid telling them about my injury. He doesn’t like to lie.

*I know. I’m sorry to ask you to lie for me. Thank you, I communicate back to him.*

Next to me, Lois sifts through the duffel bag and pulls out a clean set of clothes for me. Her hand touches mine, and I open my eyes and look down at her as she kneels in front of me. She smiles softly at me. And at the same time, I hear Clark curse to himself.

*“Dammit.”* The curse is followed immediately by more regret. He then deliberately tells me, *“I’m still getting used to this telepathy thing. I didn’t mean to connect with you there. Sorry about that.”*

I laugh out loud, though the sound rattles in my chest a bit, and I end up coughing several times. Lois looks alarmed, but I shake my head and give her a crooked grin.

“Sorry, uh, Clark, he — he thinks very loudly sometimes,” I explain. With an understanding smile, she mouths, “Ahh,” and hands me a white long-sleeved T-shirt. To him, I project, *No problem. Please, tell them I love them, and I can’t wait to see them.*

“Will do,” he replies quickly. For a brief moment, I see my parents through his eyes, his love and respect for them overpowering his embarrassment. Then, I close our connection and turn back to my beautiful fiancée. Her hand rests lightly on my knee, and she watches me with concern.

“Is everything okay with him?” she asks, her voice low.

I nod with a grimace as I pull the T-shirt on. The soft cotton is such a contrast to the rough, tight, thick material of the Kryptonian battle suit I’d gotten so used to wearing.

“Yeah, yeah, he’s fine,” I assure her. “He’s in Smallville with my parents.”

She continues watching me expectantly, but I don’t add anything more. Exhaustion is threatening me again, and I’m quickly getting annoyed by this back and forth that my body is forcing me into — not allowing me to sleep for any amount of time, but then recoiling as soon as I do anything remotely taxing. And apparently standing up long enough to shower falls into the category of remotely taxing.

I reach over to her lap, where the rest of the clothes sit, and grab the briefs and pants. As I absently pull the clothing on, she stands and moves to the bathroom for a moment, depositing the wet towels in the clothes hamper. When she returns, I am fully dressed. I glance up at her briefly and reach out one hand toward her. She obliges and takes my hand as she steps over to me. I pull her close and settle my head on her chest as my arms wrap around her. Her hands rub my back, and a sudden urge of desire pulses through me. I push the feeling down and just hold her.

“Clark,” she starts, her voice breaking the silence.

“Hmm?” The sound is muffled in her shirt, and I feel her muscles tighten under the thin cotton material. I press my hands into her back, bringing her slightly closer to me, and I turn my head and plant a kiss on her stomach and then allow my hands to slide around and grip her waist. Her hands shift from my back to my shoulders.

“You know that he and I are just friends, right?” she asks. Her body shudders against me, and I push her back a bit so I can look up at her. She’s watching me again through anxious eyes, and it hits me. She had misinterpreted my terse response, which was actually related to my sudden overwhelming fatigue, as a sort of

resentment to her inquiring about his wellbeing. I exhale slowly and drop her gaze as I rest my head against her again.

I believe her, of course. I’m sure she’s never acted on any of her feelings. Hell, I even trust him. No, neither of them ever allowed their relationship to move beyond being very good friends — I know this now. But I’ve felt his love for her, and I’ve seen the glint in her eye when she’s looking at him as well; I know there’s something more between them. I also have no doubt that she loves me fiercely, as I do her.

“Clark?” Uncertainty radiates off of her. I shift my arms to wrap around her again.

“I know, Lois. I know,” I confirm. My eyes close as I feel her sigh with relief and lean into me.

“I-I love you,” she says as her embrace tightens. I sense she wants to say more, give me more of an explanation of her feelings for him. But it’s not necessary. I understand. *I was dead*, after all. And he is a good man. A true Superman. Everything I used to be.

Before she can say anything more, I pull her down onto the bed with me and cover her body with mine. My knee wedges between her legs as I capture her lips in a deep kiss, and my free hand, insistent and needy, pushes up under her shirt, grazing the smooth skin of her abdomen. She moans as my fingers reach the underside of her breast, covered in a thin layer of lacy satin, and her hands move to the small of my back, her palms pressing into me. She deepens the kiss, teasing my mouth with her tongue, and trails her hands lower to settle on my waist. With a gentle but firm pressure, she raises her hips off the bed, pressing against me. I growl in response, and she laughs into the kiss. Her hands travel up my back and then down again to tug at the hem of my shirt, which I’d worked so hard to put on a few minutes ago. In one swift movement, she pulls the shirt back up over my head, and with effort, I tear my hand away from just below her breast to extricate my arm from the sleeve. The cool air of the bedroom drifts over my back and shoulders, and I groan again as her fingers trace up my sides, my skin burning under her touch.

“God,” I breathe, pulling away from the kiss. She whimpers a response, but then gasps as my lips find the sensitive spot at the base of her neck.

From a pocket of her pants, her cell phone buzzes a notification, and we both flinch slightly at the interruption.

“Ignore it,” I suggest, resettling myself over her. She makes a noise that rumbles deep in her throat, and I smile as I suckle and kiss my way down toward the valley between her breasts. Her skin is so smooth, so soft, and she smells intoxicating.

She groans this time as the phone buzzes again.

“I...I just — what if — your parents...” she pants. I

hear the reluctance in her voice, but I know she's right.

Carefully, she eases out from under me and pulls her phone out of her pocket. My arm buckles, and I collapse onto the bed, managing to roll to my back and away from her as I fall. My chest heaves as my breaths come fast and short, and I close my eyes and settle into the mattress as she checks her messages. She inhales sharply, and I turn and look at her. Her shirt is still pushed partway up to her chest, and her lips are swollen and wet from our kisses. God, she is beautiful. I inch closer to her, twist onto my side, and then reach out and embrace her with one arm as my eyes close again. I feel her lips brush against my forehead.

"They are going to be here any minute," she laments. A gentle hand cups my cheek, and her lips press into mine again, teasing me with just a hint of the passion we shared a moment ago. She then pushes away from me and sits up, straightening out her shirt.

As if on cue, I hear footsteps and rustling from the living room, followed by low voices. My parents. A small smile tugs at the corners of my lips. My incredible mother and father; I love them and have missed them so much. Lois and I can continue where we left off later. Right now, I get to fulfill the promise I made to Mom and Dad — the promise that I would come back home to them. I rub my eyes and grab my T-shirt as Lois stands up.

"I'll go meet them," she suggests. She tucks a strand of her hair back behind her ear and smiles weakly at me. "You should probably put that shirt back on." She winks at me teasingly.

An overwhelming feeling of needing to be near her — of not wanting her to so much as leave the room without me — surges through me, just like when she'd left the room to go meet Clark earlier, and my head begins to swim. I push myself up to a sitting position and then grab her around the waist and pull her to me as she gasps. I kiss her stomach and embrace her again, pressing my forehead into her abdomen.

"Wait for me. I'll come with you. Please."

She massages my shoulders and threads her fingers through my hair. "Okay, sure," she whispers. She plants a light kiss on my head and then steps away from me so I can get dressed.

Moments later, Lois squeezes my hand as we walk together down the hallway toward the living room. My body is screaming at me that it needs another unsatisfyingly short power nap, and my legs tremble with each step. However, I manage to keep up with Lois until the end of the hallway, where we stop abruptly. My mom and dad stand hand in hand next to the couch. They look just as I remember them, although my dad's usual gruff expression is hidden behind a growing smile. My mom's

hands fly up to cover her mouth as she sees me, and tears run down her cheeks as she leaves Dad's side and rushes across the room. Dad follows just behind her, his glasses falling crookedly down his nose as he wipes away a tear of his own. I'm vaguely aware of Lois moving away from me to give them room and a brightly clad figure standing by the window on the opposite side of the room, but all of that awareness disappears as my mom's arms embrace me.

"Oh, Clark," she cries. Her body shakes as she sobs, and her tears wet my shirt. I close my eyes as I tighten my arms around her. *God, Mom, I'm so sorry to have put you through this.* My dad joins in the embrace, wrapping one arm around each of us. The familiarity of this, this hug — something I've taken for granted for my entire twenty-eight years of life — it energizes me. My legs stop shaking, and the throbbing pain in my chest fades somewhat.

From across the room, I hear a whisper of a thought. "*Bank alarm. Maybe... No, I should go.*" He doesn't want to leave. But I hear echoing of gunshots from his superhearing. He speaks with Lois briefly, and a second later, Superman's telltale sonic boom rattles the windows.

The boost of energy I'd felt fades, and I open my eyes and pull back slightly from the embrace.

"Mom, Dad — I missed you both so much," I manage, my voice hoarse. Seeing my mom's tear-stained cheeks unsettles me. "I'm so sorry. Both of you. All of you." I glance up to Lois, who hovers a few feet away, wiping the tears from under her eyes. Mom begins to shake her head, but I pull her back in for another hug and rasp, "I should never have left. I shouldn't have left."

No one argues with me. No one tells me that it was the right thing to do. No one tries to convince me that I was a hero to my people. Nope. We all just hold each other for another few minutes. Finally, when my legs are about to give out, Lois gently touches my shoulder.

"You should sit, sweetheart," she suggests, motioning to the couch.

I nod numbly and allow her to help me over to the sofa. I sit heavily, and my parents position themselves on either side of me. My mom immediately embraces me again, as though she cannot stand any amount of distance between us. I meet Lois's eyes briefly, and she smiles at me. I can see her concern though. She knows that I'm tired.

"I-I can't believe you're back, Clark," Mom says quietly, her voice muffled in my shoulder. "I thought we'd lost you forever. When Lois called and told us that you'd..." She can't finish her thought. Instead, she shakes her head, fresh tears sliding down her cheeks. My chest hurts. Not only because of my wound. No, not only because of that. But also because I see how much my death hurt them. All of them.



I sense Clark floating outside the window, having returned from helping with the bank robbery, and I'm reminded again of how lucky I am, how lucky we all are, that he is here and that he brought me home. He is watching, but giving us space. More evidence of his thoughtfulness. I feel a need to thank him again. I know he will hear me now.

"It's a good thing the other Clark was here to bring me back," I start. I raise my eyes to meet Lois's. She stands a few feet away now and nods slightly, agreeing with my words. There's so much more I should say, but my voice seems to fail me. When I'm feeling more articulate and less exhausted, I'll need to thank him properly. All I can manage now is to add, "I don't know how much longer it would have taken for me to be able to fly home of my own power, for me to come home to all of you. If I'd even been able to at all."

I feel Dad tense up next to me, and he shifts on the couch with agitation.

"Kinda fishy if you ask me," Dad mutters. I recognize the wary, mistrustful tone in his voice, similar to the tone he might use when referring to a slimy car salesman. My jaw clenches as I feel Clark's dejection outside, and I quickly realize something must have happened between them. I look up to Lois, but she stares at the ground now, her shoulders hunched and her arms crossed over her chest. She heard it too. Oh, man, this was not my intention. Dad's hand shudders as he straightens his glasses, and Mom speaks up from next to me, her arm squeezing my shoulders gently.

"What is, Jonathan?" Unlike my father, her voice is calm and kind, as always. But she's now opened the door for Dad to say exactly what he is thinking. Which is exactly what he does.

"He shows up, claiming he is here to help since the world needs Superman," he grumbles, shaking his head indignantly. "But the world has Superman still, we just needed to wait a bit longer for him to come home. He jumped right into your life, taking over your jobs, your apartment, your fiancée..."

I bite my lip, forcing myself to not respond. I know my dad; it's not worth arguing with him when he's got an opinion like this. He will change his opinion over time, when he gets to know Clark better, but his initial mistrust, whatever it was borne out of, will persist until he is ready. Mom usually has the best luck — or skill, I suppose — getting him to shift his views. I glance at Lois again and see her holding back a rebuttal as well. She swallows anxiously and shakes her head, almost imperceptibly.

Outside, Clark is nauseous. He's not even aware that I'm sensing his mood. I stop eavesdropping and turn my head toward my dad. This isn't fair to Clark. I need to

speaking up. But Mom beats me to it.

"No, Jon, he was just acting on the information he had available to him," Mom corrects in a sympathetic tone. They've discussed this before, I gather. I make a mental note to ask Lois about this all later — something had to have happened to make my dad feel Clark isn't trustworthy. My mom hugs me tightly and continues in a much more enthusiastic voice. "It doesn't even matter now. All that matters is that you're back now. I can't tell you how happy I am, Clark. Oh, my boy!"

I smile weakly and lean my head onto her shoulder, suddenly feeling quite tired again. And I close my eyes. Dad puts an arm around my shoulder, and soon, Lois joins us, stepping up behind me and leaning over the back of the couch as she wraps her arms around me. I forget about Clark's distress for a moment and concentrate instead on the wonderful feeling of being home and loved.

I'll worry about Clark later.

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## 10

I don't last much longer before my vision begins to go blurry again. Small multicolored dots dance in front of my eyes, and a throbbing pain pulses at the base of my skull. I press my head into my hands and screw my eyes shut, suppressing a groan.

"You're almost out of chamomile, Lois," Mom says from the kitchen, raising her voice so Lois can hear. The teapot whistles from its place on the stove, the sound exacerbating my headache.

"I'll have Clark pick some up for me next time he's in Shanghai," Lois replies from the hallway. I hear two sets of footsteps as Lois and my dad return from moving the luggage to the guest bedroom. There is a brief pause, and then Lois is at my side, her hand touching my shoulder lightly as she sits next to me. Her lips brush gently against my cheek, and she whispers, "Are you okay, sweetheart?"

"Yeah, I, um, I just..." I can't seem to form sentences. I shake my head, but that doesn't help my growing headache and only serves to make me dizzy on top of everything else. "Tired," I manage.

"Do you need to go lie down for a few minutes?" she asks quietly. Her hand moves to my back, and I hear my dad's footsteps move closer to the couch, his breathing slightly labored.

"Um, yeah, that's... Yeah." I straighten up a bit and open my eyes, trying to blink away the dancing spots. Nausea is quickly added to the growing list of symptoms, however, and I groan and close my eyes again.

"It's okay, sweetie. I'll help you, and you'll feel better again after you rest a bit," Lois assures me. She loops her arm around my waist and stands up, encouraging me to

follow. My legs complain and wobble, but I manage to push up to my feet. “Martha, I’ll be right back,” she says. I hear a muffled murmur from my mom in the kitchen, but I concentrate on moving with Lois through the apartment toward the bedroom as I feel myself slipping away into darkness. Not yet, we’re not there yet. I stumble as we turn into the bedroom, and Lois’s arm tightens around my waist.

“Almost there, Clark.” Her voice is soothing and confident. What have I done to deserve her kindness? “One more step.”

I blink my eyes open again and see the bed just in front of us. Lois reaches out ahead of me and pulls the comforter back, then helps me to turn around and sit.

“Thank you, hon,” I say as I shift onto my back and close my eyes. I feel her pull the comforter up over me and press her lips to mine. Her hand caresses my forehead gently.

“Rest now. Okay?”

“Mmmhmm.”

The bed compresses next to me as she sits, and I lean into her touch. *My beautiful Lois. Please stay with me. I need you here. To keep out the darkness.* She can’t hear my thoughts, however, and as I drift off to sleep, she kisses my forehead and her warmth disappears. *No, Lois. Please stay.*

Too late. She’s gone.

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## 11

I am cold — freezing, really — despite the scorching red sunlight burning my flesh. I run, bare-chested, over a hard, dusty, unforgiving trail. The rocks underneath me cut into the soles of my bare feet, but I ignore the pain and continue to sprint toward a bright yellow light glowing far in the distance. I must make it there. The yellow light will take me home. That is my only objective. My lungs burn, and my muscles ache; I keep running.

Ahead of me, two men materialize out of the earth. They wear the now-familiar Kryptonian battle suits of Nor’s army — black armor with the emblem of the House of Zod on a red armband — and they both wield nanotech-coated broadswords, similar to mine. I halt abruptly and pull my own sword out of its sheath. The blade vibrates menacingly in my hands, and I growl at the two soldiers as I lunge with incredible speed. Anger. I’m so angry. They are slowing me down. I must make it to the yellow light. My sword slices through both of them before they can react, and they fall to the ground at my feet. I wipe the blood off of the blade onto one leg of my tattered pants before sheathing the sword, and my feet start moving again.

The trail beneath my feet begins to rise up a steep hill, and the rocks become sharper. Soon, I’m racing over glass shards, screaming as the ground shreds my already raw feet. I cannot stop now. I cannot stop. *Lois.* I must get home. The glass melts into a flat, searing hot surface, and my feet begin to steam and blister with every step. Still I continue. A rustling from behind me is followed immediately by a strong arm wrapping around my neck. I’m forced to my knees, and I cry out in agony as I hit the sizzling earth. Two more men jump out in front of me, and fists start to pound my face, chest, and abdomen. Anger. I hate them. I hate them all. They are keeping me here, when I need to get to the yellow light. I scream with rage and rise to my feet, overpowering the man behind me. With one quick motion, I pull my deadly blade out from its sheath and slash all three men, killing them instantly. My chest heaves with effort, and the air seems to thicken around me, the red haze from the sun growing denser. I cough as I breathe in the red mist, and I step over the dead bodies at my feet and launch myself back into a sprint.

The trail levels out again, and the yellow light still shines in the distance. Is it any closer? It seems farther away. How is that possible? My vision fractures into two — on my right, an army of soldiers with red armbands approaches, and on my left, a sea of lifeless bodies forms a huge wave moving toward me, bodies falling and rising over other bodies. Blood everywhere. I switch my sword to my right hand — my nondominant hand, but it will have to do — and I charge toward the army. A single man against thousands. The bodies continue to follow me, the wave growing like a tsunami, as I slice and slash through the army. Every man I kill becomes part of the sea behind me, and yet, I continue toward the yellow light. Home. I must get home. Anger. Madness. Home. I must get home. Hate. I hate them all. Get out of my way. I must get home. I must get home. I strike down the final enemy soldier. I have killed them all. I must get home. But my feet will not carry me another step.

Exhausted, I fall to my knees. As I hit the ground, an earsplitting sound, like a sonic boom, echoes around me, and the sea of bodies vanishes, replaced by miles and miles of dead, dusty earth. The thick red haze blurs my vision, and breathing it in stings my lungs. A single man clad in a black battle suit similar to mine approaches me out of the red fog, swinging a massive broadsword in his hand. He laughs at me. There is something familiar about him, but I can’t place it. I stand and regrip my sword, moving it back to my left hand. The man smiles maliciously and then lunges forward, his broadsword moving absurdly fast. Despite my fatigue, I parry his blow and automatically counterattack. My sword slices through his abdomen, and blood spurts out of the fresh open wound, coating my

blade. The man's eyes widen and then become unfocused as his life leaves him; his body collapses and turns to ashes at my feet.

A hand grabs my shoulder, and I spin around as I raise my sword up to attack.

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## 12

I sit bolt upright in bed, twisting around and grasping a small wrist tightly in my left hand. Sweat drips down my face, and my chest heaves as I take short, rapid breaths. Through blurry vision, I see Lois's eyes first widen in surprise and then screw shut as she inhales sharply. The dim lighting of the room obscures her facial features, but an obvious pained expression crosses her face as she tries to tug her hand out of my grip. Immediately, I release her wrist.

"Oh, God, Lois. I'm so sorry," I blurt out.

My voice sounds foreign — this isn't really me. I'm not really here, and I didn't really just do that to her. I blink several times. I didn't really just do that to her. Right? Her eyes are lowered now, but a single tear slides down her cheek, and she rubs her injured wrist with her other hand. An angry red discoloration already encircles her wrist.

God. I did really just do that to her.

I push myself up out of the bed and stumble across the room.

"I'm so sorry. Are you okay? I'm — God, I'm sorry, Lois."

I begin pacing at the edge of the room, and I run my hand through my hair, damp from sweat. The room sways around me, and I stop as a wave of nausea — like the wave of dead bodies from my dream — pummels me. I grab onto the wall next to me to keep myself from collapsing.

Lois moves off the bed and starts toward me, but I hastily back away, tripping as I run into the dresser. "Clark, it's okay, sweetheart. It was an accident. I'm fine. Just breathe, sweetie," she tells me, her voice calm and firm. She advances a few more steps toward me, and my stomach seems to twist into knots.

"No, stay away. I don't want to hurt you," I plead, gesturing with my hands for her to stop. I try to focus my eyes on her, but my vision is still fuzzy. "Please, stay away. Please."

"Clark, look at me, sweetheart," she instructs.

But I can't. I can't. I can't.

I turn away from her and start pacing again. Dead bodies swim around in my vision, and I feel another wave of lifeless corpses crashing over me. I raise my hands up to protect myself, but the wave hits hard, and I fall to my knees. Blood covers my hands. I try to wipe the viscous

red liquid off on my shirt, but it won't come off. Why won't it come off? Please. I push myself back to my feet and head toward the bathroom. I can wash it off.

I turn on the water as hot as it will go and shove my hands under the burning stream. Soap. I need soap. Three or four or maybe five squirts of the lavender-scented liquid. I scrub. Harder. The bubbles aren't working. There is still blood.

"Clark?"

Why won't it come off? I scrub harder.

"Sweetheart, please."

"Why won't it come off?"

"Honey, there's nothing there."

No. They are covered in blood. So much blood. Can't she see it? I scrub harder.

"Clark, your hands are clean, sweetheart." She is close to me now. Too close. I could hurt her. She shouldn't be near me.

I forget about washing the blood off my hands and step backward, away from her. I continue backing up into the corner of the bathroom until I feel the cold, hard wall against my back, and my knees buckle. I slide down into a seated position against the wall.

"Please stay away," I beg, lowering my head to press against my knees. The room begins to spin around me. I close my eyes to fight off the nausea.

"I'll sit right here. Okay, sweetheart?" Her voice reverberates through the room and echoes in my head. I risk a glance up at her; she sits cross-legged on the floor about three feet away from me. Her nightgown is bunched up around her thighs, and her hair falls loosely around her shoulders. Her face is tight with concern, frown lines creasing on her forehead. I screw my eyes shut again and nod my head against my knees. I can't hurt her from here. I — God, how could I have done that to her?

We sit there in silence for some time. Eventually, the room stops spinning, and my rapid breathing slows. However, a tingling sensation persists in my hands and feet, and when I try to open my eyes, the bright artificial light of the bathroom is disorienting. I shut them again. She is still there, sitting quietly, waiting patiently for me. I don't deserve her.

"Are — are you okay?" I ask. The words are difficult to form, and my mouth feels like it's stuffed full of cotton. I hear her move closer to me, and I tighten my arms around my knees as tension builds in my shoulders. A sharp pain erupts in my head, and I clench my jaw to keep from groaning.

"Yes, sweetheart. I'm fine, really," she replies gently. A small hand rests carefully on my arm, and I have to force myself not to flinch away. "It was just an accident. I'm okay. Please look at me, Clark." I hear her pleading

tone, but I shake my head.

“I’m so sorry,” I mumble, keeping my head buried in my knees. Her hand squeezes my arm, and she shifts closer to me, moving to wrap one arm around my shoulders. Her body presses up against mine. I can’t breathe. I see her wide, scared eyes, my hand gripping her wrist roughly. Blood. Bodies. Drowning in a sea of dead soldiers. Soldiers that I killed. No, I won’t hurt her.

I jump to my feet and move out of the room, barely managing to stay upright as large black spots dance in my vision and the room spins again.

“I’m so sorry,” I repeat. Over and over. My feet find a path along the far wall near the window. It is dark outside now. When did the Sun go down? My hands wring together as I pace, and I’m only vaguely aware of her following me out of the bathroom and then settling silently on the edge of the bed. I pace and pace. I can’t seem to allow myself to stop. My feet begin to ache, and my legs quiver. But I can’t stop. “I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry.”

Through the red haze that seems to have filled the room around me, I hear a muffled sob. My feet finally freeze, although my body almost continues moving forward, and I grasp the wall to keep myself upright. The red fog dissipates, and I see her — my lovely fiancée, the love of my life — sitting on the bed several feet away from me, her head buried in her hands. Her body shakes as she sobs.

All the energy I’d had — all that I used to pace for who knows how long — is gone now, and I collapse to the ground. My knees hitting the carpet sends shooting pain through my back and chest, and I give in to the exhaustion and roll over onto my back on the floor.

“Lois?” I force her name out and weakly reach toward her. My arm will barely lift off the floor. She is at my side almost immediately, her hand clasping mine, and I close my eyes and rest my head back onto the ground again. “Lois, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt you. I-I didn’t mean to make you cry.”

She stretches out next to me and buries her head into my shoulder.

“It’s okay, sweetheart,” she whispers. “I’m fine. It’s okay. We’re okay. Shhhh.”

I want to curl up and wrap my arms around her. But fear prevents me from moving.

“I love you, Lois,” I murmur, my voice trembling.

“I love you.”

Her hand brushes against my cheek, and my aching body shudders as my brain begins to shut down, pulling me back toward unconsciousness.

“D-don’t l-leave me, p-please,” I implore her.

“I’m not going anywhere, sweetheart,” she promises.

Her lips press against my temple, and I fall into a

dreamless sleep.

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### 13

Morning brings weak rays of sunlight peeking through the curtains. I wake up slowly, stiffly, my muscles complaining about the effort I forced upon them last night. Next to me, Lois shifts slightly, and her kind voice whispers, “Good morning, sweetheart.”

Although we are still lying on the floor in the corner of the room, at some point during the night, Lois had retrieved a lightweight blanket and pillows from the bed; we are curled up together underneath the warm covers, and my head rests on a fluffy white pillow. Her hand lies flat on my abdomen, and her head is settled in the crook of my shoulder.

I swallow hard as I remember the events of the previous night. My whole body tenses as I move my hand to cover hers on my stomach. I lift her hand slightly so I can see her wrist, and my breath catches nauseatingly in my throat as I see the red discoloration. Evidence of the pain I inflicted upon her. Evidence that I’m dangerous to her. I close my eyes.

“Clark,” she says, her tone gentle. “Sweetie, it doesn’t hurt. I’m fine.” Her lips brush against my cheek.

How can she be so calm? I fight down nausea and shake my head. I want to say something. I want to apologize again. To tell her I’ll fix everything and that it will never happen again. But no words will come.

“While it’s been fun camping out on the floor with you, I hear your mom poking around in the kitchen, and I’m afraid she won’t find much to cook with,” she teases. The reassuring pressure of her body pressed up against mine disappears as she sits up, adding, “I should get up and go help her.”

I don’t want to be alone — even just the thought makes my heart start to race. So I follow her, pushing myself into a sitting position despite the complaints from my sore muscles. She is already standing and beginning to move toward the bathroom, but my movement stops her, and she turns back toward me as I gather my legs underneath me to stand. She hesitates for only a moment before stepping back over to me to help me up. The room spins around me as I get my bearings, and I grimace as I straighten up next to her. Her hand lingers on my arm.

“You don’t want to be by yourself, do you?” she asks quietly. She shifts to stand in front of me and wraps her arms around my waist.

I don’t move. I want to return the embrace. I need her so much. But a vision of my hand catching her wrist flashes in my mind, the pained expression on her face haunting me. And so I stand stiffly as she leans into me.

“No, I don’t,” I say hoarsely. My throat feels dry. I can’t fully explain the extreme anxiety I’ve started to feel when she leaves and I’m alone. It feels like the worst part of death. Like I’m slipping into that terrifying cold, dark nothingness. Like everything is closing in around me. And I can’t breathe.

She nods into my chest and holds me for a moment. Then, she pulls away and studies my eyes. Both of her hands move to cup my cheeks, and she stretches up and kisses me — a light kiss, comforting, but not demanding. I still cannot bring myself to touch her.

“I’ll just get dressed and go out to the kitchen for only a minute to see if your mom needs anything,” she explains, her voice low. She slides her arms back around my waist and hugs me again. “I’ll be back before you know it. Okay?”

I nod, but don’t say anything. She steps away from me and smiles at me weakly before moving to the dresser, pulling out several items of clothing, and disappearing into the bathroom. My heart starts to race. I force myself to take a deep breath. I’m fine. She’s just in the bathroom. I’m not alone. I’m fine. I bend over carefully, pick up the two pillows and blanket from the floor, and stumble to the bed, where I set the bedding down.

Lois emerges from the bathroom, now clad in a clean set of yoga pants and a long-sleeved light blue shirt with the words ‘Women in Journalism Conference 1995’ across the front. She smiles at me.

“I’ll be right back,” she promises, and she heads out of the bedroom.

Suddenly dizzy, I grab onto the edge of the bed next to me and close my eyes. I’m fine. She’ll be right back. She told me. I hear voices and some rustling sounds from the other room. Then her footsteps re-enter the room, and the door closes behind her. See. Less than a minute.

“Your mom is making waffles,” she says. I open my eyes as her hands once again move to embrace me. She kisses my cheek and then settles her head on my chest.

“Blueberry?”

“Yes. And eggs and sausage.”

“That sounds wonderful,” I breathe, resting my head on top of hers and cautiously allowing my arms to wrap around her.

“Your dad just got back from the store,” she adds. “Your mom says everything will be ready in maybe fifteen minutes.”

I nod into her, breathing in the familiar, comforting scent of her shampoo. God, how I missed her.

She shifts slightly in my embrace, and I feel tension grow in her shoulders. She clears her throat and says tentatively, “So, we have a little time to talk...about last night.”

My arms drop from around her, and I shake my head as I back away. “Lois, I’m so sorry.” The words roll right off my tongue, as they had countless times last night. Only this time, I feel like I might be in control of my actions. Last night, I wasn’t. Not entirely. I turn away from her as my stomach twists itself into knots. “It won’t happen again. I won’t hurt you again. I’m so sorry.”

“No, Clark,” she says gently, reaching out to me. Her hands rest on my back, and she presses herself up against me from behind. “That’s not what I meant, sweetheart.” Her voice is so kind, so sympathetic, as though she understands why I’m upset. But I know she can’t understand.

I shake my head again and step away from her, turning to face her as I do. My back is against the wall now. I cross my arms tightly over my chest, not like Superman does — no, the opposite actually. And I lower my eyes to the ground as my shoulders hunch.

Lois, my lovely, strong, resilient Lois. She doesn’t even hesitate. She steps up to me and places her hands lightly on my arms.

“Clark, sweetheart, we don’t need to talk about what happened. We need to talk about why it happened,” she explains.

My throat constricts; I can’t speak, and I feel myself shivering. Why had it happened? Why had I hurt her? Why had I panicked and paced and attempted to scrub imaginary blood from my hands? Why had we ended up sleeping on the floor? God, I don’t want to think about it. I don’t want to remember. But I can’t stop it. I close my eyes as images from the terrifying, violent nightmare, filled with death, destruction, and pain, flicker in my vision.

“No, no, no,” I mumble. Suddenly feeling trapped against the wall, I push my way around her and move to the bed. I sit heavily and run a trembling hand through my hair. “No, I don’t want to talk about it. I can’t.”

She doesn’t immediately follow me, and I hear her let out a shaky breath. This isn’t fair to her. But telling her everything that I went through, everything that I did, everything that I now am — that wouldn’t be fair to her either. No, I can’t.

“I came back into the bedroom late, after getting your parents settled into the guest room,” she starts, her voice now clear and confident. I lower my head into my hands as she continues. “You’d been sleeping for several hours already, and I was really glad you were finally getting rest.” The bed compresses next to me, but she doesn’t touch me this time. “I showered and got changed, and when I went to get into bed, you started to talk in your sleep and move around restlessly. You seemed to be getting progressively agitated, so I reached out and

touched your shoulder to try to settle you. And that’s when you woke up.” Now she shifts closer to me, and I feel her hand on my thigh. “So I assume you had a pretty intense dream. I’m sorry to have startled you out of it.”

I shake my head, finally able to react to her words. “No, please don’t apologize,” I reply hastily. Her hand squeezes my leg gently, but she doesn’t move. Her breath seems to catch in her throat.

“Clark, I-I know that it may be difficult to talk about, but…” Her voice trails off, and she finally scoots up against me and wraps one arm around my hunched shoulders. She brushes a gentle kiss on my cheek. “But I think last night — after you woke up, you had a major panic attack, sweetheart, and I think that’s not something we can just ignore and assume it will get better.”

Of course, she is right. I know this. Intellectually, I know this. But my brain is also screaming at me that I cannot talk about it. That if I do talk about it — if I do tell her what I’ve done, who I’ve become — she will not be able to love me anymore.

I am not worthy of her love.

I killed hundreds of men in the name of pursuing peace. Purposefully, boldly, and without hesitation.

Something Superman is never supposed to do. Never. No compromises.

And yet, I compromised.

I don’t deserve her.

But I can’t fathom losing her. And that’s why I can’t tell her. I’m a coward. Of the worst sort.

“No, I can’t,” I repeat, mumbling into my hands. She tugs gently on me until I’m leaning on her, and I feel another kiss plant on the top of my head this time. “I’m sorry, Lois.”

“I love you, Clark,” she murmurs into my hair. She tightens her arms around me. God, I don’t deserve this.

“I love you, too.”

“I know you think that whatever you have to tell me will change my feelings about you,” she acknowledges. One hand strokes my back as she again kisses the top of my head. “And you’re wrong. I love you. Always. Nothing will change that. Nothing could change that.”

“You can’t know that, Lois,” I argue. I shake my head and stand up abruptly, pulling out of her embrace. My hands and arms feel numb now, though there is a slight tingling in my fingers, and I find myself balling up my hands into fists to try to get rid of the disconcerting sensation. It doesn’t work. I move across the room, back toward the window, where light from the Sun shines through the curtains. “I’m sorry,” I say again. “I can’t talk about it. Not yet.”

Behind me, I hear her stand and shuffle around briefly. Her breathing seems labored, and she snuffles several

times. God, I’ve made her cry again. I’m terrible. A monster. I’m so sorry, Lois.

“Okay. I-I hope you are ready soon,” she falters. She is standing just a few feet from me now, but she doesn’t move any closer. She sucks in a deep breath. “I’ll wait for you. For as long as it takes, I’ll wait for you.”

God. I bite my lip hard, tasting blood, and I have to force myself to not turn around, throw myself into her arms, and cry. Instead, I just nod weakly.

“I’m going to go help your mom finish up breakfast.”

“I-I’ll come with you,” I stammer.

I turn around; she stands with her arms folded in front of her protectively, tears wetting her cheeks. She reaches up and wipes them away as she clenches her jaw and nods at me. Then, she offers me her hand. My eyes wander to the abrasion on her wrist, and I hesitate. However, Lois doesn’t falter. She grasps my hand in hers and turns, pulling me along with her toward the door. I follow obediently. And I absently wonder how she is so strong and poised, so sure of herself, despite everything that has happened in the last twenty-four hours.

I also wonder what happened to Lord Kal-El, confident and self-assured leader of New Krypton. I used to be him — the one giving commands to thousands of soldiers; the one striding confidently through masses of followers to lead a group of officers with so much more experience than I; the one who did not second-guess himself, even when standing in front of the Council of Elders and arguing about outdated traditions and customs and the merits of self-determination, gender equality, and democracy. I used to be so certain about who I was. I used to know myself — to know what I stood for and where my hard limits were. But now… I don’t even recognize myself.

And so, I guess I’ll have to pretend. I don’t know who I am anymore, but I can pretend to be who they want me to be. At least until I can figure myself out again.

I follow her out of the bedroom and down the hallway. The smell of my mom’s blueberry waffles is strong, and a sense of nostalgia hits me as we walk hand in hand into the living room.

I take a deep breath and force a smile on my face as my mom looks up at me from the kitchen.

“Good morning, Mom!”

I can do this. I can pretend.

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## 14

And pretending is much easier than I expected. At least with my parents.

We spend the morning talking over breakfast. My appetite has come back, and I manage to eat the entire plate of waffles, eggs, and sausage that my mom prepares

for me. Mom and Dad tell me about the most recent corn harvest as well as some repairs they've made around the farm. The conversation is easy; they don't press me to tell them anything about New Krypton. In fact, they don't mention it at all. They tell me about the color they chose to paint the exterior of the farmhouse, which they'd been planning before I left, and the new tractor their neighbor Wayne Irig had given them. Mom also describes a new painting she's working on, and Dad tells me about some work he did a couple months ago to help rebuild a friend's barn after a tornado struck. They are generally cheerful and happy, and the morning feels almost normal, almost like how we'd have spent a morning with them before I left.

However, Lois sits next to me silently, picking absently at her own breakfast. She occasionally inserts a few words into the conversation, but is mostly quiet. Mom glances at her and then back to me every so often, hiding her concern behind a kind smile.

After breakfast, I try to help with the dishes, but Lois stops me with a kiss on the cheek.

"I'll take care of it, sweetheart. You spend time with your parents," she says, stepping up to the sink. She begins scrubbing a pan as my mom loops her arm through mine and ushers me to the couch. My eyes linger on my beautiful fiancée for an extra moment after I sit, and I swallow tightly as I notice the tension in her shoulders. My lovely Lois. I'm so sorry I hurt you.

My mom squeezes my hand next to me, and I tilt my head toward her and smile again.

"You look much better than yesterday," Mom observes, her voice a bit low.

I smile weakly. "I feel much better. I finally got some solid sleep, and that really helped," I explain. And it's true. Although there is still a dull ache in my chest, I feel stronger and more stable than I had yesterday. At least physically.

From his seat next to me, my dad lifts the remote control and turns on the television. He flips to the news channel and mutes the sound, a frown growing on his face as the video footage shows Superman assisting with putting out a chemical fire at a manufacturing plant in Nevada. I grimace as I watch, but only because I remember the challenge of washing off the acrid smell of smoke after helping with a chemical fire. Definitely not my favorite type of emergency to help with. Mom follows my gaze.

"He's really been a huge help, you know," she says, moving her hand to my knee. She pats me gently as I nod in assent. "He's done a good job. Been a good Superman."

My dad scoffs, but doesn't argue with her, and Mom meets my eyes and then shakes her head almost

imperceptibly, imploring me to ignore my father's behavior right now. I turn back to the television, my eyes drawn to my doppelganger on the screen. Chemical fires can be tricky to extinguish, but he's got an easy handle on it; his cooling breath seems to be working, although spot fires continue to pop back up, and he is now consulting with the chief firefighter on the scene. I assume they will have him help apply a chemical retardant to smother the most stubborn of the flames. I shift on the couch, settling back into the cushions.

"I saw him working on the nuclear power plant repair in Japan. That was complicated, but he had no trouble. He's got a good handle on his abilities," I remark, watching my dad's reaction carefully. His facial muscles tighten, but again, he says nothing.

Lois speaks up from the kitchen. "He told me he had to deal with the same emergency in his world last year."

"Last year?" Mom questions, twisting a bit so she is facing Lois.

Lois nods as she moves a plate into the dishwasher. "It's odd, really. Some events in his world seemed to have happened about a year prior to when they happen here, and others, like that airplane crash last month, happen at the same time."

I feel nauseous, but I hide it as best I can. "Airplane crash?"

Mom shifts next to me, and Lois inhales sharply. "Yeah," she falters, putting another plate into the dishwasher. She hesitates for a brief moment before continuing. "A flight from Los Angeles. The engines failed. It crashed about forty miles west of Metropolis."

She doesn't say any more, but I hear the unspoken words clearly enough. Everyone onboard died. More deaths notched on my belt. I should never have left. I drop my chin and close my eyes a moment.

"That happened right before he came," Mom adds. She stands and moves into the kitchen briefly, then brings us each a fresh cup of mint tea.

I murmur a quick "thank you" to my mom, and Lois turns around, drying her hands on a dishtowel. She walks across the room to her desk, opens the top right drawer, and pulls out a thick folder stuffed with newspaper clippings. She raises her eyes to me and gives me a weak smile.

"And since he's been here," she says, holding up the folder. "All of this." Lois again crosses the room, this time stopping in front of me. She hands me the folder. "He's been very busy."

I lower my eyes to the folder and tentatively open the front cover. The first article, titled "SUPERMAN RETURNS: Exclusive Interview And Look At Life On New Krypton," spans several pages of a Special Edition

print of the *Daily Planet*. I begin reading, intending only to skim the first few lines, but I quickly find myself immersed in the prose. He’s an incredible writer, and he somehow managed to present the account of my journey — minus the final moments — accurately and thoroughly, in a captivating text that is also easy to read. I continue reading until I reach the end of the article, and I recognize my own words and ideas represented throughout the article. I look up at Lois, who is back in the kitchen finishing the dishes. Her eyes meet mine.

“He, uh, must have...used my journals for this?” I ask in a low voice.

She nods. “Yeah,” she confirms. Her eyes dart to my dad and then back to me. “He wrote that the first night he was here, using your journals. He tried his best to copy your writing style as well.”

“He did a great job with it,” I state as I drop my eyes back to the stack of newspapers in my lap. I flip through to the next clippings, which are not articles written by Clark Kent, but instead are articles detailing Superman’s activities since he ‘returned’ from New Krypton. Lois is right — he has been busy. A little boy rescued from an apartment fire. A mass shooting thwarted at a protest rally in Centennial Park. A wildfire extinguished in Colorado. Bank robberies. Traffic accidents. A huge dam repaired before it could burst in Russia. Hikers rescued from an avalanche in Switzerland. A cruise ship saved from sinking during the middle of a powerful storm. A tenuous cease fire negotiated in an intense conflict in Syria. The International Space Station repaired after taking severe damage due to space debris. All this within the first few days of his move to this world.

My slow flipping through the articles stops abruptly as I scan the next headline, “Five Children and Two Faculty Dead in School Shooting at Briarwood Elementary.” Underneath the main headline, a second line in smaller font reads, “Superman Stops Shooter, Saves Dozens.” I scan the first few lines, and I have to force myself to remember to breathe. God, I’m glad I wasn’t here for this one. The victims were elementary children. Kindergarteners and first graders mostly.

I feel my mom’s hand cover mine, and I realize I’m shaking pretty badly. I close the folder and set it on the coffee table. I suddenly feel sick.

“I think I need to go lie down,” I say quietly. “Sorry, Mom, Dad.”

“Oh, honey, it’s no problem,” Mom assures me, rubbing my back gently. “I think your father and I will take a walk to the park. Get some fresh air. You rest.”

As I push myself to my feet, I remember one of the visions I’d had while I thought I was dead. Everything had been so confusing — bits and pieces of visions, memories,

and events. Many of them his experiences. And I hadn’t taken the time to reflect on it all. But now, I remember the gunshots, the screaming, the crying. The children huddled in a corner, their teacher valiantly trying to protect them. Bullets hurdling out of an assault rifle. Blood on my hands — no, his hands — and on the suit, staining the red and yellow ‘S’ shield. I remember his pain and grief as he transported victims to the hospital. His echoing thoughts that he is not fast enough.

I stumble as I move around the coffee table toward the bedroom, but Lois is right there by my side to steady me. Just as she was with him after he returned from Briarwood. How much had he needed her then? I cannot imagine. I feel her kindness and warmth, and I lean into her as she helps me down the hallway.

“That school shooting,” I say, my voice nearly a whisper. “That — that must have been...” I can’t even finish my sentence. Lois leads me into the dimly lit bedroom and over to the bed.

She sits next to me and pulls me into an embrace. “I think that nearly broke him,” she admits. “It was the most distraught I’ve seen him. He’s usually quite confident when he’s Superman. But that — that was too much for him.”

“But you were there for him. You helped him,” I add. I feel her nod into me.

I want to say more, but a sudden weariness overtakes me, and I close my eyes and lie back on to the bed, pulling out of her arms. Cold. I’m so cold now. Tired and cold. I feel myself start to drift off. A blanket covers me, and then a warm body presses next to me on the bed, an arm draping lightly over my stomach. Lips brush against my cheek, and three words are whispered into my ear.

“I love you.”

I love you, too, Lois.

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## 15

I suppose dying can really take a toll on a person. At least that’s what I tell myself when I wake up several hours later, my chest aching and my head pounding. I’m alone in the bedroom, but the lights are on, the curtains let in plenty of sunlight, the door is open, and voices can be heard from down the hall. The light and voices are probably what keep my anxiety at bay. The clock on the nightstand next to me indicates that it’s around 12:30 p.m., which explains the tantalizing smell of my mom’s homemade chicken soup. I push back the blankets covering me and clench my jaw against the pain in my chest as I sit up and swing my legs off the bed.

My breath seems to rattle as I inhale deeply, and I then exhale with a dry, burning cough. The sound reverberates



through the otherwise quiet bedroom, and the voices from the other room go silent. Footsteps approach from down the hallway.

“Hey, you’re up.”

Her soft voice carries a hint of concern, and I raise my eyes to meet hers. She stands in the doorway, her arms crossed over her chest. Her hair is tied back in a low ponytail now, and her lips curl into a smile as she moves toward me. *So beautiful, my lovely Lois.* Why haven’t I told her how beautiful she is?

I start to return her smile, but a flash of a memory from the previous night flickers in my mind. Her wide, scared eyes and pained expression. And instead of smiling, I recoil as she approaches, my hands clasping together in my lap and my shoulders hunching. Swallowing reflexively, I lower my eyes. She either doesn’t notice my reaction or chooses to ignore it, and she sits next to me, wraps an arm around my shoulder, and plants a kiss on my cheek.

“Lois, I — ” Another coughing fit interrupts my speech, and I groan as my lungs seem to burn with the effort of breathing. I stop trying to talk and close my eyes. Next to me, Lois shifts uneasily.

“Lunch is ready, if you’re up to eating,” she says quietly.

There is something guarded about her demeanor now, and I shudder as a terrifying thought forces its way into my consciousness. *Is she scared of me?* God, what have I done to her?

I nod stiffly and mumble, “‘K, I’ll — I’ll be out — ” But I start coughing again, searing pain stinging my throat and chest. I cover my mouth with my elbow and feel myself start to list sideways into her a bit. Her arm tightens around my shoulders. “S-sorry.”

“No rush, sweetheart.” Her voice soothes my worries. Another light kiss on my cheek brings my pain down a notch. “Can I head back out and help your mom set the table? Will you be okay on you own?”

I nod again. “I’ll be out in a minute,” I assure her, in a voice that is more confident than I feel.

“Okay, great!” Her positivity feels forced, but I don’t question it. Her hand lingers on my back for a moment, and then she pulls away and stands. My heart stutters a bit in my chest.

“Lois...” I want to tell her so many things. That I’ll never hurt her again. That she is beautiful and strong. And that I love her and appreciate everything she’s done for me. That I love her so much. But my voice doesn’t work, and I barely suppress another coughing fit. I screw my eyes shut again as I notice the slight discoloration on her wrist from my outburst the previous night.

Her footsteps have paused a couple feet away, but she stays silent. When I don’t elaborate, she clears her throat

and quietly says, “I’ll be in the kitchen if you need me. I love you, Clark.”

And then she leaves the room, drawing all of the warmth with her. It is cold again. So cold. I start to shiver. I have to follow her. I push myself to my feet, run an anxious hand through my hair, and swallow back a cough as I start toward the hallway. Thankfully, my legs are not wobbly; they actually feel strong enough to carry me forward. Within a moment, I emerge into the living room. My dad stands next to the stove, stirring a large pot of soup, and my mom removes a loaf of freshly baked bread from the oven while Lois sets the table. She looks up at me and smiles.

I manage a weak smile in return.

“That smells amazing, Mom,” I say. I reach the kitchen table. “Can I help with anything?” I know it’s a pretty ridiculous offer; I’m nowhere near strong enough to really help any of them with anything. But I also don’t like feeling so useless, and all they have been doing for the last twenty-four hours is take care of me.

As usual, Lois understands me.

“Here, sweetie, you can finish setting the table. I need to — ”

Her cell phone rings from her pocket, interrupting her. I step over to where she was working and begin to carefully arrange bowls and plates at each of the seats at the table while she opens her phone.

“Ah, it’s, uh, Clark. I’d better take this,” she mumbles. Her fingers seem to fumble as she unlocks her phone and answers the call with a quick, “Hello?” She looks up at me briefly and adds, “Sorry, I’ll be right back.” And then she disappears down the hallway and into the bedroom, shutting the door behind her.

I finish setting the table. It does feel good to have an actual job to do. And when there is a bowl, plate, spoon, fork, and napkin at each seat, my mom carries over a basket filled with warm slices of her fresh bread, and my dad sets the pot of soup in the middle of the table. I don’t have an appetite. In fact, I feel a bit nauseous. But the food smells amazing.

Lois re-emerges from the bedroom a moment later, and we all sit together at the table. My mom serves us each a bowl of soup and slice of bread.

“Clark, uh, he was calling to talk to me about dinner tonight,” Lois explains. She blows gently on her soup to help cool it and then takes a cautious spoonful. With shaky hands, I spread a thin layer of butter on my bread and take a small bite. She continues. “Jimmy is taking Perry out to dinner, and he invited us — Clark and me, that is.” She glances at me fleetingly, some emotion that I can’t pinpoint flickering in her dark eyes. “Perry, um, well, Alice just left him, only two days ago, actually. So he

could use some friends right now, you know?”

Mom speaks up from my left. “Oh, Lois, that’s terrible.”

Lois nods and takes a bite of her bread. Sadness fills her eyes now, and she doesn’t look up as she chews. “Perry talked to me a bit yesterday morning. He — he knows he should have been prioritizing Alice more than the paper. He knows he took her for granted, and he says he’s going to do all that he can to try to win her back. They’ve been married almost thirty years now. I can’t even imagine.”

“Marriage is a lot of work,” Dad inserts. Mom nods and reaches over to take his hand. They look at each other and smile, their eyes communicating their strong, unconditional love for each other.

I’m reminded briefly of a scene I witnessed late one evening when I was about fifteen. I’d been up in my room studying for a physics final, and I’d snuck quietly downstairs to grab a drink of water, expecting my parents to be sleeping. To my surprise, Mom had been sitting at the kitchen table, wearing an elegant black dress, and Dad sat next to her, his black tuxedo a stark contrast to his usual dusty blue jeans and flannel shirt. The room was dimly lit with a single candle, the flame flickering and causing shadows to dance around on the walls of the farmhouse. They sat close together, chatting idly, and as I watched, Dad had reached out and touched Mom’s cheek with a tenderness that I’d never seen from him before. Mom’s hand had covered his, and then they leaned toward each other and shared a gentle kiss. Not the usual peck on the cheek that I was used to seeing from them. No, this had been much more than that. I’d turned around and tiptoed back up to my room, careful not to disturb them. And in that moment, I’d realized what I wanted most in life was to have what they had built together — someone to love me for who or what I was, despite my strange abilities, and a family to share my life with.

My lower lip quivers as I feel Lois’s presence next to me. Mom seems to sense my thoughts, and she turns back to me and Lois, her smile growing as she regards us.

“So, honey, are you going to go?” Mom asks, lifting a piece of bread to her mouth.

“Am I...going to go?” Lois falters.

I tilt my head toward her, and she raises her eyes to my mom’s, her brow furrowed in confusion.

“To dinner with Jimmy and Perry and...” Mom’s voice trails off, and I feel everyone’s eyes shift to me. The muscle in my jaw twitches, and the tickle in my throat from earlier, which caused several painful coughing fits, threatens to return.

“Oh, right, well...”

Lois seems at a loss for words, and it doesn’t require a

fully functional brain — which I’m sure I don’t quite have yet — to realize why she’s feeling awkward.

There are now two Clark Kents. Lois Lane and Clark Kent are invited to dinner. I know I’m no longer Superman. That is easy. But am I really even Clark Kent anymore? I’ve spent the last several months being addressed as Kal-El. Kal-El, rightful ruler of New Krypton. Kal-El, Chief Commanding Officer of the Defenders of New Krypton. And — I shudder — Kal-El, husband to Lady Zara. I’ve been Kal-El, not Clark Kent. And now, Clark Kent should accompany Lois Lane to dinner with their friends.

I want to see Perry and Jimmy. And Perry and Alice separating — this news makes me feel incredibly sad. But, at the same time, I recognize that I’m not healthy enough, mentally or physically, to go out in public yet. No, this is a job for the other me. Lois knows it too, but she doesn’t want to be the first to admit it.

I open my mouth to explain that I understand she should take him, not me, but my dad speaks before I can.

“Of course you two should go. I’m sure you want to see your friends, right, son?”

So matter-of-fact, straight forward, no nonsense, like always. That’s my dad. And veiled in his words are his strong distrust of the other Clark. I shake my head.

“No, Dad, I — ”

I stop myself and raise my eyes to meet his. He is watching me carefully, as are Mom and Lois. Several thoughts run through my mind — doubts, mostly. Doubts about whether I’m making the right decision, whether letting Lois continue to spend time with the other me is a good idea, whether they are all going to accept when I eventually tell them that he — this other me, this other Clark, this other Superman — cannot leave because... because I cannot ever be Superman again. I swallow hard and lower my eyes.

“No. Clark, the other Clark, he should go with you, Lois. I-I wouldn’t make it through dinner, I’m afraid. I’m just not strong enough yet. And...” I pause, taking a deep breath. Dad won’t accept that I’m just not ready physically — he’s a ‘push through the pain’ sort of guy. And my parents don’t exactly know how much pain I’ve been in, or how exhausted I often become. But I’m sure he’ll understand my other reason. “...I just really want to spend time with you guys right now.”

Underneath the table, Lois places a hand on my knee. A silent ‘thank you.’ I give her a tight smile and take another small bite of my bread.

My dad wants to protest; I can feel it. But my mom nods vigorously as she sets her spoon back into her bowl.

“We probably need to head back home tomorrow morning,” she admits, frowning slightly. “Your dad has an

appointment in Wichita with his cardiologist at noon. So the more time we get to spend together today, the better.”

“Martha, we can always reschedule that appointment,” Dad argues, shaking his head slightly. But my mom isn’t having it this time.

“No, Jonathan. You’ve been waiting for this appointment for too long already,” she reminds him, patting him gently on the back. Then she looks up at me and Lois. “Lois, you go and take the other Clark, and we’ll hang out here.”

Dad can’t argue with that. Neither can Lois. She nods, and we all settle into a sort of pregnant silence while we finish our lunch.

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## 16

The rest of the day passes uneventfully. Spending time with my parents feels healing in a way, but is also draining as I continue to project my ‘act’ of being okay. Lois seems to have resigned herself to my pretense, and much of the day, she remains quiet, distracting herself by cleaning the house, checking work emails, organizing her desk drawers, and other unimportant tasks. My mom notices, of course, but she says nothing.

At around 6 p.m., Lois excuses herself to the bedroom to get ready for dinner with Perry, Jimmy, and Clark. As she disappears down the hallway, absently rubbing her wrist, Mom moves into the kitchen and starts rifling through the refrigerator and cupboards, looking for ingredients to make dinner. Dad switches on the television to a football game and settles back onto the couch.

My eyes wander longingly toward the bedroom, where Lois is probably showering. I feel my heart rate increase as a memory tugs at me. Lois stepping into the hot stream of water, the droplets cascading down her naked body, and then her hands running through her hair, over her breasts, and down to her hips. I close my eyes and push the images out of my mind. But they stubbornly refuse to leave. I see myself reaching out and touching her, and her hands, guiding mine to her breasts and then lower. God, I want to touch her now. I stand abruptly and mumble, just loud enough for my parents to hear, “I’m going to go lie down for a bit.”

I’m almost in a daze as I make my way slowly down the hall. I knock gently on the bedroom door, and, hearing no response, I let myself in, shutting the door behind me. Sure enough, the shower is on, and the bathroom door is propped open slightly, steam wafting out. I move toward the bathroom, fully intending to join her in the shower. I don’t know where I got this sudden urge, but the image of my hands caressing her, accompanied by the feeling of her clinging to me, the sound of her moaning my name — it

drives me to reach for the door handle. As I grasp the cold metal, however, a sound from inside the bathroom causes me to freeze. My stomach lurches, and I feel a heavy weight press on my chest.

Lois is crying. Sobbing, actually. She’s trying to keep quiet, but her sharp intakes of breath and sniffing are easy to make out, even over the sound of the shower running.

I pull my hand back from the door handle and back up a step. This is all my fault. God, I hate when she cries. I feel myself start to shake, and I turn and stumble over to the bed, my vision turning blurry. Sitting heavily, I bury my head in my hands. What have I done to her? And how callous could I be to consider being intimate with her when I’ve hurt her so badly? She doesn’t deserve this. The pain I’ve caused her is both physical and emotional.

God, I don’t deserve her.

From the bathroom, the water shuts off, and I hear the shower door open and then close. Minutes later, warm air hits me as the bathroom door opens.

“Oh, Clark, I didn’t know you were here,” she exclaims. Her voice sounds...normal. Distinctly not distressed. I look up at her, but her back is to me now as she sifts through the clothes in her closet. A gray towel is wrapped snugly around her body, but her bare shoulders are visible, only partly hidden by long dark locks of wet hair. “Are you okay? Need to rest again?”

“I’m okay. Thought I should rest a bit, yeah,” I reply, my voice low. I don’t trust myself to say anything more.

Lois finds what she is looking for in the closet and then turns around toward me. The troubled darkness in her eyes is hidden by a weak smile. She approaches me, sets her outfit — a sleeveless navy-blue dress that I recall her wearing to one of our first dates — next to me on the bed, and then turns back to the dresser. A minute later, she returns to the bed, black lacy panties and a matching bra in her hand. I gulp audibly as an image of her wearing the scant undergarments floods my mind.

“I’ll just go — I mean, I should...”

I trail off as she drops the towel on the floor in front of me, revealing her beautiful, perfect body. I hold my breath as my fingers tingle, remembering the feel of her smooth skin, her taut abdominal muscles, her soft lips. I desperately want to reach out and touch her, but I don’t move. She proceeds to tug on the panties, slip on the bra, and pull the dress over her head. She then pauses, her hands lingering just above her hips and her eyes shifting to meet mine. I see my desire reflected in her gaze, but only briefly. She blinks, and her expression changes to something more unreadable.

“Can you help me zip this?” she asks innocently, turning around so her back is to me. She holds her hair out of the way.

“Sure, yes,” I respond. I reach out and fumble with the small metallic zipper, my fingers trembling. “There you go.”

“Thank you,” she says, spinning back around to face me. She smiles at me almost shyly and adjusts the thin sheer material around her shoulders. “I should... finish up.” Her gaze lingers on me for another second before she turns back to the bathroom. A moment later, I hear the hair dryer. And I finally remember that I need to breathe.

I flop down onto my back on the bed, willing myself to forget the soft curves of her figure as she’d stood before me naked a moment before. But, as usual, my resolve is ineffective. As my eyes close, I see her again. This time, the image, the memory is of our first time together, the night we became engaged over seven months ago. Neither of us had had much experience with intimacy at the time; she’d had only a few previous lovers, while I’d had none. Yep. Clark Kent, the twenty-eight-year-old virgin. I don’t recall having ever been more nervous about something as I was that night. However, she was incredible; she’d made me feel loved and needed, more than I’d ever felt before. Although it is a long-standing joke that I have quite a poor memory, my recollection of that night is crystal clear. I see her in front of me, undressing herself slowly, a teasing smile on her face. She’d been wearing pink lace that night, and her hair fell in soft curls, framing her face. She’d shed the panties first and then the bra, letting both undergarments drop to the floor next to the bed. Then, she’d stepped up to me, taken my hands in hers, and shown me how she liked to be touched.

I groan as my body begins to react to my memory, and I curl up on the bed and tug the comforter up and over myself.

From the bathroom, the hair dryer shuts off. Lois emerges a few minutes later, her hair and makeup done. She glances at me briefly, and my breath catches in my throat. I sit up and scoot to the edge of the bed.

“You look stunning.” The smile that grows on her face when I tell her this only serves to make her more beautiful.

“Thank you,” she murmurs, ducking her head almost shyly. She moves toward the closet as she finishes doing the clasp on her necklace and then slips on a pair of low black heels. She smiles at me again. “I’ve got to get going. Are you going to be okay here?”

I nod in response. “Yeah, I think I’ll — ” I stop abruptly as I notice her absently rubbing her injured wrist. She doesn’t even realize she’s doing it, I think, until she sees me staring at her. She lowers both her hands to her sides and shakes her head.

“It doesn’t hurt. Really.”

She starts to move toward me, to close the distance between us, but I find myself inching away. Dizziness and

nausea force me to close my eyes, and I let out a long breath and pull the comforter back over myself as I lie down again on the bed. I feel the bed compress next to me, and a gentle hand touches my forehead. I flinch involuntarily, and the movement seems to startle her, causing her to inhale sharply. My eyes fly open as she jumps to her feet and moves toward the door.

“I should go, I guess. Don’t want to be late,” she says, her voice almost inaudible. Her back is to me now, and I can see the tension in her shoulders. I push myself up again into a sitting position, and pain shoots through my chest.

“Lois, I — ”

“Sorry, Clark, I really do need to go,” she interrupts, her voice steady. She seems to straighten up, but she doesn’t turn around to look at me. Instead, she clears her throat and takes a step toward the door. “Rest, and I’ll see you when I get home.”

She wraps her arms around herself, betraying her true feelings. She is hurting. I can feel it.

“Okay,” I reply feebly.

“Okay,” she repeats.

And she walks out the door.

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## 17

“*Did he do this to you?*”

I hear his angry words clearly in my mind, and a mix of his strong emotions — most notably concern — hits me as I lie in bed, curled up on my side on top of the comforter. About twenty-five minutes have passed since she left, and I’ve been alternately trying to force myself to fall asleep and pacing the room, replaying our last conversation over and over.

Now, I sit upright, ignoring the sharp pain in my chest, and I focus on the telepathic connection the other Clark and I share. Immediately, I see what he sees and feel his thoughts. They are sitting in the Jeep outside my old apartment — his apartment now. Lois pulls her hand away from his, and his thoughts shift, cycling rapidly from anger at me to concern for her to guilt over his initial judgmental reaction. His tone is much softer as he compels her, “*Sorry, Lois, I just — please tell me what happened.*”

I close my eyes and force myself to stop eavesdropping. She is going to tell him how I hurt her, and, being the coward that I am, I don’t want to hear her recount the events of the previous night. Despite trying to block out his thoughts, small glimpses of the conversation they have continue to flicker in my mind. Mostly, I see her crying, feel her leaning into him, hear him pleading with her to let him help her, and see her crying more. Though he’s trying to block our telepathic connection, as am I, I

hear him tell her, “*Shhh, it will be okay.*” And then I shrink in on myself as her response shakes me to my core. “*I’m not sure if it will, Clark. I-I don’t know anymore.*”

I swing my legs over the edge of the bed to stand, but I can’t seem to muster up that much energy. My stomach lurches as I hear her words again. She doesn’t know if things will be okay. She doesn’t know. Of course. Because I physically injured her. What would have happened if I’d had my powers back? I cringe as another snippet of their conversation worms its way into my head, echoing my own thoughts. She mumbles to him quietly, “*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.*”

I shake my head vehemently. She is scared of me. What have I done? I lower my head into my hands and again try to block out their conversation. I don’t hear any more words or see any more visions, but I sense his emotions. He is determined to help her — to help both of us, actually. And God, I feel the strong love he has for her. It rivals my own. He wants to act on it, but he knows he will not. He knows he cannot. He respects me too much.

I am unworthy of that respect, Clark.

And then I feel a disconnection; she is no longer with him. I redirect my focus and see through his eyes as her Jeep drives away and he is left walking toward his front door, keys in hand. He sent her home. Back to me. Why back to me? She’s not safe with me. Frantically, I reach out to him.

*Is she okay?*

He doesn’t respond right away, and with alarm, I realize he’s not sure whether she is actually okay. He’s as worried about her as I am. I shudder as I hear his response.

“*She is very worried about you. The best thing you can do is to talk to her,*” he thinks pointedly. He’s flying now, on his way to dinner with Perry and Jimmy.

His words unsettle me, and several emotions fizzle up to the surface. Talk to her. He says I should talk to her. I know what he means, but... No. No, I can’t. I can’t tell her about the monster I’ve become. Kal-El, the killing machine. The hundreds of dead soldiers I left in my path in my attempt to bring “peace” to New Krypton. The disregard for life. The violence I wrought so skillfully.

An overwhelming fear grips me as my heart starts racing with a deep-seated rage, which I’d also felt last night during my dream, right before she’d woken me up. I’m a monster. I can’t tell her about all of that. No.

I stand and start pacing again, my hands trembling.

*I can’t tell her everything. I can’t do that to her,* I insist. I knit my fingers together behind my head and grimace. I can’t.

He responds almost immediately, conceding somewhat

to my assertion. “*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 hear his words, but I shake my head. No, that’s not it. She only loves me still because she doesn’t know what I’ve done, who I’ve become. She won’t love me once she knows. She can’t. I’m not the same man. And trust her? It’s not about trusting her... Is it?

*I do trust her,* I tell him emphatically. But I stop my pacing and screw my eyes shut. Of course I trust her. She is my life. My love. The most important thing to me. My knees give out, and I collapse with my back against the wall. No, that’s not it. *I don’t trust myself. You saw what I did to her.* The words are communicated to him in a haze. I see her wide, scared eyes again, pain filling her expression as I grip her wrist. I shake my head; I don’t want to see it.

A strong sense of conviction from him pulls me out of my daze.

“*Let me tell you what I saw just now,*” he starts. And an image of her is projected into my mind. She is beautiful, he thinks; but her eyes — she’s been crying. They are puffy and red, and she blinks back tears as she speaks quietly to him. He feels her love for me.

He tells me, “*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 swallow hard as he shows me an image of her injured wrist, held gently in his hand. His thumb brushes against the red discoloration. I can barely suppress a sob. God, I did that to her. The stabbing pain in my chest grows as he continues.

“*But I saw her brush it off, because that’s what it was — an accident.*” It was an accident, of course. I didn’t intentionally hurt her. I would *never* intentionally hurt her. God. But that doesn’t excuse it. And that doesn’t mean I can prevent it from happening again.

His thoughts continue as I bury my head between my knees. His words are clear and steady and calculated. And they reflect his deep love and admiration of her.

“*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.*”

I try to hear his words — to really hear them. He’s contending that the best way to avoid hurting her is to talk to her and tell her what I went through. And then she will

be able to help me. Otherwise, he says, my holding back that part of myself will only hurt her more. My breath begins to come in short, shallow gulps as I sob into my hands.

I don't want to hurt her. That is the last thing I want. God, I don't want to hurt her.

I can't stop the memory of the previous night from replaying in my mind. The terrifying dream, ending with my sword slicing through the final enemy in my path and then spinning around, my bloody blade raised up over my head, only to wake and find her wrist in my grasp. The pain in her eyes as she pulls her hand away from me. The terror in my voice as I tell her I'm sorry. Over and over. And then the pure, unchecked panic.

I jump to my feet as I realize I'd shared that memory with him just now. So now he knows. He sees exactly how it happened. He sees that I hurt her. A brief thought from him repeats that the incident was just an accident, but I barely hear it.

*Sorry. God, I can't believe I hurt her.*

I turn to face the wall, slamming my balled-up fists into the hard surface. A piercing pain shoots through my hands and up into my shoulders, and I groan and twist back around to rest my back against the wall.

A small knock at the door is accompanied by Lois's tentative voice. "Clark? Is everything okay?"

Immediately, I block the connection with Clark and stand up straighter. When did she get home? The door creaks slightly as she inches it open, and I swallow hard as I wipe the tears from my cheeks and raise my eyes toward the sound. Light from the hallway filters into the room, and for the first time, I realize how dark it has become. She flips on the light switch and steps inside the room, closing the door behind her.

"Your mom is still making dinner. That Chinese tofu dish you like — Mapo Tofu, I think. I..." She purses her lips together and then drops her eyes to the floor as her voice trails off. Her hands wring together fretfully, and she shuffles across the room toward me, refusing to make eye contact. Stopping a couple feet in front of me, she stammers, "I-I had to come back. I don't like where we left things, and..."

I step over to her, closing the distance between us, and I very carefully take her hands in mine. We stand there almost awkwardly for a moment before she moves to embrace me. I initially stiffen up at her touch as the pervading fear of physically hurting her grips me. But then, I hear a gentle whisper of a thought in my mind. *"It will be okay."* And the same words echo on her lips, which brush against my cheek.

"Clark, sweetheart, I love you. It will be okay. We will be okay. Please trust me, Clark." She buries her head into

my shoulder as I wrap my arms around her.

"I do, Lois," I murmur into her ear. "I do trust you. I'm just — I'm scared, Lois."

Her arms tighten around me. "Scared of what, sweetheart?"

I feel the love in her touch. She holds me tightly, one hand rubbing gentle, reassuring circles on my back. But a deep pain in my gut warns me not to confide my fears to her as the meaning of Clark's words finally hits me.

It is about lack of trust. A lack of trust in myself, yes. But also, deep down, I don't trust that her love is as unconditional as she contends it is. How can it be? She cannot be in love with the monster I've become. She cannot love a killer. A murderer. And as long as she doesn't know, she can't reject me.

God, I'm so scared of losing her. I couldn't live without her. But I suppose I owe it to her to give her the chance to decide.

I owe it to her to trust her.

I screw my eyes shut and rest my head on top of hers as my mind races, trying to figure out how to respond. She pulls away slightly and looks up at me, and as our eyes meet, I suddenly remember the first moment I saw her, when she burst into Perry's office during my interview at the Daily Planet nearly three years ago. I'd fallen in love right then and there. It was a feeling like no other I'd ever had. And in the coming year, as we were frequently partnered up to work together on various stories, that love had grown as I'd come to recognize, respect, and admire her passion, intelligence, kindness, and tenacity.

I raise my hand to cup her cheek and then lean down to kiss her. She meets me halfway. Her lips are soft and pliant, and as she deepens the kiss, her tongue tentatively exploring my mouth, a calming warmth spreads through my body.

This. I'm scared to lose this.

Actually, scared is too tame of a word. No, I'm terrified.

Her hands shift from my back to my chest, her fingers splaying out as she presses them into me through the thin cotton of my shirt. She unintentionally brushes the scar centered over my sternum, and I pull away and suppress a groan as pain radiates outward, into my arms, shoulders, and abdomen. She immediately realizes her mistake, and she backs away a step.

"Clark, I'm sorry, I —"

"It's okay, hon," I interject, wrapping my arms back around her. The loss of contact is almost as painful to me as her accidental touch, and so I tug her back into my embrace and close my eyes as I rest my head against hers. "It doesn't hurt as much as yesterday," I add.

"Good, that's — that's good," she murmurs against me.

After a moment, I feel her shift carefully in my embrace, and her fingers reach for the hem of my shirt. I inch back to give her room as she lifts the shirt up and over my head. The cool air of the bedroom breathes over my chest and back, and I swallow almost nervously as she runs a gentle hand up toward the four-inch-long blemish. I follow her gaze as she stares apprehensively at the angry red scar, her fingers only inches away, and I inhale shakily as I see Nor's sharp black blade pressing into my flesh. The pain flares again, but I manage to avoid reacting.

"This is where he — Lord Nor — where he..." Her voice trails off as she raises her eyes to meet mine.

My lack of reaction is my response, I suppose, and she doesn't wait for me to speak before she leans into me and kisses my chest, just above the topmost edge of the scar. I close my eyes.

"Do you remember it?"

The unexpected question surprises me, and I open my eyes to see her dark gaze staring up at me. Her expression is curious but concerned. I swallow hard.

"Do I remember...dying?" She nods hesitantly, and I lower my eyes to the ground. "Yes. I mean, well, I remember all of the events leading up to...it."

I rub the back of my neck as I carefully measure my next words. What does she want to know? That the pain was worse than anything I'd ever felt before? That my death had been only one of hundreds on that oppressively hot, long afternoon? That I'd died alone at the top of that desolate hill, the wind blowing dust over my worn, injured body? Or that my last thoughts were of her and how I'd failed to keep the promise I'd made to return home to her? Her fingers distract me as they run back down and along my side, which would probably also have a deep, painful scar if not for the protective effects of the special dagger Ching had given to me. Both of her hands come to rest on my hips, and she again kisses me just above the scar.

"Zara and Ching, they didn't tell me much. I-I didn't really want to know then anyways," she admits weakly. "It was — I was too upset, and when I saw you — your body, lying there so still, so pale...I just..." Her arms slip around my back, and she leans against my chest, careful to not put pressure on the scar.

"Lois — "

"It was my worst fear, come true," she interrupts. I feel her tears wet my chest, and I hold her tighter. "I always knew it was a possibility, that you wouldn't come back to me. But I really thought it wouldn't happen. I really thought you would be okay."

"I know," I say quietly, my voice muffled in her hair. "I thought so too."

We stand there and hold each other for a few more minutes, neither of us wanting to let the other go. Finally,

she shifts in my embrace to look up at me and asks gently, "So, what is it that you're scared of?"

Right. The question I'd managed to sidestep at the beginning of our conversation. I drop my gaze and close my eyes. And just as I open my mouth to respond — to tell her the truth about how scared I am to lose her — a soft knock comes at the door, followed by my mom's voice.

"Sorry to bother you two, but dinner is ready," Mom announces through the closed door.

I grimace and pull out of Lois's embrace. "Thanks, Mom. We'll be right out," I reply, raising my voice enough so she can hear through the door. Lois bends down and picks up my shirt, which she'd dropped onto the floor next to us several minutes prior. She stares at the shirt a moment before handing it to me, her eyes filled with a sort of disappointed resignation. I shake my head. "Lois, I — "

"I should get changed out of this dress," she states, cutting me off.

"Lois — " I reach for her as she begins to move toward the dresser to grab a change of clothes. My hand grips her arm lightly, and she stops, her back to me. "After dinner. I promise, we'll talk."

She seems to take several deep breaths to steady herself. I close the gap between us, slipping my arms around her waist, and I bend down to graze her shoulder with my lips. I feel her sigh and lean back into me.

"I love you," I whisper, pressing my lips to her again. She tilts her head back toward me, and I kiss her cheek and then her lips.

"I love you, too."

She gives me an unconvincing smile and heads to get changed while I pull my shirt back on and gather myself to face my parents again. And as I walk down the hallway, my hands stuffed into the pockets of my pants, I absently hope I haven't just made her another promise that I can't keep.

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## 18

The door shuts quietly behind us, and I stumble over to the bed and collapse, my eyes fluttering closed. It is late, after 10 p.m., I think, and my body is beginning to retaliate.

Dinner was excellent, as expected; my mom is a wonderful cook, and she made my favorite Chinese dish. Conversation during and after dinner was also light and unobtrusive. Lois steered the discussion away from my doppelganger whenever his name came up to avoid putting my dad on edge. Instead, my mom told us about some work she is doing with local revitalization efforts on Main Street in Smallville. Lois also discussed her plans going forward with the Metropolis Women's and Children's

Center, where she had been serving as a founding board member; she'd taken a leave of absence after I left and had recently decided that she would return to her position within the next few weeks.

And then, amidst the conversation, my eyelids had started to droop. Lois had immediately noticed and suggested that we head to bed. My parents had agreed, and we had all shuffled down the hallway to our respective bedrooms.

I feel Lois sit on the bed next to me, her hand closing over mine, and I force my eyes open. We're supposed to talk now. I promised her. Her expression is unreadable, or I'm just too tired to interpret it. But I can't let her down now. Groaning, I push myself up into a sitting position, and she immediately pulls me into her and hugs me gently.

"You must be tired, sweetheart," she murmurs in a low voice.

"Mmhm." My thoughts wander as I allow my eyes to close again. Fragments of memories drift in and out of my mind. I grab onto one memory in particular, and a dumb smile grows on my lips. "Remember Paris?" I ask, wrapping one arm around her and pulling her down onto the bed with me. My lips find her jawline, and I press lazy kisses against her.

"Mmm, yes, of course," she says, tilting her head back to give me better access to the sensitive spot at the base of her neck. My kisses trail down to her collar bone, and a low moan escapes her lips.

"The boat ride on the Seine... You knew I was planning to propose there, didn't you?" My hand ventures underneath her T-shirt, my fingertips grazing against her smooth skin, and I feel her shiver.

"I did," she admits. Her hands grasp my chin and pull me up to kiss her fully on the lips. She deepens the kiss, and her fingers thread into my hair.

"Ah, but you still acted surprised."

I prop myself up on one elbow, lifting myself off of her long enough to meet her eyes. A small smile grows on her lips as her hands slide down my arms and to the hem of my shirt.

"I was surprised," she contends.

Her hands tug at the T-shirt, and I pull my free hand away from where it explores the sensitive underside of her lace-clad breast and quickly remove the shirt, tossing it off the bed onto the floor. The movement is taxing, however, and I'm reminded of how tired I am. Lois takes that moment to push me over onto my back, and she pulls her own shirt off over her head, revealing her black lace bra, as she straddles my thighs. A bright smile grows on her face, and my breath catches in my throat.

God, she is so beautiful.

She leans over, careful to not put pressure on my chest,

and begins to string a trail of open-mouthed kisses along my collar bone. She pauses briefly to adjust herself over me, and then explains, "Your words, they were what surprised me." Her voice softens as she recounts the memory. "You said that the two of us together was stronger than you alone and that you loved me more than you ever thought possible. And your conviction, your honesty — it amazed me. I felt incredibly honored to be loved by you. I'll never forget it."

Our eyes meet, and an overwhelming guilt forces me to look away. Her hands cup my face.

"Clark," she whispers, my name rolling off her tongue sweetly.

Clark. Clark Kent. Not Kal-El. Not My Lord. Not Lord Kal-El, son of Jor-El of the House of El. No, I'm just Clark again. I slide my arms up around her back, the tantalizing feel of her bare skin under my fingertips, and press gently, pulling her down on top of me. Her body fits perfectly against mine, and the pressure comforts me.

"Clark, sweetheart, whatever it is, we'll get through it together. We always do. We always will."

I hold her to me tighter as my guilt continues to build. She believes in the man I used to be. What will she think of the man I had to become? And will she understand that I had to become that man in order to get back to her? Did I? Was there a different, better way? I kiss her temple and then her cheek, my lips lingering against her skin, and I remember my earlier thought that I owe it to her to tell her the truth and let her make her own decision.

"I love you so much," I breath into her, trembling. "I missed you, Lois. I missed you every day." I pause to kiss her again, this time gently on her warm, full lips. "The only thing keeping me going most of the time was knowing that I needed to get back home to you." She deepens the kiss and then shifts off of me, cuddling into the crook of my shoulder and hooking one leg up over my thighs.

"I knew you would come home to me, my love."

I shake my head as tension grows in my jaw and shoulders. "No, Lois, I failed," I say in a low voice, turning my head away from her. "If not for you asking Zara and Ching to take my body to the Sun and Clark flying up there and bringing me home..." I trail off as her hand caresses my cheek.

"Sweetheart, you still came home to me. Regardless of how you got here."

I feel her breath on my neck, and her soft lips brush against my skin, sending a jolt through my body. She continues to kiss my neck, and her fingers trace a path down my chest, coming to a stop on my abdomen. She pauses and settles into me.

"You brought me home too, Lois," I murmur into her



ear, turning my head to plant a gentle kiss on her hair. “When I was...in the Sun...” I hesitate, tightening my arm around her as I think of what I want to say. She shifts to look up at me. “I — my memories are jumbled and fuzzy, but I felt your presence so strongly, and I — ”

My voice breaks, and I feel my hands begin to tingle as my breath comes in short gulps and the room seems to swim around me. God, I’m so tired. My eyelids suddenly feel heavy.

“Shh,” she says, caressing my cheek again. Her body feels warm next to me, her skin soft and smooth. “It must have been scary, not knowing what was happening. Is that what...?”

I force my eyes open to meet hers, the effort making me dizzy. “What?”

“Earlier, you said you were scared, but you never said what you were scared of,” she explains.

Her expression is full of concern and love, and I have trouble holding her gaze as I think again of how I don’t deserve her.

“Oh,” I manage, closing my eyes again. Exhaustion begins to overtake my willpower. “No...I — that’s not it. No, it’s that...th...”

Darkness suddenly envelops me, and a shroud of silence shuts me off from her. I feel her hand on my stomach now, and then sliding up my side, touching my neck and my cheek. But I can’t seem to move or speak. A whisper of a breath drifts across my shoulder — is she trying to say something to me? Silence blankets me still, and I feel myself start to panic as I continue drifting off, away from her. Again, her breath flutters against my cheek, and her lips brush lightly along my jaw. She is speaking to me, but I cannot hear her.

My heart pounds in my chest, and I try to force my eyes open. Still, all I see is darkness, empty nothing. I try to talk, then cry out, then yell. Nothing. No sound.

I’m lost, Lois. Help me.

Still nothing.

I’m lost to her.

And this is what I’m scared of.

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## 19

She doesn’t leave me. I remain trapped inside my body, unable to hear, speak, or move, but I feel her next to me. Her gentle hands caress the bare skin of my chest and abdomen, and her mouth places delicate kisses on my jaw, neck, cheek, and lips.

It is cold and dark, however, and my body seems to be shaking uncontrollably. The silence turns into a deafening roar of wind, and the darkness begins to take on a red tint. *No, no, no, please don’t send me back there*, I beg to

myself. *I don’t want to go. Lois.* She can’t hear me, and she can’t hear my thoughts. But she doesn’t leave me. And I hang on to her — her touch, her presence, her love — and somehow manage to bring myself back from the brink.

Slowly, pain grows in my chest, the howling wind turns into a quiet murmuring next to my ear, and warmth begins to return to my limbs. I suck in a deep gulp of air as my eyelids flutter open. The light on the nightstand next to the bed illuminates the room, and I see Lois’s concerned eyes staring back at me.

“Lois?” My voice rasps hoarsely, my throat dry and sore. “Wha-what happened?” I try to sit up, but her hands press into my shoulders, and I’m too weak to object.

“Shhh, sweetheart, just rest,” she whispers.

“No, I — Ugh.”

I screw my eyes shut again as pain erupts in my head. Lois seems to sense my discomfort, and she leans over me and kisses my forehead. How can she be so good to me?

She stretches out again next to me, and I notice she is now fully dressed, a light purple tank top covering her upper body.

“How long was I...?” I don’t know how to finish the sentence. Was I sleeping? I don’t think so. I felt awake and conscious. And it felt like only a few minutes. I try to turn my head to glance at the clock, but the movement only serves to increase my nausea.

Lois presses another kiss to my temple. “About thirty minutes, I think.”

“I-I d-don’t know what happened,” I stammer, once again trying to push myself up to sit. This time, Lois doesn’t try to stop me; however, I’m still unable to muster up enough strength, and I soon sink back down into the bed, closing my eyes as small dots of bright colors dance around in my vision.

“We were talking,” she explains patiently, one hand now cradling my cheek. “And then you sort of stiffened up and stopped responding. I had a...feeling...that you needed me to be here, even though you couldn’t communicate with me.” Quietly, she adds, “So I stayed here with you.”

“I did need you. You saved me from going back there,” I mumble, my voice shaky. “Thank you, hon.”

I see confusion flicker across her face briefly, but it quickly disappears. She scoots away from me momentarily and sits up. “I’m going to go brush my teeth and get changed. I’ll be right back, sweetheart.”

I nod weakly and shift on the bed to try to get more comfortable. My chest aches worse than it has all day, and no matter how I position myself — on my back, on my side, half sitting up — the pain does not fade.

Lois returns from the bathroom a few minutes later, now clad in light blue cotton pajamas, her hair falling

loosely down around her shoulders. She moves to the other side of the bed and crawls under the covers, then snuggles up next to me, her head resting in the crook of my shoulder.

“Are you feeling any better now?” she asks quietly.

I don’t want to tell her the truth; the pain in my chest is growing more now, and I feel a heavy weight centered over my sternum, preventing me from taking a deep breath. I close my eyes to try to stave off the anxiety I feel as the sensation reminds me of the moment right before my death on New Krypton, when I’d been unable to breathe. But the thought of lying to her, keeping the truth from her *again*, only exacerbates my headache.

“I, uh, don’t — I don’t know,” I admit. “I can’t breathe right.”

“Is there anything I can do?”

One of her small hands settles over my larger hand resting on my stomach. I shift my hand to grip hers, and she squeezes gently.

“Probably not. Probably, just stay here with me, please.” I hear the fear in my own voice, and I grit my teeth as another wave of dizziness hits me.

“I’m not going anywhere, sweetheart,” she promises.

And we sit in silence for several minutes. Gradually, my breathing seems to stabilize as the immense weight on my chest lessens. Lois’s breathing becomes more regular as well, and I briefly wonder whether she’s fallen asleep. Then she wiggles around a bit and releases my hand for just a second while she straightens her nightshirt. Her hand finds mine again, and she lets out a deep sigh.

“It’s been a really long day, and I know how tired you are, sweetheart,” she says.

I hear her unspoken words. She’s again giving me an out — allowing me to put off our talk another day. But I also hear the disappointment in her tone. And I immediately am overcome with guilt. I clear my throat.

“I know we need to talk, but I just don’t know what to say,” I confess. My thumb absently rubs the back of her hand, and she seems to stiffen up for just a moment before relaxing into me again. “Except that I love you. And I-I’m scared...to lose you.”

There, I at least started the conversation.

She tenses up in my arms and shifts to prop herself up on one elbow. Her hand releases mine and moves to cup my cheek.

“Clark, I’m not going anywhere. I already told you — there’s nothing you can tell me that will change how I feel about you,” she implores. Her hand on my cheek applies a gentle pressure, and I turn to face her. “Please, sweetheart, tell me why you’re scared?”

I don’t respond right away. Instead, I turn onto my side and wrap my arm around her, pulling her closer to me. My

head still aches, but the pain in my chest has faded to a dull throb. Her hands now rest on my chest, on either side of the angry red scar, and her fingers trace random patterns on my skin. I kiss the top of her head.

“If I tell you about...” I shake my head.

“Clark, please.”

“You won’t love me anymore, Lois. You can’t. I’m not who I used to be.”

My voice is muffled in her hair, and I wonder if she was even able to understand me. I don’t have to wonder very long, however. She pushes back gently on my chest and raises her chin so she can look at me. Tears threaten to fall at the edges of her eyes, and she frowns sadly at me.

“You really believe that?”

Her voice is so filled with hurt. God, what have I done? I lean my forehead into hers and close my eyes. *I’m so sorry, Lois.* I swallow hard and pull her closer to me. To my dismay, she resists and pushes back against me.

She repeats herself, a bit more insistently this time.

“You really believe that I could stop loving you, Clark?”

“Lois, you don’t know — ”

“Because you won’t tell me!” she interjects. Though her words are strong, her tone also holds a note of empathy. “Because you won’t trust me enough, Clark. Let me ask you this — if the tables were turned, would you still love me?”

“Lois, I could never stop loving you,” I answer immediately.

Ah, right. I guess I see her point.

She nods into me. “And I know that, Clark, and you have to know that I feel that strongly about you. You have to know that I will always love you. Always, Clark.”

I close my eyes again as my headache returns with a vengeance, waves of pain pulsating in my forehead. With a shaky hand, I reach up and rub the bridge of my nose.

“I-I’m s-sorry, hon.”

My body seems to be spinning, a disorienting feeling that I can’t shake, and I shift onto my back again, breaking contact with her. A chill hits me as she moves away and settles on her own side of the bed, a clear distance separating us. Maybe it’s better this way. Sure, the darkness...the darkness may overtake me. But at least I can’t hurt her physically if I’m not touching her. Still, the distance between us feels immense.

In a low voice, filled with sadness, she says, “Please don’t apologize, sweetheart. Please just talk to me. Tell me about your experiences. Tell me about your dreams or nightmares. Tell me about your hopes and your fears. Just talk to me.”

If only it were that easy, Lois. I turn onto my other side, reach over to the lamp next to the bed, and switch the light off. Then, I pull the comforter up to my chin, trying

to keep myself warm as coldness seeps into me again. Next to me, Lois lets out a shaky breath and curls up on her side, facing me. Underneath the blanket, her hand moves to rest on my arm. I swallow hard and screw my eyes shut.

“Lois, I want to talk to you, but right now...right now, I just can’t.”

And I know it’s the truth. I can already feel my fractured mind pulling me away from her, away from reality — back to the dry, hot, dusty warzone on the barren rock known as New Krypton. Right now — even if I wanted to, even if I somehow convinced myself that she could still love me after knowing about what I’ve done — if I tried to talk about it, I have no doubt I’d be pushed into another full-blown panic attack like the previous night. And I can’t stand the thought of that.

More importantly, I can’t risk physically hurting her again.

She shifts over toward me for just a moment, brushing her lips against mine. Her hand lingers on my arm, and she whispers, “Okay, sweetheart. Let’s both get some rest and see what tomorrow brings.”

Relief washes over me.

“I love you.” My voice cracks with emotion, and I blink my eyes open, ignoring the stabbing pain now at the base of my skull.

She gives me a weak smile and gently squeezes my arm.

“I love you, too.” Her eyes study mine for a moment, then she adds, “Always.”

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## 20

Morning comes after a long, dreamless sleep, and when I awake, the house is already bustling with activity. From my spot in the bedroom, I feel Clark’s presence and realize he’s here to pick up my parents and take them back home to Smallville. Lois hurries out of the bathroom, smiles at me as she fastens the top button of her blouse, and heads out of the bedroom and down the hallway.

I sit up in the bed and run a hand through my hair, listening intently to the sounds from the hallway and kitchen — footsteps and hushed voices, mostly. And I sense a growing unease from Clark, but I try not to pry. I think it has to do with my dad, and I frown as I remember feeling his disappointment from outside the apartment on Saturday afternoon when my dad was being less than kind about his presence on our world.

Guiltily, I realize I should have made some sort of effort to explain things to my dad; it’s not fair to Clark that he’s had to deal with my dad’s stubborn streak. But explaining things to my dad would mean admitting a truth that I’m not ready to tell either of my parents yet.

Hopefully, my mom will straighten him out. She’s always been able to before.

After another moment, Lois re-enters the bedroom, a bagel in her hand. She smiles at me almost nervously and halts a few feet in front of me.

“Your parents are ready to go. Do you want to say goodbye? I can send them in if you’re not ready to get out of bed,” she explains.

I nod and swing my legs off the bed. “I’ll come out,” I answer. My feet hit the floor, and I stand; for the first time since I’ve been back, the motion does not induce nausea or dizziness, and I feel relatively ‘normal.’ I quickly grab a shirt from the duffle bag, which sits next to the dresser, and slip it on over my head. Then, I step toward her with a tight smile, and she reaches out and takes my hand in hers.

“Uh, are you... You look like you’re ready to go, too...” I falter, stepping ahead of her and into the hallway. She follows a bit behind me, our hands still clasped.

“Yeah, I need to go to work today. Clark and I have a big story we’re working on. I’ll tell you about it in a minute,” she says as we emerge into the living room. Her reluctance is evident, but I don’t have time to question her about it.

From across the room, both of my parents turn toward me and Lois. My mom sets down her purse and hurries over, quickly enveloping me in her arms, and my dad follows. I close my eyes as I savor the incredible feeling of love from the embrace. I release Lois’s hand for a moment as I return the hug. My dad’s hand sets solidly on my shoulder, and my mom snuffles quietly and whispers into my ear, “I’m so happy to have you home, Clark. I love you so much.” She pulls back a bit and looks up at me, a wonderful bright smile growing on her lips.

“I love you, too, Mom,” I reply, my voice low.

“You be sure to take it easy and rest until you get all of your strength back, you hear?” she instructs, her voice taking on a more serious note. “Let Lois and Clark take care of you.”

I smile and nod, my eyes shifting briefly across the room where Clark stands, dressed in the brightly colored Superman suit, his arms crossed over his chest in a pose that I’m all too familiar with. Our eyes meet just for a moment, and he quickly lowers his gaze to the floor. He is getting better at shielding his thoughts from me now, but I can still feel his agitation.

Lois steps up behind me, her hand moving to the small of my back.

“We will take good care of him, Martha. I promise,” she tells the older woman. Her hand presses into me, silently communicating the sincerity of her words.

“Okay,” Mom murmurs. She tightens her arms around me again, and I laugh quietly and kiss the top of her head.

“We’ll visit soon, too, Mom,” I assure her.

She wipes tears from her cheeks as she steps away from me. My dad, who had silently watched the exchange, reaches out and shakes my hand. His firm grip carries as much meaning as my mom’s hug.

“Take care of yourself, Dad. Let me know how your appointment goes today, please,” I tell him. He hesitates for a second before nodding an assent.

“Sure, son, sure,” he agrees. His hand releases mine, and he adds, “And you get some more rest like your mom says. Your strength will be back before you know it.”

There is a certain undertone to his words, and I sense that he really means, “*Your strength will be back soon. Then you can be Superman again, and this replacement Clark/Superman can go back to his own universe.*”

But my dad has no idea; actually, I don’t think anyone knows the truth except for me and Clark. He cannot leave because I will never be Superman again. Not that he wants to leave. I’ve sensed that he has no desire to return to his world, although I do not know why.

I nod to my dad and then step back a bit. Lois’s comforting touch returns as she slips her arm around my waist, and my mom and dad move back toward where Clark stands at the window. Clark raises his eyes and looks to Lois, obvious tension growing in his expression. Then, he clears his throat, blinks a few times, and stands up taller, his apprehension now hidden under his commanding superhero visage.

“I’ll meet you at the Planet?” His voice reflects this same change in demeanor — strong and confident — though I know he feels anything but confident right now.

Lois’s arm tightens around my waist, and she nods. Clark tips his head in response and then turns to my parents. After a few words of explanation, he loops one arm around each of them and begins to levitate them off the floor and then out the open window. A moment later, they rise up and out of my field of vision, heading south toward Kansas.

“I’ve got to get going,” Lois says, shifting to stand in front of me. Her eyes lock on mine, and she seems to study me for a moment, an obvious reluctance in her expression. Finally, she breaks eye contact, lowering her gaze to the bagel in her hand, and adds, “Clark and I have been working on a big story on Lex Luthor. Do you remember him?”

“Yes,” I answer quickly. “He’s that billionaire philanthropist from New York.”

“Right, well...” Her voice trails off as she frowns and fidgets, turning slightly toward the kitchen before raising her eyes to meet mine again. “We managed an interview with him last week, but we still haven’t finished writing it up. We think he might be involved with Intergang

somehow, but we haven’t quite found the connection. And the Churches are having a press conference today where we are expecting they will announce their expansion of Costmart stores into New York City. They’ve already purchased several old warehouses and gotten permits to begin construction on multiple stores. And Luthor, well...”

As she explains the potential connection between Luthor and Intergang, I feel a smile growing. She is beautiful and brilliant and passionate, and I love her so much. I reach out and touch her cheek gently, my thumb brushing along her cheekbone. I step up closer to her, wrap my arms around her waist, and lower my lips to hers, effectively silencing her explanation. She moans slightly and leans into me, her arms sliding their way up my chest and shoulders. The kiss deepens briefly before she pulls away, breathing heavily.

“What was that for?” She feigns indignation, but then smiles broadly at me and leans in for another brief kiss. My heart seems to skip a beat.

“I love listening to you talk about work,” I admit. My hands linger at her waist, and hers slip down from my shoulders to rest on my chest. “And I love you,” I add in a low voice.

She smiles again, but then her smile quickly fades, replaced by a look of uncertainty. “I wish I could stay here with you. Are you going to be okay alone? I don’t want to leave you if you’re not sure you’ll be okay.”

Although I also have reservations about being alone, given the uncontrollable physical reactions I’ve had at times, I hate seeing her so concerned about me. So I give her the most reassuring smile I can muster up and rub her upper arms with my hands as I lean in to kiss her again.

“I’ll be okay,” I promise. “You go and get some work done and don’t worry about me. I’ll do some work myself. Catch up on current events, that sort of thing.”

I wrap my arms around her again, relishing in the feeling of her body pressed up against mine, and she mumbles something into me that I can’t make out. I reluctantly release her from the embrace, and then she says, a little louder this time, “I love you, Clark.”

My lips graze hers lightly, and she sighs and leans into me again, deepening the kiss. However, after a much-too-short moment, she pulls away, gives me a weak smile, and starts towards the door, adjusting her purse on her shoulder.

“Are you sure you will be okay?”

“Yes,” I lie. *No, Lois, actually, I’m not really sure. But I’m going to pretend. Because you need me to.* “I’ll call you if I have any trouble. Promise.”

That seems to be enough to satisfy her, and she nods and turns toward the door. A moment later, I close my eyes and steady my breathing as the door closes behind her with

a decisive click; I'm alone. And I almost immediately regret allowing her to leave. The temperature in the apartment seems to plummet, and my heart rate increases, accompanied by a flicker of anxiety building in the back of my mind.

I need a distraction.

I make my way into the kitchen to pour myself a fresh cup of coffee. As I take a cautious sip of the hot black liquid, I remember the folder she has with all of the articles describing Superman's work in the last month, and I make my way to her desk, locate the folder after rummaging through one of the side drawers, and take it to the couch with me. I then flip on the television to the news and settle down to do some reading on my doppelganger and his heroic deeds.

Everything I read suggests that he is as dedicated to his Superman duties as I'd surmised. The photographs that accompany each article show a focused, in-control superhero exercising precision and immense strength to rescue victims and assist law enforcement. And I see how busy he's been as well. He seems to devote much more time to being Superman than I ever did, and he keeps up a global presence almost every day. In fact, just a week ago, he apparently moderated peace talks between the Syrian government and a large group of rebel forces in conjunction with Russia, the UN, and NATO the day after he spent hours in California rescuing victims of a massive earthquake.

My world has truly been in good hands.

I rub my eyes, which feel strained from all the reading, and stand up to stretch as I close the folder, my muscles complaining. The pain in my chest is dull, but still present, and as I take my now-empty coffee cup to the kitchen for another refill, darkness clouds the edge of my vision. I blink several times in an attempt to clear my vision, but a familiar feeling of nausea and dizziness begins to grow as well. I lean heavily on the kitchen sink and try to steady my breathing. The air in the apartment suddenly feels stifling and stale, and on a whim, I decide that I should try taking a short walk to the park; after all, I haven't been outside of the apartment since Clark brought me back from the Sun two days prior. Maybe the sunlight and fresh air will help me feel better.

I quickly change into a clean set of clothes; find an old baseball cap, tennis shoes, and coat of mine in Lois's closet; and head out of the apartment. The walk to the elevator and then out the front foyer of the building is so familiar and yet so strange. Everything is colorful and bright. Not like the red-tinged, dusty, barren landscape or the sterile white walls of the palace on New Krypton. People walk casually down the street as I stand frozen on the stairs to the apartment building. One man walking a

short, chubby brown dog smiles up at me and tips his hat, then continues on his way, and a mother and child march briskly hand in hand in the opposite direction. The child waves at me with a huge toothless grin and then jumps in a puddle giggling. Sights and sounds I thought I'd never hear again. I let out the breath I'd been holding, grasp the handrail, and step carefully down the stairs.

The park near Lois's apartment is a small grassy area with a few benches set strategically under several American elm and Japanese cherry trees. The trees are bare this time of year, their leafless branches providing no protection from the bright morning sunlight. Squirrels chitter in the trees, and a group of pigeons pecks at the ground near one of the benches, where a boy, maybe fifteen years old, sits and tosses small seeds from a colorful plastic bag.

I find a bench in a sunny corner of the park and sit to rest in the sunlight. Immediately, I feel the healing power of the Sun working its way into my broken body. The aching in my chest fades, and my vision clears substantially. I close my eyes as I enjoy the feeling.

"Excuse me, Mister."

The voice startles me, and my eyes fly open as I sit upright. The boy who had been feeding the pigeons stands in front of me, his hands shoved deep into the pockets of his old coat. His black hair is hidden under a gray knit hat, and his cheeks are red from the cool morning air. There is something familiar about him, but I can't place it. He pulls the bag of birdseed out of his pocket and offers it to me. Confused, I reach out and take the bag from him.

"The pigeons, they like this seed the best. My mom told me. She used to feed them here every morning, but she died a year ago," he says. His eyes dart from mine to the ground and back again, as though he's nervous to hold eye contact for too long. Before I can respond, he continues. "Superman tried to save her, and I'm grateful to him for it. She was in a car wreck, you see, and Superman, he pulled her out and got her to the hospital as fast as he could. But the doctors said her injuries were too severe."

I stare at the bag of birdseed in my hand. I remember her. And now I also remember why the boy had seemed familiar.

"I'm so sorry," I manage, my voice shaky. The boy sits next to me, and the pigeons congregate around us, eyeing the bag of birdseed expectantly.

"He saved me though, Superman did. I wish I could see him again to thank him, you know?" The boy pauses, and I feel his eyes on me.

I clear my throat. "Uh, well, I-I'm sure Superman knows."

The boy stands again and thrusts his hands back into his pockets. "I hope so." He backs up a step and shuffles

his feet again. “I decided to be an EMT after that. I want to help people, like he does, you know? And today, I turned sixteen today, and I’ve been saving my money. So I’m gonna go downtown right now and sign up for the next training course. Do you think...do you think my mom would be proud of me? And Superman, he would be too, right?”

“Most definitely,” I reply without hesitation. I raise my eyes to look at the boy again, and a profound sense of hope overwhelms me as I realize the huge impact that moment — a simple rescue, the likes of which I had performed every day — had on this young man’s life. “They would be incredibly proud of you. I know it.”

He smiles at me as his face lights up. Then he nods to the birdseed.

“Can you finish feeding the pigeons for me, Mister? I have to get going. Mom always told me to never be late to anything important. And this is pretty important to me.”

“Of course. I’d be honored to help you,” I say. And I remember that he’s Sam; his name comes to me as the memory of his quick airlift to the hospital surfaces. He’d been injured badly, though not as badly as his mother, and I’d moved her first and returned to the wreck for him. Their car, an older Ford pickup, had been sideswiped by an eighteen-wheeler when the driver had lost control due to poor weather conditions. The pickup had flipped several times, landing upright but wrapped around a telephone pole. Five other cars had also been affected, and the seven victims had injuries of varying severity; his mother Rose had sustained severe trauma to her head, neck, and back, among other injuries. It was a pretty terrible wreck.

Sam gives me a crooked smile, winks, and then waves as he jogs off toward the bus stop. The pigeons move as a unit a few feet after him before realizing I’m the one with the bag of birdseed, and they then resume their cooing as they gather around me. I glance up again, watch as Sam boards the bus toward downtown, and then smile as I reach into the bag and grab a handful of the tiny seeds to toss to the birds. They flock enthusiastically around the bench, pecking up every last seed. I repeat the process again, throwing the last handful to the hungry birds, and then set the now empty bag of birdseed next to me and rest my hands on my knees.

The morning sunlight continues to bathe the park in a soft glow, and I lean back on the bench and breathe in the fresh air. It feels good. However, a moment later, a sudden sense of unease jars me, and I hear an urgent voice in my head.

“Clark, where are you?”

Immediately, I sit upright as fear grows in my chest. I respond without hesitation. *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 scoot to the edge of the bench as I glance around, suddenly feeling exposed and unsure. Anxiously, I adjust the baseball cap on my head.

“*Everything is fine. Sorry, I should have led with that,*” he assures me. A deep sigh escapes my lips, and I drop my head to my chest with relief as he adds, “*Lois wanted to come check on you, and she got worried when you were not here. I’ll bring her to you.*”

I shift on the bench and watch as a moment later, Superman floats out of Lois’s fifth floor window, holding my fiancée gently in his arms. She looks so small, so fragile, which is not a word I would typically associate with Lois Lane. I frown and inhale sharply as I see tears in the corners of her eyes. She wipes them away as Superman lands lightly a couple feet from me. I set my hands on the hard wood of the bench and begin to push myself up to meet her, but she quickly waves at me to stay put as she jumps out of his arms. Half a second later, she pulls me into a tight embrace and assaults me with frantic kisses on my jaw, cheek, and lips.

“God, Clark, I was so scared when you weren’t there,” she breathes, burying her head into my shoulder. I feel her tears wetting my shirt, and I kiss the top of her head reassuringly.

“I’m sorry, hon,” I apologize.

I hold her tighter and close my eyes for a moment as my hands rub her back. She is shaking still, nearly sobbing into my shoulder, and an incredible sense of guilt hits me. I raise my eyes to Superman, who stands with his arms crossed over his chest and a look of concern on his face. *Thank you, Clark,* I tell him with a silent nod. He returns the gesture and moves a step back from us, glancing briefly up into the sunny sky.

“*Tell her I’ll meet her at the press conference, whenever she’s ready.*” His voice conveys his relief that I’m safe and that Lois is with me, her fears unfounded. And I’m again struck by his kindness, strength, and empathy. A tiny hint of jealousy hides behind these other thoughts, but he rejects it and begins to float upwards, his eyes on mine.

I nod again, grateful for his help, and then close my eyes as I breathe in the scent of Lois’s shampoo and place a light kiss on the top of her head.

“I love you, hon,” I murmur into her, and she holds me tighter as Superman’s familiar sonic boom rattles the branches of the trees above us.

“I’m sorry,” she says, her voice trembling. “I’m sorry, I just panicked. I — this isn’t me, really, I don’t panic like this, I — ”

“Shhh, it’s okay,” I soothe, continuing to rub her back. “I’m okay. I’m here. And I’m never leaving you again. I

promise.” It is the least I can do, to make her this promise. I owe her much, much more than just this, but for now, I know this is all I can give.

“I know, I know, I just — ”

I cut her off with a kiss — not one of the many soft, gentle kisses we’ve shared in the last couple days; no, this one is deeper, stronger, more urgent. Her arms move up around my neck, pulling her closer to me, and her tongue pushes into my mouth, recklessly exploring. Breathless, she breaks the kiss and leans her forehead against my cheek. We sit together there in silence for several minutes.

The pigeons coo and peck around on the ground, impatiently waiting for more birdseed, and a cold breeze picks up, carrying dark, ominous-looking clouds to block out the sunlight. The pigeons seem to sense the change in weather and, as a flock, flutter their wings and launch up into the sky, heading toward downtown. Next to me, Lois shivers and pulls her coat tighter around her as she snuggles against me.

“Maybe we should head back inside. It’s getting cold,” I suggest, brushing my lips against her cheek. She nods, but does not otherwise respond, and then moves away from me to stand. I grab the empty birdseed bag, stuff it in my pocket, and follow her. My muscles feel strong and decidedly not stiff, despite the fact that I’ve been sitting in the same spot for quite some time. I reach toward her and grasp her hand, and she looks up at me, wipes the last of the tears from her eyes, and smiles weakly. “Come on, hon.” And I lead the way back to her apartment.

Once inside, she shrugs off her coat and helps me with mine. She then hangs up both coats on the rack near the front door and turns to me. I close the distance between us with a single step, and her hands slide up my chest and wrap around my neck as I remove the baseball cap and toss it aside. She leans into me, and we kiss again, gentler this time. Her fingers thread into my hair, sending pulses of warmth through me. God, I love this woman.

“Mmm, Lois — I — ”

“Don’t talk right now,” she interjects, and her tongue again darts into my mouth. She tastes like coffee.

“Mmm. ‘K.’”

I want to touch her, to make her feel good and loved and whole. My hands move to her waist, and I pull the hem of her blouse out of the waistband, my fingers sliding under the satiny fabric to tease along the smooth, taut skin of her abdomen. She shivers and moans into our kiss. I pull away from her for just a moment, and she initially whimpers in protest and then gasps as I loop an arm under her knees and lift her into my embrace. Her arms remain wrapped around my neck, and she captures my lips again as I carry her to the bedroom. She is light, or I’m getting stronger; either way, we make it to the darkened bedroom,

and I set her gently on top of the comforter. She tries to pull me down with her, but I resist and stand upright, allowing my eyes to travel over her beautiful form. Her hair loosely frames her face, falling in soft curls on the pillow, and a bright smile lights up her expression as she watches me, desire reflected in her kind, dark eyes.

“Clark, I need you. Please touch me,” she begs, reaching out a hand toward me. I take her hand, kiss her knuckles softly, and release her again.

“I will, my love. I will,” I assure her.

I kneel down next to the bed and brush one hand up the outside of her right calf. She shivers again as my hand travels back down to her ankle, and I carefully slip off one shoe and then the other, placing them neatly on the floor next to me. I step out of my own shoes and socks and then climb onto the bed, kneeling at her feet. Her long legs entice me, and I reach out to touch her, as she wants, as she needs. With my left hand, I caress gently up the outside of her calf and then thigh, shifting my body upwards as I go. Soon, I’m propped up on my right elbow, lying alongside her; my left hand rubs up and down her arm, and I lean in and kiss her softly on the lips. I trail a line of kisses down her jaw and neck, finding that sensitive spot where her neck meets her collar bone, and I suckle gently, smiling against her as she moans my name.

Her hands become restless, running first down my chest and then up and under my shirt. The feel of her hands on my bare skin sends a shiver up my spine, and I groan into her and drop my own hands to her waist for a brief moment before sitting up and removing my T-shirt with one quick motion. She giggles at me, but then her face becomes quite serious as she stares at the middle of my chest.

“Sweetheart, your chest — the scar,” she comments, sitting up next to me and reaching out with a tentative hand. I lower my eyes to my chest and watch as she runs a hand lightly over my sternum. The angry red scar has faded substantially; it is still a visible, raised blemish, but the redness is nearly gone, and the thickness of the scar tissue has decreased.

“Hmm.” I place my hand over hers and raise my eyes to meet hers again. Her lips are slightly parted as she gazes at my bare chest. “I guess the sunlight helped,” I suggest, and I shift my hands to the front of her blouse, brushing my fingers along the exposed skin of her collar bone. I lean in and run my lips along her jaw and down her neck again, kissing and suckling gently as my fingers find and unfasten each small button. After I reach the bottom of the blouse, I push it back and off her shoulders, exposing a pink lacy bra covering her breasts. Her hands begin to reach behind her to unsnap the clasp of her bra, but I stop her.

“Please, let me.”

She acquiesces, dropping her hands back to her sides. I lower my lips to her collar bone and flutter light, wet kisses down to the valley between her breasts. My fingers trace parallel paths along her sides and then wrap around to her back.

“Oh, Clark, please,” she murmurs into me. Her hands move from their place on the bed and grasp my arms as I undo the clasp of her bra and slide the straps off her shoulders.

She is perfect, beautiful, full of life. And she is mine.

“Lois, you are so beautiful, my love,” I murmur, lowering my head to nibble at the soft skin at the base of her neck. She moans as I continue my exploration.

Four months. It’s been four long months since we’ve had this — each other. I wonder if she dreamed of this as often as I did. Almost every night, I dreamed of her. But this is so much better than any dream.

“Make love to me, Clark,” she whispers. Her hands grasp my cheeks, and she pulls me back up to her as our lips meet in a long, slow, needy kiss.

Oh yes, much better than a dream...

After our lovemaking, she lies still on the bed, breathing heavily, and I crawl up and stretch out next to her, pressing my body against hers. She groans with pleasure and curls up in my embrace. I kiss her forehead gently.

“I love you, Lois Lane,” I whisper, and I close my eyes and breathe deeply into her hair.

“God, Clark, I-I thought I’d never — ”

“Shhh, hon,” I soothe, pulling her closer to me. A chill fills the cold, dark bedroom as raindrops begin to splatter against the window, and I tug the comforter out from under us and then wrap it around us to keep us warm.

“I love you,” she sighs, clinging to me and burying her head deeper into the crook of my shoulder. Her body trembles as she begins crying softly. I shake my head and breathe more kisses into her hair, holding her tightly.

“Please don’t cry, Lois. I’m so sorry,” I whisper. Guilt overwhelms me, knowing that I’ve done this to her. I’ve made her so fragile, so vulnerable. None of this has been fair to her in any way. I never should have left. My hand rubs her back, and I close my eyes again, forcing back my own tears.

We lie still for several minutes as her sobs gradually subside. She steadies her breathing and then pulls away from me just enough to raise her eyes to mine. Her tears still wet her cheeks, and I swallow hard as I reach up and wipe them away. Gentle kisses then trace the same path as my fingers, down her cheek and to her full lips.

“I’m so sorry to make you cry, Lois. I love you so much.” My voice falters as I plant a soft kiss on her

forehead and then rest my forehead against hers. She touches my cheek lightly, the tips of her fingers making my skin tingle.

I place my hand over hers and tighten my other arm around her. It feels so perfect right here, right now, just the two of us — her naked body pressed up against mine. I feel warm and loved and complete. Our lips meet again, and I close my eyes and hold her.

And I think maybe this time I’ll just never let her go.

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## 21

Exhausted from the emotional morning, she falls asleep in my arms after a few minutes. I continue rubbing her back gently, listening to the sound of her steady breathing, and my eyes wander over the delicate features of her beautiful face. Her lips remain slightly parted in her sleep and are still wet from our kisses.

Very softly, my hand moves from around her back and to her stomach, my fingers barely grazing her smooth skin. She sighs deeply, but does not wake, and I continue caressing her with feather-light touches, exploring her as thoroughly as I had the first time we’d made love. Finally, when I’ve touched most of her upper body, I still my movements, nudge one knee between her legs, and cradle her closer to me.

“My beautiful Lois, my love, I love you so much. I’m so sorry for all the pain I’ve caused you,” I murmur into her ear. I place a light kiss on her cheek, still being careful not to wake her.

Next to me, Lois shifts slightly in her sleep and mumbles quietly, “Mmm, love you, too, sweetie.”

Outside, a light rain still falls, the raindrops keeping a steady rhythm against the window. With a start, I realize that’s another thing I’ve missed — rain. It did not rain on New Krypton; the composition of the atmosphere was substantially different from that of Earth, and precipitation just was not possible. In fact, there was no above-ground water at all. During my first week on the barren planet, Zara had explained to me that clouds did not form on New Krypton and that they harvested water from underground hot springs and filtered it to make it drinkable. So now, as I lie in bed, holding my beautiful fiancée tightly in my arms, I close my eyes and listen to the relaxing sound of rain falling, and a small smile grows on my face.

“Hmm, oh, um. Clark, what — ?” Lois lifts her head off the pillow, blinking and rubbing her eyes. I reach up and tuck an errant lock of hair behind her ear, allowing my fingers to brush along her cheek. “I fell asleep?”

“Yes.” I allow my fingers to trail down her neck to her shoulder, and I lean forward slightly to flutter kisses down the same path. “Just for a few minutes. Half hour, max.”



“Mmm, power nap?” she responds, a hint of amusement in her voice. Her leg slides up over my thigh, bringing our hips closer together. God.

“Mmm, yes,” I breathe. Does she know how much I love her? I’ll have to tell her and show her, again and again. “Lois, my love — ” I kiss the tip of her nose — “my beautiful love — ” I kiss her forehead, and my fingers brush down her arm — “my only love — ” I kiss her full lips, gently tasting her with my tongue — “I love you, Lois.”

The raindrops continue to fall, a bit harder now, and the constant thrumming against the window mutes the sound of her soft moan. Her hands press against my chest, pushing me away from her slightly, and our lips part.

“Clark, I love you so much,” she says in a low voice. Her hands caress up and down my chest, my skin burning under her touch, and she leans into me for another kiss. Her tongue, her lips, her mouth — God, she feels so good.

A buzzing noise interrupts us, and Lois groans in protest. I close my eyes as she pushes away from me, turns over, and moves to the edge of the bed. I turn to watch as she rifles through the pile of clothes for several seconds. She then groans again as she pulls her phone out of the pocket of her skirt. The screen lights up with the words “DAILY PLANET” as it vibrates and buzzes loudly. She sighs and gives me a sympathetic look before answering the call.

“Hello?”

I breathe in deeply and rub my eyes. Next to me, Lois pulls the covers back up over her as she listens to the person on the other line. Mischievously, I slide one arm over her hip and down her abdomen, pulling her closer to me as she mumbles a quick, “Uh huh, yep,” into the phone. My hand skims lightly along the soft skin of her abdomen, and she swallows hard and mumbles again, “Uh huh, yep, okay. I’ll — ” My fingers brush up along her arm, and I flutter gentle kisses on her shoulder. She pulls the phone away from her as she muffles a moan into her pillow. She then lets out a breath. “Okay, I’ll be there... Yep, okay, Jimmy, sure... Bye.” The phone beeps off, and she tosses it aside, somewhere in front of her on the bed.

“You are in so much trouble, buster,” she scolds. I groan into her shoulder as she presses up against me.

“I was counting on it,” I retort, smiling into her again. She twists around in my embrace, but her joking smile turns into a frown.

“I have to go back to work,” she laments, propping herself up onto one elbow. She traces circles on my chest with two fingers and bites her lip almost nervously. “Clark isn’t in right now. He’s probably dealing with traffic accidents or something because of the rain. And Jimmy said Perry is not in a great mood.”

Her eyes raise up to meet mine, and I give her a small smile.

“It’s okay, hon. I understand,” I assure her. I reach up and brush her hair back behind her ears and then kiss her cheek. “I’ll be waiting right here for you when you get home.”

“Right here?” she asks coyly, running her hand down my chest and pressing her fingers into my abdomen.

“Mmm, yep,” I say, covering her hand with mine. I bring her hand to my lips and kiss her palm. “Right here. Naked and ready to go.”

She giggles and leans over to kiss my cheek again. “Well, don’t get ready to go without me here,” she jokes. “That’s half the fun, after all.”

God, how I missed this.

She sits up and scoots off the bed, her long hair falling loosely down around her shoulders. My stomach flutters as I watch her gather her clothes. *So beautiful, my love.* Almost as though she hears my thoughts, she glances up at me shyly and smiles. Her eyes look bright with a renewed energy, and I realize she feels the same as I do right now — complete, whole, loved, content. If only we could just have this forever. This wonderful feeling, not complicated by...anything else. I push the thoughts out of my mind to avoid clouding the moment.

“I’d better hurry in case Clark isn’t back soon. Jimmy sounded anxious,” she admits. Then she hesitates and frowns. “You’ll be okay here alone, right? I was so worried earlier, and — ”

“I’ll be fine, hon,” I promise. I sit up, move toward the edge of the bed, and wrap my arms around her waist, pulling her toward me so my head rests on her abdomen. “And if I go anywhere, I’ll let you know first.” Honestly, I have no plans to go anywhere now, not even explore outside. A small part of me wants to venture back outside and enjoy the feel of the rain, but I’m not invulnerable, and it is November; it’s quite cold outside, and the weather can turn worse without warning.

My answer seems to satisfy Lois, and she strokes my hair tentatively and then steps away from me toward the bathroom. I give her a weak smile, and she disappears through the door to get changed.

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## 22

I should have known. I should have remembered. And it’s really not even funny. I know Lois will probably disagree, but she’s wrong. It’s not funny. No, it’s actually quite pathetic.

See, I thought I would be a thoughtful fiancé and have dinner ready for when she got home. All I needed to do was to reheat the soup my mom had made for lunch the

previous day. But then, I forgot that I'm no longer invulnerable, confidently grabbed the searing hot ceramic container from the microwave with both hands, and promptly yelped and dropped the entire bowl onto the ground, where it shattered.

And now, soup is everywhere. Lots and lots of hot soup — because my mom always cooks as though the entire town will be visiting, and for some boneheaded reason, I had decided to reheat the entire container rather than just remove two servings' worth. And then there's the ceramic as well. Several shards seem to have lodged themselves in the bottoms of my annoyingly vulnerable feet as I'd stumbled and fallen backwards into the counter, and the remaining fragments are now scattered like landmines around the kitchen.

Yep. I'm really, truly completely and utterly useless in the kitchen.

My hands still sting from touching the hot ceramic as I grab a dish towel off the counter and carefully tiptoe to the table, where I sit heavily. After several painful moments, I manage to remove all of the slivers from the soles of my feet, and I limp over to the far-left cabinet in the kitchen, where I find several Band-Aids, alcohol wipes, and clean gauze. Dark red smudges of blood cover the floor, and I frown at the mess as I make my way back to the table to sit and bandage my wounds.

I mutter a few curse words under my breath as I set the first-aid supplies down on the table. I then clean the wounds using the gauze and alcohol wipes, dry my feet, and carefully apply a Band-Aid to each of the cuts. After depositing the soiled gauze and wipes into the trash, I hobble into the bedroom to get towels to clean up the remaining mess of soup.

Fifteen minutes later, I make a final pass through the kitchen with the mop just as the locks to the front door begin to methodically click open. I quickly set the mop up against the wall and turn around as Lois pushes open the door. She enters the apartment silently and seems to force a smile as our eyes meet. Immediately, I know something is wrong. She shrugs off her coat and hangs it on the rack and then slips off her shoes, leaving them by the front door.

"You're not still naked in bed, I see," she jokes as she approaches, her teasing tone hiding whatever unease she's not ready for me to see. As she gets closer, her expression changes to concern, however, and she narrows her eyes first at the mop and then at my bandaged feet. "What happened to you, sweetheart?"

I grimace and rub the back of my neck anxiously. "Ahh, well, I just..." *Stupid. I'm so stupid.* I turn away from her for a moment and rest my hands on the counter. "I dropped the soup."

I won't lie to her. But, God, it is so embarrassing to admit the truth.

I feel her hand on my back.

"You...dropped the soup?" she repeats, uncertainty in her voice.

I nod. "Yeah, I was trying to reheat the soup for dinner, and then I sorta forgot to use potholders, and the ceramic was hot, and I —"

I spin around as I hear muffled...laughing? Yep, she is laughing, one hand covering her mouth, her eyes squinting back tears. She shakes her head as her face begins to turn pinkish, and she backs up away from me a few steps.

"Oh — Clark, I'm sorry, I-I'm not — okay, I am laughing. Oh, I'm sorry, it's just —"

"It's not funny, Lois!" I interject. I'm somewhere between mildly amused and offended; honestly, I'm not sure how I feel about her reaction.

"I know, I just —" She breaks into another fit of giggles, both hands now covering her mouth, and she turns away from me and stumbles to the table, where she collapses into a chair, still laughing hysterically. After another moment, she manages to breathe without breaking into more laughter, and she adds, "I'm sorry, Clark. Are — are you okay?"

I just stand there staring at her for another moment before I can respond. I shake my head in disbelief as I say, "I'm okay, I guess. Yeah, I'm fine."

She nods and holds back more laughter. "I'm sorry, sweetheart. It's been a really long day and I — you really hurt yourself trying to reheat soup?" There is finally a touch of concern in her voice. I frown and then lower my eyes.

"Yeah, I dropped the container and it —" The sound of her laughter again fills the room, and my eyes shoot back up. "Lois!"

She clutches her stomach and laughs so hard that her face turns a deeper shade of red. Her eyes briefly meet mine, and I shake my head again.

"I'm sorry, Clark. Here, I —"

She takes several deep breaths to steady herself, pastes a neutral expression on her face, stands up, and closes the distance between us. Her arms wrap tightly around my waist, and she leans into me. Her body trembles slightly, and I realize she's still trying to hold back her laughter.

"It's not funny," I mope, my arms closing around her.

I'm embarrassed, yes, but I realize it's more than that. It's such a simple thing; a thing that I should have no trouble with. Really, heating up soup in the microwave. A child could do it. And I'll admit, my uselessness in the kitchen, it used to be funny. Just something to laugh at — one of the few things that I wasn't good at, that I couldn't master on the first (or second) try. Just something silly to

make fun of — that and my incongruously defective memory for numbers, dates, and passwords. But now, instead of laughing along with her, as I’m sure I would have before my intergalactic travels, I feel a strong sense of inadequacy, failure, and incompetence.

And, yes, I feel threatened by the fact that there is another me flying around out there who is stronger and faster than I ever was; who is kind and empathetic, an incredible writer, and insanely intelligent; and who can also apparently cook. Quite well, in fact.

Lois’s head settles on my chest as she continues to embrace me. The truth — she needs the truth. I sigh and reluctantly admit, in a small voice, “He can make you five-star restaurant-quality chocolate cheesecake, and I can’t even reheat soup without disaster.”

Her body stills. She pushes back from me slightly and raises her eyes to mine. Her hands slide around to my chest and up around my neck. As her fingers thread into my hair, she reaches up on her tiptoes and brushes her lips lightly against mine. I close my eyes.

“Sweetheart, I don’t care if you can cook. You know that,” she says, her tone now quite serious. Her hands drop from around my neck to my chest, and I loosen my arms to give her space.

“I know, I just — I really wanted to do something for you, and —”

“Clark,” she interrupts me, her voice soft and sympathetic. Her fingers press into my chest, and our eyes meet again. Hers are filled with concern and love. “Sweetheart, I love you. Not him. You.” She touches my cheek gently. “Whether or not you can cook...or remember my phone number...or fly. I love you.”

My shoulders tense up, and I clench my jaw as I lower my eyes and hug her to me again. I don’t trust myself to say anything, and she seems to understand. She wraps her arms around my waist again, pulling me closer to her.

“So, pepperoni or sausage?”

I manage a laugh and kiss the top of her head. “Whatever you want, hon.”

“Pepperoni and olives, then,” she suggests, raising her eyebrows at me for confirmation. I nod in response.

“Sounds good to me. I’m honestly not too hungry right now,” I admit, though I know I probably should be. I didn’t eat breakfast and only had a small piece of my mom’s homemade bread for lunch. But my appetite seems to have disappeared with my confidence and coordination.

A flicker of apprehension crosses her face, but she buries it quickly as she pulls out her phone.

“I’ll put in the order,” she says. Her fingers pause over the phone screen briefly. “And then while we wait, I, uh, have a little news to share with you.” She swallows nervously, forces a smile, and then hurriedly dials the

number for the pizza place.

News, huh? And something that is making her anxious. She turns away from me, stuffs her free hand under her opposite elbow, and seems to listen intently as the phone line rings. A couple seconds later, she clears her throat and begins placing the pizza order.

I move to the couch and sit in one corner, glad to get off my feet. The cuts from the glass have started to throb, and I grimace as I lift the worse foot — my right one — to inspect the Band-Aids. They seem to be staying on, but the bottoms of my feet are slightly swollen and red, and I absently wonder if I should have also applied an antibiotic ointment. My first-aid skills are a bit rusty, I suppose.

“Can I take a look?” Lois asks tentatively, sitting next to me on the couch. She doesn’t wait for my response. Instead, she reaches out and runs one hand gently along the top of my foot before leaning over slightly to examine my bandaging. “The pizza will be here in about fifteen minutes, they said. Ouch, sweetheart. Did you really get this many cuts?”

“Nope, I just enjoyed putting Band-Aids on,” I retort with a smirk. She swats at me playfully and then slowly pulls back an edge of one of the Band-Aids. I grit my teeth as the motion tugs on my sensitive skin. She doesn’t notice my discomfort and continues her exam. After a moment, she carefully presses the Band-Aid back over the cut and sits up.

“Does it hurt?” She scoots closer to me, and I lower my foot back to the ground with a grimace and wrap my arm around her shoulders.

“Yeah, but, um, I’ll live,” I reply. As soon as the words are out of my mouth, I realize how stupid I am, yet again, and I immediately backtrack. “I mean, I’ll heal. It will heal. They’re just small cuts, nothing serious.”

Lois’s complexion has turned white as a sheet, and she tries to pull away from me, but I resist, holding her tightly around her shoulders. I shift on the couch a bit and pull her closer into my chest.

“Sorry, hon. I can’t seem to say or do anything right today. I’m sorry, please don’t be upset.”

She closes her eyes momentarily and allows me to hold her, relaxing her body into me. We sit there for several minutes. Finally, she lifts her head to look at me. Her eyes are clear, and she gives me a small smile.

“We’re okay, sweetheart. I’m okay,” she assures me. “I guess we’ve both been a bit out of sync sometimes. But we’re okay.”

Out of sync. I suppose that’s a good way to describe it. I’ve felt that way about nearly everything since I’ve been back.

She kisses my cheek and then shifts slightly out of my embrace and pulls a small piece of yellow notebook paper

out of her pocket. She unfolds the paper and stares at it, her expression unreadable. I reach up and brush a lock of her hair back behind her ear.

“What’s that?” I ask quietly. I tilt my head sideways and trail a series of kisses down along her jawline.

“This — this is... Well... Oh, boy, that’s a little distracting. Mmmm.” She turns to capture my lips in hers, and she deepens the kiss momentarily. However, she then groans almost in frustration and pushes back against my chest as she moves away from me, breaking our contact. “This is kind of important, actually, sweetheart.”

“Hmm, what’s more important than this?” My fingers trace the path that my lips had taken a moment before and then graze the sensitive skin of her neck and down her collar bone. Her eyelids flutter closed as she inhales sharply.

“Not more important,” she replies breathlessly. “Nothing is more important. But...it’s — Ooh, ahh — ”

Her head falls back against the couch as my hand cups the underside of her breast through her blouse, and I smile and lower my lips again to kiss along her jawline as she grasps the hem of my T-shirt in her free hand.

“Oh, Clark, sweetie, that feels so good, but — ”

“But?”

I know she wants to talk about whatever is on that paper, and it must be important, something serious. Which is why I’m procrastinating yet again. I breathe against her neck and then taste her with my tongue. She whimpers and pushes back against me again.

“We need to talk about this,” she insists. Her eyes shift from the paper in her hand to me, and she scoots a few inches away from me and turns to sit cross-legged facing me on the couch.

Her expression concerns me, but I try to hide it with a weak smile.

“Okay, hon, sure. Sorry to — ”

She cuts me off with a quick kiss and then smiles at me as she pulls back. “No, no apologies. We have a lot of lost time to make up for.”

“Yes, we do,” I say quietly.

Her smile fades as she lowers her eyes to the paper. She hands it to me. I hold her gaze for a moment before glancing down to read Perry White’s distinct handwriting on the page. Sharon Anderson. The name is familiar to me — a publisher, I think, maybe. And then a very large number. I squint at it. I must be seeing things. A million dollars? Confused, I raise my eyes to meet Lois’s. She is nodding slowly as though she’s still processing something herself.

“What is this?”

She seems to gather herself before answering, and she drops her gaze to her hands, which clasp together

nervously in her lap, her fingers fidgeting.

“It’s an offer for an advance on a book deal with Chicago Review Press to publish Clark Kent’s extended memoir on his trip to New Krypton with Superman,” she explains, her voice low.

“Oh. Wow.”

I blink several times. No wonder she seems a little uneasy. That’s a lot of money, and truly not something I ever expected, although I suppose I should have been able to predict that there would be some sort of book deal or... something. Everyone thinks Clark Kent is just a regular guy, and he somehow traveled light-years across space, spent three months on another planet, and returned “unharmful” to tell the story of Superman’s victory against Lord Nor — an experience that no other human has had or will ever have. And since Clark Kent’s article on Superman’s return had been so well received, this really shouldn’t be a huge surprise.

Lois shifts uncomfortably next to me.

“That’s a lot of money. I don’t know that — ”

I abruptly stop talking as she stands and begins pacing along the length of the living room, her hands wringing together in front of her. She looks like she wants to say something, so I stay quiet and watch her. After a moment, she halts and turns to face me.

“It — it seems wrong, doesn’t it? To capitalize on...” She can’t finish her statement, but she has no idea how right she is.

“...war.” I whisper the word to finish her thought. She nods weakly and then starts pacing again. Her steps gradually slow, and she crosses her arms over her chest.

“Perry gave this offer to Clark on Saturday morning, just before he realized you were alive,” she explains, her lips pursed in a frown. “He just told me about it today, and he asked what we wanted to do.”

I inhale deeply and lower my eyes to my hands as I consider her words. For the first time that day, I feel a headache coming on, but I ignore it. We definitely cannot take that money. Right? I read Clark’s article on Superman’s return from New Krypton; he’d done an excellent job of glossing over the violence and actual death count of the war. Whenever possible, he’d focused on diplomacy, strategy, and the overall positive outcome. But that doesn’t mean the hundreds of deaths can just be ignored. And no one has any idea that Superman had betrayed his most sacred tenet of “do not kill,” with the exception of the final battle against Lord Nor.

I close my eyes as I try to block the memories of my journey — everything about it — from overwhelming me.

That’s another problem.

The bigger problem, really.

I don’t want to relive it. I can’t.

My hands start to shake.

“Lois, I can’t — I can’t write that — I...”

The shaking worsens, and I feel nauseous. Two small hands settle on mine, and I swallow hard as I focus on her steadiness next to me.

“I know, sweetheart,” she murmurs quietly. “But I think Clark can.”

Her hands squeeze mine as I turn my head to look at her. As our eyes meet, I am reminded of the day I left with Zara and Ching. Her eyes had the same unobtrusive intensity to them — a sort of conviction that I just couldn’t feel at the time, or now for that matter.

She sighs and adds, “I know we can’t accept that money. But eventually, you will return to work. And Clark, he will need a source of income. I mean...” She hesitates and drops her gaze to the floor for a moment, gathering herself.

I understand her reluctance, and I know better than she does how appropriate this reluctance is. She’s probably concerned that I might not get my powers back, or maybe she also knows that Clark doesn’t want to go back to his Earth. I suppose I have no way of knowing if they’ve talked about this. But she doesn’t know that even if my powers come back — which I suspect they will, and soon, actually — that he will still need to stay here to be Superman for me.

Because Superman doesn’t kill.

Because that is the one thing that Superman can’t compromise on. Yet I did.

Also, Superman needs to be unshakably in control of his emotions at all times. Or bad things can happen. And that’s something that I’m definitely not.

No, I’m not Superman anymore. And this world needs a Superman. Therefore, I know, Clark cannot leave.

So, it stands to reason that when I return to work as Clark Kent, mild-mannered reporter for the Daily Planet, this other Clark Kent, who has so effectively stepped into my shoes and taken care of my life for me, will need to be financially supported as he continues doing his work as Superman.

I clear my throat, and she glances up at me with the same look of resolve in her eyes.

“You’re right, hon. He’ll need financial support. The advance plus royalties will be more than enough for a long time. I, uh —” The muscle in my jaw quivers, and I screw my eyes shut for a moment. I try to project a semblance of confidence in my voice. But I’m sure she sees right through me. “I hope I’ll be ready to go back to work with you soon.”

“Of course. I was actually thinking that, uh, maybe we could split the money with him —” She shifts abruptly as she sees the change in my expression. I start to object, but

she continues. “Not for us to keep the money, but to donate to charity — to the Superman Foundation. The Foundation’s philanthropic efforts really took a hit after you left, and an influx of a large sum like that would give it the boost it needs to get back to where it was...before.”

I nod in agreement. The Superman Foundation had been started by a few benevolent individuals within the first six months of me beginning my work as Superman. Though I was never officially part of the organization, I had supported their efforts whenever possible and had given numerous speeches at their events. As an organization, they maintained a broad focus on improving the lives of the impoverished and underprivileged worldwide, promoting peace, and providing aid in emergencies. The Superman Foundation is definitely a worthwhile organization to support, and this plan makes the thought of taking money for the memoir on my journey a bit more palatable.

“You’re right,” I agree quietly. “And even half — Clark will be able to live comfortably for a long time on that much. Plus royalties...”

Her eyes shift restlessly as she studies mine, and I smile weakly at her. I move closer to her on the couch as I screw my eyes shut to block out the growing pain in my head, centered right between my eyes this time, and I wrap my arms around her and pull her into my embrace. She relaxes into me as I try to steady myself.

The truth is, I trust him completely. I know he will do justice to my story. And I know he will continue to help my world as Superman. But a sudden sense of anxiety threatens me as I consider how much Lois still doesn’t know. She never read my journals; she admitted this to me already. She said she just couldn’t do it. And, unlike him, she has never been up close and personal with my memories and thoughts. The topic is going to come up sometime again soon, and I’m going to have to tell her the truth.

I pull out of the embrace and then lean in and brush my lips against hers just as the doorbell rings. She laughs against my mouth, her hands pressing into my chest. She breaks the kiss off and stands, smiling at me.

“Pizza time,” she announces, and then she hurries off toward the front door, grabbing her wallet from her purse on the way.

Unfortunately, I still have no appetite.

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## 23

Soft. She is so soft. Her skin, her hair, her lips. I press a kiss into her hair and hold her tighter against me as the morning sunlight peeks in through the bedroom window. She sighs in her sleep but doesn’t wake.

It is still early; I can see the clock on the wall across the room, and it's barely 7:15 a.m. Lois and I had been up probably later than we should have been last night, "making up for lost time," as she'd said. But since Clark is supposed to be here at 8 a.m. to discuss the plans for the memoir, I know we should probably get up and shower.

I lower my lips to her bare shoulder and breathe kisses up along her neck and then jawline. She moans softly and twists her head toward me, allowing me to capture her lips in mine. Her arm reaches up and backwards until her fingers can thread through my hair.

"Mmm, this is the best way to wake up," she says, pulling me deeper into the kiss. "But I suppose you're waking me up because we need to get out of bed."

"Uh huh, yeah, sorry, hon," I admit, kissing her one more time before propping myself up onto one elbow. She turns over onto her back, pulling the comforter up over herself, and I frown in mock indignation as I trail my open palm over her abdomen. "You know, we could shower together to save some time," I suggest mischievously, leaning over her to kiss her forehead.

Her hands lift from off the bed and splay out on my chest as her eyes shift to my sternum. Her fingers trace gently over my scar, which seems to have faded even more overnight, and she then raises her eyes again to meet mine, a small smile tugging at the corners of her lips. She runs her hands up my chest.

"Mmm, that's a great idea. But I think if we did that, we might get a bit distracted and end up taking *more* time," she giggles. Her fingers tickle the back of my neck, and she pulls me down on top of her as she reaches up and kisses me.

She then shifts away from me and drags herself out of bed. I groan and follow her. Several minutes later, after we've both showered and dried off, I tighten the towel around my waist and wipe the condensation from the mirror. She steps up behind me, her soft hand touching my back. She seems to hesitate, but then clears her throat.

"I, um...wanted to ask... How are you feeling this morning? You know, um... I mean..." Her eyes study mine as she bites her lower lip. She continues reluctantly, her unease clear. "You seem to be doing so much better physically than you were three days ago. It's almost...like a miracle, really. But we haven't talked about...the other stuff still."

I frown and lower my eyes.

"I know we haven't talked... And I'm sorry, hon. But right now is probably not the best time... I mean, Clark will be here any minute, and..." I shake my head and then force myself to raise my eyes to the mirror. I do look better than Saturday. I no longer look pale and gaunt. But my eyes show darkness, pain, fear... I blink and look down

again. Behind me, Lois sighs, and her hands glide gently up my back. She presses herself against me, and I lift my eyes to meet hers in the mirror.

"I'm sorry. You're right. I just wanted to check that you're okay," she apologizes. She kisses my shoulder and then turns toward the door.

"Lois, wait," I call out, pushing myself away from the sink toward her. She stops and spins back around. I swallow nervously as our eyes meet. I rub the back of my neck and step closer to her. "You have every right to ask me how I'm feeling. I'm sorry. I just — I... Yesterday and last night were so amazing, and..."

As always, she understands me. She closes the distance between us and wraps her arms around my waist. Her head rests against my chest, and I feel her breathe deeply as she relaxes into me.

"I know. I've felt it too," she agrees. "But we can't ignore it forever. We need to talk, sweetheart."

I nod into her, but I feel myself tense up as the pain in my head intensifies. My eyes close as I hold her tightly.

"We will, hon," I promise. "But for now, Clark is going to be here any minute, and I think I'd really prefer if we're both dressed when he gets here."

I kiss the top of her head as she chuckles half-heartedly and releases me from her embrace.

"Okay, okay, you're right." She pats my arm playfully and gives me a weak smile before reaching up and touching my face. "You should shave, you know — you're getting a little stubble right here."

I laugh a bit self-consciously and regard myself in the mirror again. She is correct. Ugh, I haven't used a razor in a long time.

"Do you have — "

"Top left drawer," she answers before I can finish. She kisses my cheek and turns toward the door again. "I'll leave you to it."

"Thanks, hon."

I reach over, open the drawer, and find an old razor of mine, along with a small travel-sized bottle of shaving cream. I frown again at the unfamiliar tools and get to work.

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## 24

The knock on the door comes right at 8 a.m. Of course, he's perfectly punctual; I'd expect nothing less. I glance at Lois as I grab three coffee mugs from the cupboard, and she utters a quick "I'll get it," as she makes her way toward the front door.

I nod and refocus my attention on pouring the hot black liquid into the mugs — hopefully without scalding myself or dropping any breakable dishes — while I listen to the

sounds of her opening the door and my doppelganger entering the apartment. I turn slightly and look up long enough to meet his eyes. He looks oddly tired, his eyes dull and a bit listless; maybe it was a long night for Superman. I paste a smile on my face and channel as much of the positive energy I'd had from earlier as I can.

"Good morning," I greet enthusiastically. I start moving the three cups of coffee to the table.

He nods and holds up a nondescript brown paper bag. The tantalizing smell of fresh pastries wafts across the room.

"Good morning," he says, returning my smile. He's getting even better at guarding his thoughts now, I note, but I can feel his exhaustion. He steps across the room toward the table. "I brought croissants from a café in Lyon. We had the same one on my world, actually. The lady who owns it —"

"Marie?" I interject, glancing back up at him as I start to move the three cups of coffee to the table.

"You know it then," he confirms, nodding. "Kaova Café."

"Yeah, it used to be my favorite," I respond. I set the coffee down on the table and turn back to the kitchen. "Milk and sugar?"

"Oh, no, thank you. I just drink my coffee black." He adjusts his glasses as he drops his eyes to the floor, almost as though he is embarrassed to admit his preference for black coffee. I can't help the face I make. I've never been able to drink plain coffee.

"Suit yourself," I joke, pouring a generous amount of milk into my mug. I add a couple spoonfuls of sugar as well and settle myself at the table as I take a cautious sip.

Lois sets out a plate for each of us, while Clark takes a seat across from me and places the bag in the middle of the table. Lois immediately reaches forward and opens the bag, her eyes widening with appreciation. She glances up at Clark, who sips his coffee slowly and watches her with a small smile. She then pulls out a large croissant oozing a dark chocolate filling and licks her lips in anticipation.

"You got me the chocolate filled one," she squeals, taking a big bite. She closes her eyes as she savors the flavors and then sets the pastry down on her plate. "Oh, so good."

Across from me, Clark's smile fades, and he takes a plain croissant from the bag and lowers his eyes, suppressing a yawn. I feel his anxiety and concern, although he seems to be trying to hide it. I still don't have much of an appetite, but I grab my own croissant from the bag, copying the two of them, as a sort of uncomfortable silence fills the room. Lois manages to eat the majority of her croissant, as does Clark, but the most I can handle is a few bites. I swallow and stare down at the table as I feel

my own anxiety start to build. The pain in my head pulses nauseatingly, and I force myself to breathe slowly to stave off a wave of dizziness. Lois reaches out and places her hand on my back, and I try to focus on her touch to ground me. She starts to speak, her tone guarded.

"So, um, Clark and I talked about the memoir and other stuff," she says. Her fingers press into my back in a comforting gesture, but I don't move or look up. I'm afraid of the emotions I've been holding in for the last day; with Clark here, something angry, dark, and malevolent seems to be tugging at my memory. It's not his doing, I know, but his presence seems to have triggered it. My jaw tightens as Lois clears her throat and continues, her voice now a bit unsteady. "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 —"

I'm not sure what it is, maybe the mention of Superman, but a sudden rush of anger hits me, and the pain in my head intensifies. I close my eyes and clench my fists as I try to block the pain from being transmitted to Clark through our telepathic connection. I know both of them sense my discomfort, however, and I open my eyes and look up across the table. Clark is watching me, a look of concern on his face.

I feel him try to reach out to me, communicating silently, "*What is it?*"

But I just stare at him, through him, really, as I try to contain the memories that want to surface — memories of violence, death, and fear, giving rise to an intense sense of self-hatred. The room begins to feel hot, as though the glaring red sun of New Krypton beats down on us. It is almost debilitating.

Lois's hand on my back is the only thing keeping me from falling over the edge of this cliff I've unwittingly stepped up to. I exhale the breath I'd been holding and lower my eyes back to my croissant. Take a bite. Even just a small bite, I tell myself. Maybe it will distract me. My hands follow the instructions from my brain, as they are generally programmed to do, and I lift the pastry to my mouth. It is tasteless, but I chew it anyways. My stomach churns.

"Um, well..." Lois stammers. I feel her shift in her seat next to me, and then she sighs almost inaudibly before continuing. "We were hoping you'd be able to help us with this too. With the memoir, that is."

My words to her from last night seem to reverberate in my head. *I can't write that.* We need his help. Again. Just like how my world needed his help as Superman, and Lois needed his support and friendship while I was dead. Just like how I needed his help to be brought back from the Sun, and to walk to the living room, and to see my parents. Can't I be at least a sliver of the person I used to be? Can't

I do anything for myself? Why do we need him so much for everything?

“I’d be happy to help, of course,” he answers quickly.

Of course. He’s always more than happy to help. I suppose he has nothing better to do. Just my job. And my other job. And cooking for my fiancée. And taking her out to dinner with our friends. And everything else I can’t do right now.

“Clark, what’s bothering you?”

I hear his voice inside my head, gently nudging me, trying to get an explanation for the mixed emotions I’m sure he feels from me. I can’t even block my thoughts right anymore. I try harder, pushing him out of my head with all my willpower. God, why can’t I even do this right?

Somewhere deep inside me, a memory surfaces. It is out of focus, fuzzy. The heat is stifling, and dust covers my black boots. Blood drips off the end of my sword as an enemy falls to the ground in front of me. My first kill. I suddenly remember it with great clarity. And I feel an intense anger, just as I’d felt in that moment. I had hated being forced into this, and I’d hated myself so much for giving in to Ching’s insistence, to the Council’s insistence, that my leading the army and killing Lord Nor was the only way to end the war. Rage fills me again, as it had in that moment. I can’t stop it. I squeeze my eyes shut as nausea and pain overwhelm me.

Across from me, I feel Clark’s unease grow. “*Stop it, man. Please. I get it.*” He feels my emotions — the anger, the self-loathing, the guilt. But I can’t stop it.

Lois’s hand slips from my back just then. The last anchor holding me in the moment. I try to grasp onto her presence. She starts to speak again.

“Great. Um, we talked a little about the money,” she says, her voice tentative. Her hand touches mine briefly, and she shakes her head. “It’s...a lot of money.” After a brief pause, she addresses me. “Clark, sweetheart, do you want to tell him what we were thinking?”

Without looking up at either of them, I shake my head. I certainly do not trust myself to talk right now. I’m barely present as it is. The room seems to grow redder, hotter. I almost cough as dust fills my lungs.

“No, you can...please...” It’s the best I can manage. Otherwise, I’d have to be able to form coherent sentences. Not possible right now. The throbbing in my head seems to shift from my forehead to my temples, and I feel my fingers start to tingle, as though my hands have fallen asleep.

“Okay, um, well...” Lois seems nervous herself, and I immediately feel more guilty for forcing her to be the one to speak now. To be the one to have to ask even more of him when both of us know he won’t refuse any request from either of us. I force myself to breathe as she

continues. “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...”

Her voice trails off. But Clark, he knows her thoughts. He’s perceptive like that. And I hear his thoughts too, albeit unintentionally. “*Until what, Lois?*” he thinks. He wants her to say it, but he knows she is unsure of herself right now, and he wants to help her.

“For when Clark returns to the Planet, so I’ll have income to live off of,” he suggests, his voice calm and collected.

I feel his eyes shift to me, though I still stare at my uneaten croissant on my plate. He hesitates as his mind seems to probe mine for an answer to an unasked question.

“*Superman. Lois — does she know?*”

His thoughts are not directed at me. In fact, I think he’s trying to conceal them. But I feel it, or sense it. He wonders whether we’ve talked about him staying on our world as Superman, even after my powers return. He wonders whether I’ve admitted to Lois that I cannot be the superhero again. He thinks that since we’ve talked about my returning to work, that we must have also talked about Superman. But he needs clarification. My stomach lurches, and the room turns a dark blood red.

In a low voice, Clark says, “And I assume you talked about — ”

*No. We haven’t talked about it. She can’t know. Don’t say anything. Please. Dammit.*

I’m back there again. The ground is hard underneath me as I kneel in front of a comrade, Colonel Rahm, pressing my hands onto a deep wound in his side. The bleeding won’t stop. His eyes beg with me to help him, but there is nothing I can do. The life leaves him as a gust of hot wind nearly blows me over. In a flash, the memory shifts, and I’m sprinting up a hill, Lieutenant Ching at my side. We both swing our swords at incoming enemy soldiers. I barely notice them; my focus is ahead, where Lord Nor waits at the top of the hill. Rage pulses through me as blood coats my sword. I parry an attack, stab another enemy with my hidden dagger, and continue moving forward. Images, memories, moments, fragments — all reminding me of the horrible things I’d done in the name of peace. The bodies pile up. The blood is on my hands, dripping off my sword, oozing out my chest. Everywhere. It is everywhere.

God. I can’t — I don’t deserve to live.

I shouldn’t be alive.

I killed them.

That’s — God, that’s not me. I’m not me.

I deserved what I got. I deserved to die that day. I don’t



deserve to live now.

*“God, please — please, stop it.”*

I feel a smooth, solid surface under my fingers, and I blink several times. The room is still red, and a layer of dust covers the table. My fingers smear bright red blood across the wood. It will stain. We should clean it up now. The room dissolves again into a glaring red light. Sweat drips down my forehead as my fingers wrap around the neck of an enemy soldier. Then, I’m on my back, staring up at a sword about to plunge into my chest, and I roll out of the way at the last second and swing my fist, feeling bones crunch as I connect the blow.

*“Clark, I understand. Please, don’t show me anymore.”*

Whose voice is that? They don’t know anything about me. They don’t understand. They can’t.

Pain engulfs me as I stab another soldier in the gut and shove him back away from me. Blood stains the ground. Then I’m running through a hazy fog, Ching ahead of me. He stumbles, and I grab his arm just as an explosive device detonates only feet from us. Together, we dive sideways, landing hard against the solid earth. Blood trickles down the side of my face, and my ears ring. And I’m angry. So incredibly angry. And scared. I pull Ching to his feet with me and yell a command to him over the roar of the battle. Keep going, he tells me. I grab my sword, which had fallen out of my hand, and immediately launch back into the battle. More dead bodies pile up in my wake. Anger.

Is this me? Is this who I am now? A killer. A murderer.

I don’t deserve to live. I hold my dagger in my hand. It pulses with a white light. I can just... I raise it up to my throat. One quick thrust is all it would take. I deserve to die.

Blood drips off my hands.

God.

*“Kal, that’s enough.”*

Kal? That’s me, yes. Kal of the House of El. But who growled at me like that? People don’t talk to me like that. And why is it so cold?

I blink, and the dagger is gone. My hands rest on a dark wood table in front of me. They are clean. No blood.

Lois. Lois sits next to me. And Clark across from me. Clark — is he the one who called me Kal?

My hands shake uncontrollably. I need to get away. I don’t want to hurt her. I hurt her the other day, now I remember. I need to get away. I can’t be near her.

I push my chair back, stand, and leave the room. My vision is blurry, darkness clouding the edges, and my hands and feet tingle. I manage to make it to the bedroom, and I shut the door behind me. I can’t be near her. I don’t want to hurt her. Like I hurt so many others.

My chest feels tight, and I struggle to fill my lungs

completely as I pace the room. Back and forth I walk. For how long, I don’t know. My hands begin to feel numb. I look down at them and turn them over and then over again. There was blood on them earlier. Dark red, viscous blood. Where did it go? I gasp for air as a stabbing pain radiates from my chest, and I stumble into the wall as my legs shake.

The floor. I need to sit. Then maybe I can catch my breath. I lower myself down haphazardly, grunting in pain as my hands hit the hard ground. And then I push my back up against the wall and lower my head to my knees. It helps a little. I can sort of breathe now. My head throbs though, and I close my eyes as I fight another wave of nausea.

I feel a tugging in my mind. Him. The other me. The better me. Who doesn’t kill. Who deserves to be here. He wants to talk to me.

*“Clark, please listen to me. This is important,”* he tells me.

I take several deep breaths. Important, he says. And he’s a smart guy. So he’s probably right. I should listen. I rub the back of my neck and open my mind to him.

His voice in my mind is confident and assured. *“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.”*

It takes me several minutes to orient myself as I realize where I am and what is happening. Flashbacks, a panic attack, hallucinations triggered by his thoughts suggesting that Lois needs to know why I cannot be Superman. None of that was real just now. And he insists I need to tell her about it.

I swallow hard and stare at my hands. No blood. They are clean. My feet, still bandaged from yesterday’s soup disaster, are covered with a clean pair of white socks, not dusty black boots. It is comfortably warm in the dark bedroom, not stiflingly hot. No wind blows orange dust all over. No explosions rock the ground.

I died. As I deserved. But then I came back to life. Given a second chance, one might say. But I don’t deserve this second chance. All the people I killed — they don’t get a second chance. Why me?

A gentle nudge in my mind reminds me of my doppelganger’s presence. Right. Tell Lois about it all. She will still love me, he says. She can help me. I’m hurting her by not telling her. I see a flash of a memory from three nights ago — her wide, terrified eyes as I’d grabbed her wrist waking up out of a nightmare. I’d hurt her. And now

I'm doing it again. My love. My Lois. I can't tell her. I feel my hands start shaking. Maybe...

*Maybe you can tell her for me,* I suggest. I know it's a dumb proposal, and I immediately sense his response.

*"You know I can't do that. It has to come from you."*

No, he knows as well as I do that it has to be me. In fact, I sense he's considered telling her himself but has always stopped himself. No, I have to be the one to tell her.

The trembling of my hands turns into something more uncontrollable, and I grip my knees to stop the shaking. The darkness of the bedroom seems to grow, closing in around me. A fragment of an image from my earlier hallucination lodges in my mind — I see myself raising my glowing white dagger to my throat, and my thoughts echo again, *I don't deserve to live.* I am no longer me. Clark Kent? No, I'm Kal-El — a killer. I know I'll never be Superman, and I could probably live with that, I realize. But I'm not sure I'll ever be Clark Kent again either.

God, I just want to die.

No. No, that's not right. Is it?

I don't want to die, no. But I don't deserve to live.

The room grows colder, darker, with a slight red tinge. No, I don't want to go back there again. Please, someone help me. But I'm alone now, and I feel myself begin to drift off.

His voice saves me.

*"Clark, listen to me, and please understand this. She loves you."* There is a short pause, but then he repeats the sentence, with even more conviction. *"She loves you."*

The red tint the bedroom had taken begins to fade, but my whole body continues to shake. She does love me. I felt that the last few days. She loves me as much as I love her. But... God, she doesn't know that I'm a monster. She... Can she still love me?

He continues, his words still filled with sincerity and certainty. *"You can get past everything else,"* he tells me. *"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."*

I know this. At least, she is definitely stronger than me. God, I love her so much. I feel her closeness from the other room through my connection with him. I feel her love.

*"It will be hard, but she is worth it. She is worth living for. If you cannot find anything else to live for right now, remember that. She is worth living for."*

God, he's right. Of course, he's right. He's always been right.

My love. My Lois. I would do anything for her.

I close my eyes and connect with him again. He's watching her as they sit at the table, and I can see her through his eyes. She's crying, a tear running down her cheek, but she's resolute and strong, and she trusts him. God, she's beautiful. My love. I need to see her. To touch her.

I need her.

With effort, I push myself up to my feet. My legs are weak and almost buckle with the effort, but I manage to stand. I start toward the door, but I stop myself as a wave of uncertainty hits me. What am I going to say to her? What can I tell her? Am I going to lose myself again to those horrible hallucinations once I start talking?

My legs move, but I don't feel completely in control. I pace back and forth several times, stopping each time I pass the door. Clark's words echo in my head. *"...she is strong, and she loves you. And nothing — nothing you tell her will change that."* How can he be so sure?

Another lap around the room. She loves me. She will always love me, she told me. *"Let me ask you this — if the tables were turned, would you still love me?"* *"Lois, I could never stop loving you."* *"And I know that, Clark, and you have to know that I feel that strongly about you. You have to know that I will always love you. Always, Clark."*

I stop in front of the door again. If the tables were turned, would I even consider abandoning her? No. This love I have for her is unconditional. And she has told me that her love for me is the same. Unconditional. Always. Forever. So why am I having such a hard time believing that? I owe her the chance to hear my truth. And then decide for herself. My hands shake as I stare at the door handle.

Clark nudges me telepathically again, his voice kind and sympathetic.

*"Do you want me to stay or go?"*

He seems to project an image of Lois to me. She is beautiful, but hurting. She wipes a tear from her cheek. I want to kiss away that pain and never cause her to hurt again.

Clark's kind voice tells me, *"She is waiting here for you."*

I reach for the door handle as I exhale a long breath. Thank you, Clark. My eyes close as I turn the door knob. I know what I need to do. And I won't falter again. I will tell her the truth. And I owe him an apology, too. He's been steadfast and supportive despite the emotional barrage I've thrown at him. I blink against the discomfort of my growing headache and focus to communicate to him.

*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 —*

An intense pain erupts between my eyes, and everything goes black.

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25

Softness cradles my throbbing head, and a small hand rests on my shoulder. Lois? Pain. God, it hurts. I moan as I reach one hand up and rub the bridge of my nose. The movement doesn't help. I try to open my eyes, but the light exacerbates the pain, which pulses angrily right between my eyes. God. I groan again, and I feel Lois's fingers press into my shoulder gently. Lois. Thank you for being here with me. God, it hurts.

"W-what happened?" I ask, my voice shaky.

I try to raise my hands to block the light as I open my eyes again. Why is it so bright in here? The light seems to fade ever so slightly, and I can almost see around the room now. Lois sits next to me, and Clark is moving off somewhere on the other side of the room. Shutting the curtains, I think.

"You passed out," Lois says quietly.

I close my eyes as she gently caresses my cheek. The touch is so soothing, I can almost ignore the sharp pain stabbing my forehead. I passed out? I remember opening the bedroom door and then pain and blackness. A sudden rush of fear jolts me, and I struggle to try to sit up. I need to explain. She needs to know that I was coming to talk to her. I can't hurt her again. But my arms won't support me. I can't move, really. Her hand presses again into my shoulder, urging me to settle back into the soft bed. I oblige. I don't really have much of a choice right now. But I can explain, right?

"I-I was g-going to come back out t-to the kitchen," I try to tell her. My head throbs, and I feel my heart racing in my chest. Does she believe me? Does she understand? "I'm sorry, I-I was trying to —"

Her lips brush lightly against my forehead.

"Shhh," she whispers soothingly. "It's okay, Clark. We have all the time in the world. You rest, relax, breathe. We'll talk more when you're ready."

"You're too good to me, Lois," I say, moving my hand to cover hers on my shoulder as I close my eyes. The pain is nauseating and exhausting, like how I'd felt on Saturday and Sunday — so tired that I can barely move. I squeeze her hand as her lips again graze my forehead.

"I love you, sweetheart," she replies. Her free hand strokes my forehead, and her touch seems to have a calming effect. My heart rate slows, and my breathing stabilizes.

Across the room, I feel Clark hesitate for a moment, watching our exchange. I'm too tired to interpret his thoughts, but I see a glimpse of a familiar-looking blonde

woman, whom he is grateful is no longer in his life, and then Lois — but...not my Lois? Did he have his own Lois? How could he have left her? No, it's something else. And Superman too — something about how he became Superman is tied to this other Lois Lane. His thoughts are scattered and confusing to me, and I shake my head slightly as I close off my mind to him. A moment later, I hear the door close, and I realize Lois and I are now alone.

She continues to caress my forehead, her quiet presence keeping my anxiety at bay.

"He's a good friend, isn't he?" My voice is slurred, almost as though I'm drunk, and I open my eyes weakly to look at her. She smiles down at me, but the smile doesn't quite reach her eyes. She nods.

"Yes, he is."

"I haven't been fair to him," I admit, closing my eyes again. I lean into her touch and sigh as the pain in my head throbs again. Her hand stills on my forehead.

"What do you mean, sweetheart?"

"I mean — I-I don't know," I stutter. My thoughts are not making much sense, even to myself, and I'm not sure if I can explain to her either. I try to shift to a more comfortable position. Maybe if I turn on my side, my head will stop pounding. But I'm too tired to move.

Lois stretches out on the bed next to me and kisses my forehead again.

"I...I'm so tired now, hon. I'm sorry, again. Again — I — I keep doing this to you," I mumble. Dark and cold. I have to fight it. I force my eyes open and reach up to touch her cheek. She smiles down at me again. "You're so beautiful, my love. I want to talk to you now. I don't want to —" The pain in my head intensifies, and I choke back a sob.

"Shh, sweetheart. It's okay. Really," she soothes.

But I shake my head. It's not okay.

"No, hon, it's not — it's —" The pain stops me once again, and I close my eyes as I inhale sharply.

"Clark, you just fainted, maybe because of extreme anxiety, and you are clearly in a lot of pain right now." She pauses to brush the hair back off my forehead. "I want you to rest now, and we can talk when you're ready."

"But hon, I-I need to tell you everything. I can't keep — I c-can't —" My words won't form how I want them to. I try again, but Lois cuts me off.

"Shhh, please, Clark. Your health is more important right now," she insists. Her hand rests on my chest now, her fingers tracing slow circles on my T-shirt. "Please rest. I'll go tell Clark he can leave, and I'll stay here with you today. I won't go to work. That way, we can talk when you're ready. Okay, sweetheart?"

I force myself to turn toward her, shifting onto my side. My vision swims as my head throbs, but I blink the pain

back. My eyes meet hers, and I see her kindness, love, and concern; it overwhelms me. I wrap one arm around her and pull her to me. A tear escapes and slides down my cheek, and I close my eyes again and breathe deeply. God, I love her so much.

“Please tell him — ” I cough, and a sharp pain stabs my chest. “Ah, sorry, uh — please tell Clark thank you and I-I’m sorry.”

Her hand slips around to my back, and she tightens the embrace for a moment as her lips graze mine.

“Sorry for what, sweetheart? I’m sure you don’t need to apologize,” she says quietly.

“I do though,” I argue. My voice sounds weak and raspy, and I cough to clear my throat this time. “I do need to apologize. He — he has been nothing but a friend. Helpful, reliable. And in return, I...I’ve...”

My voice trails off again, and I blink my eyes several times as the world seems to start spinning around me. Bright lights dance around in front of my eyes, like fireflies. I resist the urge to swat my hand at the swirling pinpoints of light.

“I’ve had — I mean, sometimes I can’t control myself, my emotions, and — and it seems like I’m always hurting him because of it. Please tell him for me.”

That’s all I have. The pain and exhaustion are overwhelming.

“Okay, sweetheart, I will tell him for you. You rest now,” she repeats.

She leans over again and kisses my forehead as I close my eyes. Darkness envelops me, and I drift off into a blissfully dreamless sleep.

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## 26

Coffee with a lot of milk and sugar. For the second time that day. I stare down at the mug in front of me, watching the bubbles drift out to the edges of the ceramic. Lois settles in her seat next to me, her own coffee cup in hand. She closes her laptop and pushes it and her work notes over to the other side of the table. I take a small sip of the hot liquid and then raise my eyes to meet hers. She reaches over and sets a hand gently on top of mine.

*What did I ever do to deserve her?* I wonder, not for the first time. I offer a weak smile and then lower my eyes again to my coffee.

I’d slept for several hours, I guess, and it’s now after lunch time. Like earlier, I have no appetite, but my headache is gone, and my mind is clear. I hope it will stay that way. I recall earlier, when I’d felt such an urgent need to tell Lois everything, but I’d been unable to form coherent thoughts. No more waiting now, I’m afraid. I sip my coffee and sit up straighter, shifting slightly in my seat

to face her.

“Lois, I don’t know how to tell you...”

I shake my head as I realize how hard this is going to be. Where do I start? How much do I tell her? What if — what if she...? Her chair scrapes on the ground as she scoots it closer to mine, and she leans against me and wraps an arm around my shoulders.

“I’ll help you, sweetheart,” she offers softly. She kisses my cheek. “You ended up having to fight in the war, didn’t you?”

I close my eyes and nod. “Yes, I...I did. A month in, Ching and the Council insisted that I had enough training and was ready. They said the troops needed my leadership. Ching — he explained that...”

My voice trails off as I remember the conversation. Lois squeezes my hand, keeping me in the present, and I clear my throat. *Don’t drift off*, I tell myself. *Stay present*.

“He explained that it was my duty to...to kill Nor and that the only way to restore peace to New Krypton was for me to fight and defeat Nor in one-on-one combat.” But she already knows that, I think. Or at least, some version of that, which Clark had written about in his article.

“Right,” she says, confirming my suspicion.

I rub my thumb absently against the rough ceramic of the mug and blink several times before continuing.

“I met with the Council of Elders, together and with each member individually. I tried to get them to hear me, hear my side of things. Peace cannot be built on top of violence. I tried to tell them this. And Ching and Zara, too. But no one would listen. They just insisted that the law was the law. And the law said that I must defeat Nor to take back control over my people.”

The words start to come easier as I detach myself from the emotions I’d felt. Yep, emotionless, logical, direct, impassive. Right. Just like them. I am Kryptonian, after all.

“The first day I led my army... I remember it was so hot, and we wore these heavy black battle suits. And...”

I raise my eyes to meet hers. She wipes away a tear quickly, hoping I don’t see it. I reach over and touch her cheek, which is still wet.

No, I was wrong. I may be Kryptonian, but I’m also human. So very human. And my heart hurts seeing her cry.

“Lois, I never wanted any of this,” I say quietly.

“I know, sweetheart.”

“I had to do things that I’m not proud of,” I admit, lowering my eyes.

Shakily, I lean into her, our foreheads touching. She doesn’t back away from me; she doesn’t pull away or admonish me for my sins. Instead, she wraps her arm around my shoulders and holds me tighter. I continue, because there’s nothing else to do now. She needs the whole truth. No matter how terrible.

“I gave in to their arguments, and I led my army into battle. And I...I was really good at it — the leading, the fighting, all of it.”

I pause as the room darkens. A passing cloud, or my imagination playing tricks on me? A reddish hue glows from the window. My imagination. Knock it off, please. I grit my teeth and keep going, again. Telling her my worst truth.

My worst truth summarized in six terrible words.

“I killed a lot of people.”

She tenses up next to me but doesn’t move. I feel her hand grip my shoulder and her breath heat my cheek as she exhales. She smells like coffee and chocolate. All of these things, I hang onto as the red tint of the room grows. The room heats up. The light rain outside turns to a howling, dusty wind.

No, I will not go back there again.

I start talking again, clutching my coffee mug tighter.

“It’s what my nightmares are about. And my panic attacks. I had to do it. I had no choice, Lois, you know that, right?” Rhetorical question. I keep talking. “I led my army for two months. Every day for two months, we fought Nor’s troops. There were so many of them. Thousands of soldiers. And my army killed them all. Ching — Ching said we didn’t take prisoners. It was not Kryptonian to show mercy. We...we had to kill them all. I had to — God, I hate myself for it, Lois. I-I’m not the same man I was. I — ”

I collapse into her, no longer able to hold back my grief. My grief at all that I’d lost. I’d lost myself. I’d lost who I was and what I believed in. I’m no longer me. But she doesn’t reject me. No, she holds me tighter as I cry into her shoulder. She rubs my back and kisses my cheek and murmurs “I love you, sweetheart” into my ear. And I cling to her.

“I love you so much, Lois. Please, please forgive me. I didn’t want any of that. Please forgive me. I’m so scared to lose you,” I sob, burying my head into her hair.

“Oh, sweetie, you’ll never lose me,” she promises. Her hand strokes my hair gently. “I love you, always.”

How? How can she still love me? I want to ask, but I don’t. I just hold her and let her hold me. She keeps the darkness out. She grounds me. She anchors me here, in the present.

But I’m so tired again, so exhausted from it all. Three months of battle on New Krypton. One month of being dead. Four days back. God, I’m so tired.

“Thank you, Lois,” I murmur, closing my eyes. “Thank you. Thank you. I love you. I need you.”

“I know, sweetheart,” she whispers back to me. “I’m here.”

“Always?”

“Always, Clark.”

We have so much more to talk about. There’s so much more to tell her. But at least she knows my worst truth. And somehow, she still loves me.

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## 27

The afternoon passes slowly as we talk in short stretches. She listens and sometimes asks questions, but mostly just listens, holds me, and reassures me that she loves me. Occasionally, I am overwhelmed by my memories, and I have to stop talking for a while. But she still understands. She holds me, rubs my back, and tells me about what happened during my four-month absence.

I learn a lot about my doppelganger as well. She tells me about how he became Superman when another Lois Lane from another universe was brought to his world and how he worked together with that Lois Lane to defeat an evil villain from the future named Tempus. She also explains his early encounter with my father; apparently, on only the second day after he’d come to my world, my father had accused him of fabricating the article he wrote about Superman’s return from New Krypton. He was hurting, my father — his grief was fresh and strong, Lois says, and that has colored his feelings about the other Clark, despite all the good that Clark has done. In all of her explanations, I hear what I already know — that this Clark has been supportive, kind, and reliable, all without asking for anything in return. He is a genuinely good person, and Lois respects him very much.

I’m glad my world has been in such good hands.

After several more hours, as the sunset fades to blackness outside, we end up sitting together on her couch, and she turns on a movie — *The Princess Bride*, one of her favorites. She leans back into my arms, and I hold her as we forget the seriousness of the day.

Halfway or so through the movie, I feel myself starting to drift off to sleep. I shift a bit, pulling Lois tighter into my arms, in an attempt to keep myself awake. She glances back at me, and I lean in and kiss her softly.

A sudden, sharp pain in my head forces me to pull away, and I screw my eyes shut as the pain spreads quickly into my chest, arms, and legs. The pain is distinct; I’ve felt it before, but not for many months now. Kryptonite. But... how?

“Clark, are you okay?”

I shake my head and move away from her as a sense of panic rises in my chest. With a start, I realize that the pain and fear are not mine. They are the other Clark’s. And then, as quickly as it came, the pain vanishes, accompanied by a sense of relief. I blink several times to get my bearings. Lois sits a few feet away on the couch, her eyes

full of concern as they study mine. She reaches out to take my hands, which still tremble, and I scoot closer to her and wrap my arms around her.

“What happened, Clark? That was very sudden,” she says as her hands rub my back gently.

“The other Clark — he — dammit. Ah, sorry.” I feel my cheeks turn slightly red as I apologize for the mild curse. Lois pushes away from me, her hands moving to my knees.

“Clark, what is it?” She stands up and pulls me up with her. Her fear is palpable. “Is he okay? What happened?”

“I-I don’t know. I just felt…” I close my eyes and try to connect with him, but everything is fuzzy. I can’t sense pain or discomfort, but I also can’t sense much of anything. I know he’s conscious. And moving. And scared. That’s about it.

“What?” Her voice is higher than normal. She is scared for him now too. And I don’t blame her. I need to connect with him.

“There was kryptonite. I’m sorry, give me a second,” I reply tersely, and I move away from her and sit back on the couch. I close my eyes, rest my hands on my knees, and concentrate on relaying a quick message to him.

*What happened? Where are you? Are you okay?*

This time, I feel a flicker of our connection, and fear rattles me. I have to remind myself that the feeling is his, not mine. I open my eyes, but stare at my hands on my knees. I see an alleyway, and I feel an aching pain and weakness in my limbs. His limbs. His pain, I remind myself again. His voice is almost incoherent and obviously shaky, but he responds.

*“Sorry if I — there was kryptonite. Luthor testing me. Bomb threat at high school. I’m okay, but no powers. Could use a ride.”*

A bomb threat at a school? I raise my eyes abruptly to look at Lois.

“Turn on the news,” I say quickly. She obliges and then sits heavily next to me as a reporter stands among a group of panicking parents and students exiting Metropolis High. Lois takes my hand, and I swallow hard as I close my eyes again to concentrate. I feel his exhaustion and nausea, and I’m glad that I’m sitting down. *We’re on our way. Be there in five minutes.*

*“Thank you.”*

Our connection falters and fades, and I open my eyes and push myself back to my feet.

“We have to go help him,” I tell her, pulling her with me as I head toward the front door.

“Clark, wait — what is going on?” She’s confused. Right. I didn’t tell her.

*“I’ll tell you on the way. We need to hurry.”*

I squeeze her hand and then grab us each a coat from

the rack near the door. She follows me, picking up her purse as we exit the apartment. She quickly locks the deadbolts and throws her coat on as we jog to the elevator.

As I climb into the Jeep next to her a moment later, I reach out to Clark again. He’s sitting down with the long red cape wrapped around him, trying to keep warm. The feeling of being cold is unfamiliar to him, as is the painful aching in his chest, head, and limbs. I glance sideways at Lois. Her jaw is tight, and she grips the steering wheel so hard that her knuckles have turned white. She quickly pulls the Jeep away from the curb and speeds off down the road toward the high school.

“Tell me, please, Clark. Is he okay?” she asks uneasily, her eyes darting to me briefly before focusing back on the road.

“He is…in a safe place right now,” I answer carefully. He’s not okay. He’s hurting still, despite what seemed like a fairly short exposure, and he’s terrified. But he’s not in danger. “He was exposed to kryptonite, although I think it was a short exposure, and he was able to get away from it. He mentioned Luthor and some test, but I — ”

“Oh, God, I — my cell phone, Clark, can you — ” She motions almost frantically to her phone, which sits in a cupholder between us. I hastily open up the phone and see several notifications, including a missed call from Clark several hours ago and a couple text messages, one of which is from Clark, sent about an hour ago. It is accompanied by a photo of bank records showing a large transaction between the Church Group and a company called Dynamont Ltd.

I read the text message out loud. “Looks a little suspicious to me. Can I stop by later to talk it through? Also have some info re: Luthor and the K.”

“Shoot. He knew something. I shouldn’t have ignored my phone all day,” she complains in a low voice as she swerves onto a side street. Up ahead, colorful lights of firetrucks, police cars, and other emergency vehicles flash brightly. We are close to the school. She slows down as her eyes widen at the scene in front of us. “God, I hope he’s okay.”

“Me too,” I agree. I close my eyes and immediately connect with him this time. He is still cold, nauseous, and achy. I have a bad feeling about this; such a short exposure to regular kryptonite shouldn’t cause lingering effects like this. I shake off the unease and quickly tell him, *We are nearby. Where are you?*

I feel him stir, anxiety building as he tries to figure out how to help us navigate to him. I grit my teeth against his feelings of dizziness and nausea and focus on trying to follow his chaotic thoughts.

*“I’m here,”* he thinks, but quickly realizes that means nothing to me. A moment later, he projects an image of a

green storefront lined with old used books.

I scan the buildings ahead of us and easily recognize the storefront. I point ahead as I see a flash of red material fluttering out along the edge of the building across the street from the bookstore.

“There he is,” I say out loud. Then, silently for his benefit, I add, *Gotcha*.

“I see him.”

Lois pulls up to the curb as close as she can, and Clark releases his grip on the wall and begins to stumble toward the Jeep. He is wobbly and unsteady, and I quickly hop out of the car to help him.

“Here, man, I got you.”

My arm loops around his waist, and he leans on me as we move the last few feet to the car. I hear a fleeting “*Thank you*,” and I reach ahead of us and open the door to the backseat. He nearly collapses into the car, his long red cape falling unceremoniously over him as he shifts onto his back, groaning in pain.

“Th-thank you,” he repeats out loud this time, his voice weak. Then he closes his eyes as I shut the door to the backseat and move back to my seat in the front. Lois twists around and watches him for a moment. Then, when I’m settled and my seatbelt is fastened, she puts shifts the Jeep back into drive and turns around to head back the way we came.

She seems to make a split-second decision and turns right instead of left at one intersection, however, and I quickly realize she’s decided to take him to my apartment — his apartment, now, I suppose — rather than back to her place. We continue the rest of the short trip in silence, and I sit quietly, my eyes closed in concentration, as I monitor his condition through our telepathic connection. His pain is worsening, and he feels dizzy and confused. Thankfully, I’m finally able to detach myself enough that I can know what he’s feeling without actually feeling it myself, and I frown as I sense that his level of pain is continuing to grow rather than fade. I’d encountered kryptonite that did this same thing once before; it was one of the worst experiences of my life — until New Krypton, that is.

Lois pulls up outside Clark’s apartment and shuts off the car. From the backseat, Clark groans in agony as he pushes himself into a sitting position. I glance back at him; his eyes are screwed tightly shut, and he is terribly pale — not a good look for the Man of Steel. Right. He’s in the suit still. I quickly scan the street before hopping out of the car. All is quiet, so no one should see Superman limping up the steps to Clark Kent’s apartment late at night. Lois follows me out of the car and hurries around to meet me while Clark grasps the door and tries to pull himself up. Lois reaches out to try to help him, but he waves her off. He seems to think he should be able to do it himself, and I

understand the sentiment. However, he nearly collapses as his legs give out, and I move to his side.

“Here, let me help you,” I say, and I again loop my arm around his waist as I had earlier to support him.

“I should — I shouldn’t need help b-by now,” he protests in a weak voice. But I can also hear his thoughts and feel his weakness, which grows with each step. He mumbles a quick, “S-sorry,” as he leans on me more toward the top of the steps leading to his apartment, and my own fears mingle with his as I feel him struggling to breathe. It is the feeling of having a heavy weight pressing down on my chest, as I’d felt in the moment before I died. I swallow and follow Lois inside the apartment, clenching my jaw as the effort of supporting him begins to tire me. We manage to get to the couch, and I carefully help him lower himself down onto the soft cushions. His eyes are closed tightly, and he covers his face with one hand, groaning again.

“Why is it getting worse?” he complains. Lois steps up around me, her hand brushing against my back, and she then kneels down next to him and gently touches his forehead.

“He’s burning up, Clark,” she says to me as she stands back up and steps away from him. Her arms cross over her chest, and she glances back up at me. “What is this? This doesn’t seem like kryptonite.”

I wrap my arm around her shoulders and pull her to me.

“It is kryptonite. Remember last January. The Newtrich sisters.” She looks up at me sharply, and I grimace as I nod my head. “It’s the same feeling I had then. Someone knew to melt down the kryptonite and then let it resolidify. It’s going to get worse before it gets better, I’m afraid.”

“He doesn’t deserve this,” she murmurs, shifting in my embrace to face him again.

He doesn’t seem to be aware of our conversation, which makes sense, now that I’m sure I know what’s going on, but he groans and forces his eyes open as he turns his head toward us. Lois tenses up as she sees the pain in his expression, and I squeeze her shoulders gently. Clark shakes his head, but immediately regrets it; I feel his dizziness and nausea, and he closes his eyes again.

“What’s happening? I-I haven’t felt this before,” he says, his voice almost a whisper.

Lois glances up at me briefly and then moves back to his side. She kneels down next to the couch and softly brushes his hair back as she attempts to explain why he’s feeling so terrible still.

“Clark thinks that the kryptonite you were exposed to was a modified form that was melted down. The effects are different from those of regular kryptonite and can last a long time, maybe even several hours. Luthor now has your

medical files, so he must have read Dr. Klein’s notes on the effects of this modified form of kryptonite.” Her hand lingers on his forehead as she speaks, and I can sense that her touch provides him a small amount of comfort.

However, I also sense his confusion and realize he couldn’t hear everything she said. I step closer to them and kneel down next to Lois. Maybe he’ll be able to hear my thoughts better than he can hear her voice.

*Lois said they have Superman’s medical files, so they will know this, I explain slowly, doing my best to focus my thoughts for him. 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 add.* The memory surfaces — a short exposure to the deadly green rock, only seconds probably, and then the pain, getting worse and worse. I’d been lucky Lois had been with me at the time. She’d managed to somehow knock out both of the Newtrich sisters (how and with what I’m still not sure), tie them up, and then call the police while getting us both to safety. She’d also taken the modified kryptonite, safely wrapped up in lead foil, so we could later get it to Dr. Klein at S.T.A.R. Labs. The memory is painful, and I push it away; Clark doesn’t need to see that right now.

“Great,” he responds shortly. I almost laugh.

“He can’t really hear you, but I can communicate with him,” I explain to Lois in a low voice. She nods.

“Can you tell him that I’m really sorry I missed his calls and texts earlier? God, I feel like this is all my fault,” she mumbles, frowning at me. “Tell him we’ll stay here as long as he needs. He must be scared right now.”

“He’s strong, hon. He’ll be okay,” I assure her, reaching out to rub her back. “But I’ll tell him.”

I close my eyes again as she moves her hand to his shoulder, and I focus on passing along her message to him. As I open up our connection more, I feel the world start to spin around me, and I have to remind myself again that this is his perception, not mine. I clench my jaw.

*She says she’s sorry she missed your calls earlier. And that we’ll stay here as long as you need us, I tell him. He is trying to contain his panic; he’s never felt this sick before. In fact, I sense that he’s only even been exposed to regular kryptonite one time. Lucky him. I sigh and drop my chin to my chest as I relay a bit more information to him about this nasty modified version of the deadly green rock. 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.*

That may have been a slight understatement there. If I recall, it was actually probably closer to twelve hours. And even then, I could still barely stand on my own. It had

taken at least a day for my powers to return. But he doesn’t need to know that now.

Immediately, he responds just as I’d expect. “*Please, tell her she doesn’t need to apologize.*” He then curls up onto his side, groaning, as another wave of pain hits him. “*God. This is the worst.*”

*Try dying, I almost think to him, but I hold it back. No, I know how much pain he’s in right now, and it’s no joke. I stand up, and Lois follows me. She exhales sharply as she watches him struggle to breathe.*

“We should move him to the bedroom so he can sleep it off,” she suggests, looking up at me.

“Definitely,” I agree.

She kneels back down next to him and sets her hand gently on his shoulder.

“Let’s get you to the bedroom, Clark. I think you’ll be more comfortable there,” she says softly. I sense his initial confusion, but then he understands.

“K,” he manages. He opens his eyes and tries to push himself up. I feel the weakness in his limbs and hear his fear as he stutters, “I-I can’t...”

Lois and I both reach for him together, and I silently tell him, *Let us help.* Working in unison, Lois and I lift him off the couch and into the bedroom.

As we enter the bedroom, I’m suddenly very aware that this space used to be mine. It feels foreign now, even though he’s seemed to have changed very little in the way of décor. I don’t give myself time to study the room too closely, however, as his weight leaning on me grows. Lois leaves his side for a moment and pulls back the comforter on the bed, and I help him the final couple steps until he collapses onto the mattress. He manages to roll over on to his back, and I lift his legs up onto the bed.

“Thank you,” he says, his voice trembling.

“Just rest now,” Lois replies softly. She shifts down and slips off his boots and then pulls the blanket up over him. She touches his forehead again, frowning, and glances up at me. “Did you run a fever after you were exposed?” she asks.

I feel all of Clark’s pain slip away into darkness, and I know he’s lost consciousness. The weight is lifted from my chest, and my mind is clear. I nod to her.

“I did. You were really worried about it then too, I think. It’s all kinda fuzzy though,” I admit. I rest my hands on her shoulders. “He’s unconscious now.”

She nods and gently touches his cheek one more time before standing up and following me out of the bedroom. I scan the apartment, noting again that there are very few differences. He’s switched out a throw blanket I had on the couch and removed the personal photographs I’d had on the walls and side table. Otherwise, the room looks basically the same as when I’d left it. Lois places her hand



on my back as I stop near the dining table.

“How about I make us some tea?” I propose, turning to face her and wrapping my arms around her waist. She leans into me and nods.

“That sounds good. It could be a long night. I don’t want to leave him,” she says.

A small part of me wonders whether I should be jealous of how much she cares about him, but I realize that I don’t want to leave yet, either. She was right earlier when she said that he doesn’t deserve this; it should be me there in that bed, fighting pain, weakness, and a rising fever — not him.

I release her and step into the kitchen as she settles at the table and pulls out her phone. As I open the cupboard, another wave of familiarity washes over me. We’d spent so many late nights together, just like this. Working — or not working — here together. Lemon balm tea, I decide after rummaging through the full shelf containing various teas. I remove a small gray canister and set it on the counter and then start the water boiling. At least I can usually make tea without burning anything.

As the water heats, I turn back to Lois. She is staring at her phone, a scowl on her face. I know the look; it’s something related to a story they’ve been working on.

“What is it, hon?” I ask curiously, moving to the table to sit next to her. She sighs and pushes the phone in front of me. The photograph Clark had sent her earlier is open.

“He connected the dots on a story we’re working on and found evidence that might link Luthor to the Church Group and Intergang,” she explains. “See this here?” She points to the words “Dynamont Ltd.” on the screen. “Dynamont Ltd. They are a subsidiary of Luthor Corp. And this transaction occurred the day before Costmart, which you know is owned by the Churches, announced its expansion into New York City.”

“That’s a pretty sizeable transaction,” I agree. “But the Church Group — weren’t they a charity organization? Are you thinking they are tied to Intergang?”

She nods and continues staring at the phone. I can almost see the wheels turning in her head. The whistling of the teapot distracts me, and I quickly stand and move back to the stove. I remove the pot from the heat and add the tea leaves to steep. As I take two mugs out of the cupboard, Lois inhales sharply and clears her throat.

“It all makes sense. The Churches — they must be...” She trails off for a moment and looks up at me, pursing her lips. She shakes her head and restarts. “After you left, the Church Group claimed that they would try to fill Superman’s boots... to help law enforcement. However, we noticed that crime rates actually increased in areas where the Church Group was most active. It’s possible —”

“That the Church Group is a front for Intergang,” I finish for her. I frown and turn back to the stove. Pouring us each a cup of the fragrant tea, I consider something else that Clark had said. “Earlier, Clark said something to me — uh, telepathically, that is — about Luthor testing him, I think,” I recall. “If Luthor was responsible for the kryptonite, it would all make sense then, right?” I set her tea in front of her and sit down again.

She looks confused for a moment, but then nods as she takes a sip from her mug.

“Clark did say he thought Luthor was taking over as the new head of Intergang. And of course, if that’s true, then —”

“It makes sense that Luthor would want to take out Superman, who has always been Intergang’s biggest obstacle,” I conclude. I shake my head, and my gaze drifts toward the bedroom. “It should be me in there, Lois. Not him.”

I hear her inhale sharply, and she then stands and moves behind me. Her arms wrap around me, and she hugs me tightly.

“It shouldn’t be either of you. Luthor and the Churches should be behind bars, and we should have had all of that kryptonite destroyed. We couldn’t have guessed Luthor Corp. would buy S.T.A.R. Labs and confiscate the kryptonite,” she says softly. She kisses my cheek and then releases me to return to her seat.

“At the time, I thought it was the right thing to have Dr. Klein in charge of the kryptonite.”

“It’s not his fault either. He had no say in it,” she argues.

I nod in agreement and shift my gaze from the bedroom to her. She is watching me carefully, concern in her eyes.

“I know. But we should have just gotten rid of it. We should get rid of all of it. Toss it into the Sun.” I tense as I realize my voice has taken on a deeper tone, and my arms almost cross over my chest. I’m not Superman anymore though. Superman is lying unconscious in the other room. I force my hands back to the table and cautiously grip my mug of tea.

“Well, I certainly don’t disagree with you on that,” she smirks. I give her a weak smile and sip my tea.

A rustling from the other room startles us both, and together, we stand and move into the bedroom. Clark groans in his sleep and shifts around uncomfortably. He is pale and breathing in short, quick breaths, and a thin sheen of sweat covers his forehead. Lois frowns and steps up to the bed next to him. She lays her hand on his forehead, and he immediately relaxes into the mattress and sighs.

“He’s burning up,” she notes, glancing up at me anxiously. “I wish we could do something.”

“It will get worse before it gets better, hon,” I remind her. “But we can try to help.”

I move into the bathroom, grab a washcloth, and wet it with cool water. Then I hurry back into the bedroom and hand it to her. She carefully sets the cool washcloth on his forehead as I back away a step and rest my hands on her shoulders. She keeps one hand on his shoulder and covers my right hand with her own. And we stay there in silence for a few minutes. He seems to rest much more comfortably when she’s there next to him. I swap out the washcloth with cool water a couple more times, and after maybe another thirty minutes, his fever seems to break.

Lois is getting tired, I can tell, and honestly, I am too. It’s been a really long day, and it is getting late. She yawns and rubs her eyes, but stays sitting by his side.

“Come on, hon. Let him rest, and you can tell me more about the Churches and Luthor,” I suggest, reaching over to her and taking her hand. She looks up at me briefly and nods, then glances back at Clark again. His breathing has stabilized, and he seems to be much more comfortable than earlier. But as soon as she stands to follow me, Clark shifts onto his side, curling up with a groan. She hesitates for just a moment, then turns and shuffles slowly out of the room ahead of me.

Wordlessly, I reheat the tea, and we settle together on the couch. She leans back against me, and I wrap my arms around her. My exhaustion from earlier in the day begins to creep back in, and Lois seems to be feeling it too. Her eyes close as she rests her head on my chest, and she lets out a long breath.

“Maybe you should go back to your apartment and get some rest, hon,” I suggest, kissing the top of her head. “I’ll stay here and keep an eye on him. And I can call you when he wakes up.”

She immediately shakes her head and sits up. “No, I can’t leave him tonight. I —” She turns in my arms to look up at me. “I just can’t, sweetheart. You understand, right?”

“Of course, hon,” I reply, and I tighten my arms around her again. She is silent for a few minutes, though her fingers absently trace circles against my chest. She then lifts her head off my chest and reaches up to kiss me. The gentle touch comforts me, easing the anxiety that had been building in my chest. She pulls back and rests her head against me again.

“You should go back to my place and rest, though. There’s no reason for both of us to stay,” she says quietly.

My chest constricts at the thought. No, not that I don’t trust her here alone with him. No, it’s mainly that I’m terrified at the thought of being alone, without her, all night long. She feels me tense up, I think, because she pushes away from me and sits up again. Her hands reach

out to take mine, and she smiles weakly at me.

“I-I don’t know, Lois,” I fumble, lowering my eyes. She pats my leg and stands up. My eyes follow her as she stretches and then glances toward the bedroom. She turns back to me.

“It’ll only be for a few hours. I’ll get some sleep on the couch here, and you can come back first thing in the morning,” she proposes. But she frowns as I stand up to join her. “You trust me, don’t you? I mean —”

“Of course I do, hon,” I interject, reaching out to her and brushing a lock of hair back behind her ear. And that’s the truth. I trust her. “I trust you, and I trust him. I just... get anxious being alone.” There, the admission is not so hard. She smiles at me again and then kisses my cheek. I close my eyes and take a deep breath. It makes sense. She is right, as always. I swallow hard and continue. “However, you’re right. Since it’s only a few hours, I should be okay.”

I lean forward into her until our foreheads are touching. God, I love her so much. I envelop her in my arms, and I feel her hands press into my chest. For a moment, I am almost transported back into our life from four months ago — just before I left for New Krypton. We’d spent an entire night together here, sitting on my couch, talking. For hours, we’d discussed whether I should leave, whether we should announce Superman’s departure to the world, and what would become of Clark Kent. We’d stayed up all night long. She’d cried a lot, but I’d stayed strong for her, because that’s who I was then.

Now, she’s staying strong for both of us.

“Your keys are in your purse?” I ask quietly, and she pulls back slightly out of the embrace and nods. “Okay. You’ll be right here when I get back in the morning then?”

With a wicked smile, she replies, “Right here. Naked and ready to go.”

“Lois!”

She laughs and pulls me into a hug.

“I love you, sweetheart. Drive carefully, okay?”

“Of course. Call me if you need me.”

And I kiss her gently before heading out the door.

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## 28

Sunlight filters through the trees that line the sidewalks of Clinton Street as I navigate Lois’s Jeep into a parking spot in front of my old apartment. It is still early — about 8:30 a.m. — but I can’t stay away any longer. I need to see her. It had been a rough night, and I’d maybe gotten only a couple hours of sleep, which had been filled with nightmares. But now, I feel much more hopeful, particularly as I climb out of the Jeep and lift my head up toward the Sun. Its healing rays warm me, and I linger on

the sidewalk for just a moment before taking the steps up to Clark's front door two at a time.

I knock lightly on the door and stuff my hands into my pockets as I wait patiently. However, the apartment is quiet; no one answers, and I don't hear any sounds come from inside. I frown as I bend over a bit to try to peek through the curtains blocking the windows. The apartment is dark inside. Lois must still be sleeping, I figure, and of course, I'd left the apartment key with her the night before. I knock again, a little louder this time, and force myself to take several deep breaths to keep my anxiety in check. She's fine; she's just sleeping still.

When there is still no response, I turn back and jog toward the Jeep. I suppose I can just wait for a bit and then try again. She's usually a pretty light sleeper. I settle myself back into the driver's seat and turn the radio on. A news broadcast is discussing the fake bomb threat from the previous evening, and the two anchors bicker a bit about whether Superman should have stuck around longer to help the police mitigate the crowds of anxious students, parents, and school administrators. It seems his quick exit was noted by the press. I shake my head a bit and look up toward the apartment again, hoping to see some lights on inside. However, the windows are still darkened.

*Lois, come on, hon,* I think to myself. I close my eyes and rest my head back against the headrest. I will not panic. Nope, I'm totally fine. Totally fine.

A sudden wave of concern hits me, and my eyes snap open as I sit upright. I scan ahead of me. An older man walks down the street, leaning heavily on a rickety black cane. Otherwise, the street ahead is still quiet and abandoned. Then, I glance into the rearview mirror.

To my surprise, my doppelganger approaches, jogging down the sidewalk toward the apartment. He's up. And mobile. Actually, he looks perfectly healthy. It hasn't even been twelve hours since he was exposed to the modified kryptonite. So he's not only stronger and smarter than me, but he also heals faster. Great.

Our eyes meet in the rearview mirror, and I wave as I start to climb out of the car. I grab the old baseball cap I'd brought with me and pull it on over my head. Then, I scan the street again as I shut the car door and hurry ahead of him up the steps. As he gets closer, I see his color is normal, not sickly pale like last night, and he gives off an aura of power — just like he always has.

"You look like you're feeling much better," I comment shortly, watching him carefully as he unlocks the door. His hands are steady and confident. Unlike mine. I'm almost shaking already. Can't he hurry? I need to see Lois; the feeling is so strong right now that I find myself fidgeting, shifting from foot to foot. I consciously block my thoughts from him so he can't sense my unease.

"Yes, thank goodness," he agrees, directing a weak smile at me. "The sunlight helped a lot."

"I bet. Lois must still be sleeping, huh? I knocked, but no one answered." I try to keep the concern out of my voice. But it's difficult. She should be awake by now, particularly if he's up and about. And his reaction does not exactly assuage my fears. He freezes, one hand turning the door handle, and I feel a strong sense of dread from him.

"Wh-what? You mean she's not — she never went home...?" he asks, his voice trembling.

I feel my chest constrict and my stomach lurch. I want to grab him and shake him and demand to know where she is. But he looks as concerned as I feel. Frantically, I reach forward, push open the door, and usher both of us inside. As the door shuts behind us, I quickly scan the room. A blanket is folded neatly on the couch, and our two half-empty mugs of tea from the previous night still sit on the coffee table.

There is no evidence that she's been here in quite some time. I feel dizzy.

"What do you mean? Where is she?" I demand, turning toward him.

Clark shakes his head as he switches on the light by the front door. He glances over at me and starts down the steps toward the kitchen, pulling off his glasses briefly to rub the bridge of his nose. He suddenly looks much more tired than he did outside.

"She left about two hours ago," he replies.

I can sense his mind racing, as mine is, and I hear and see his thoughts fairly clearly. Lois was here, and they talked briefly about something. Then, a fragment of a memory flashes — she is angry, yells at him, and starts crying, then leaves the apartment hastily. Anger flares up inside me, and I jog down the steps after him. Foolish, I know, but I grab his shoulder. The room around me seems to glow slightly red as all of my focus narrows to the man standing in front of me. He made her cry.

"What did you do to her?" I growl. "Why was she so upset?"

"I-I didn't do anything," he argues, shaking his head. His thoughts are jumbled now, and although I sense his sincerity, I can't contain my fear, especially after having just spent too many hours alone without her. He continues, his voice faltering unsteadily, "I j-just — she got upset when I —"

He shrugs out of my grasp as he turns back around to face me, and he seems to open up our connection as our eyes meet. "*Here, just see...*" he communicates to me silently, and he then closes his eyes as he projects a memory to me.

He sits at the table, and she sits across from him. He smiles at her briefly, but then frowns as he begins telling

her how he'd overheard Luthor planning a 'test' for Superman. He explains how the bombs were a decoy, and after he'd disposed of the fake bombs out in space, he'd been about to find and arrest a man named Nigel, who was an associate of Lex Luthor and had orchestrated the whole debacle at the high school, when he was exposed to the kryptonite outside the gym.

He tells Lois all of this, and I hear her concerned voice as she says to him, "*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...*" I feel his agreement, and then, he concentrates to remember the scene at the high school.

He recalls landing next to Police Chief Adams after returning from space. There were four other officers nearby. He'd stepped toward the gymnasium. A small click to his left distracts him, and he notices a weak green glow in his peripheral vision. He shifts his focus and sees it — the features of a familiar face lit up by the glow of the green rock, milliseconds before his eyes shut tightly in pain. He pulls himself out of the memory and tells Lois, "*Bill Henderson was the officer with the kryptonite.*"

In his memory, I feel his disbelief. He knows his memory is correct, but Bill is a friend, and the realization is alarming to him. And Lois — she stands abruptly and begins arguing with him. "*No, no. Not Bill. He wouldn't —*"

He tries to get her to listen to him, to sit with him and talk about it. But Lois is too upset, and she gets angry and yells at him. I sense his confusion and dismay; he really just wants to discuss it, but she won't listen. He tells 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 they blackmailed him, or something?*" I hear his thoughts at the time. He's nearly begging her. She's crying now, and he can't stand to see it. *No, please don't cry, Lois*, he thinks. But she's too upset. She yells at him again, but the words are fuzzy in his memory now, and then she spins around angrily, grabs her coat and purse, and leaves. He wants to follow her, but he's too tired and weak. He says again, "*Please don't leave, Lois. Please, let's just talk about this for a minute. Please.*" But she refuses and tells him not to call her, and then she leaves.

As I watch his memory replay, my anger slowly fades. He cuts off our connection for a moment and then steps back away from me, shoving his hands deep into the pockets of his pants. I feel his sadness still, despite him blocking his thoughts from me, and I realize that Lois's reaction — her refusal to even consider what he'd said — had hurt him. He doesn't know all of their history — Lois and Bill, that is. Or he'd understand her reaction more.

*Lois, God, hon, where are you?* I blink several times and stumble over to the couch, barely managing to keep myself on my feet. I sit at the edge of one cushion and lower my head to my hands. And my own disbelief grows as well. I mean, I believe Clark. But, really? Henderson? I look up at Clark, who stands watching me, his face contorted into an anxious expression mirroring my own feelings.

"Bill Henderson? I-I can't believe it. I — there must be a reason — like you said," I fumble, shaking my head as I rub the back of my neck. I sigh and stare at the coffee table as I quietly explain Lois's reaction to him. "But Lois, I know why she got so upset," I start, my voice low. "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 —"

A sudden strong fear invades my mind, and I abruptly push myself up to stand and cross my arms over my chest. Lois. She'd left so upset, with no car, and she'd never made it home, which means...

"She probably went to find him and confront him," I blurt out, my knees starting to shake. My eyes shoot up sharply, meeting his. He stands solidly a few feet away. Why is he not panicking like me? She could be in danger. My hands begin to tingle as a weight grows on my chest. I can't breathe again. I shut my eyes and mumble, "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..."

"*I will protect her,*" he tells me silently. "*I will always protect her.*"

His voice in my head is strong, confident, like Superman. However, I feel myself losing control over my anxiety. Panic builds as the room begins to turn red, wind howling on the edges of my consciousness, dust blowing across the ground and up into my eyes. No, I will stay present.

*We have to go find her*, I insist. I rub the imaginary dust out of my eyes and clench my jaw as I look over to him again. *She probably went to Bill's house*, I tell him telepathically. I try to take deep breaths, but my chest won't seem to expand completely.

He nods, agreeing with me, and tells me, "*Let me go get the suit on. We can't be seen together otherwise.*"

"Please hurry," I plead, and I start pacing, my legs moving almost of their own accord. The room continues to grow red. An explosion rocks the floor, and I nearly stumble into the kitchen table. No, it's not real. It's not real.

"Yeah, of course. One second."

I'm only vaguely aware of his response. But a sudden gust of wind, actual wind, in the room brings me back to the present, and I look up sharply as Superman halts in front of me, his arms crossed over his chest. I can't contain my surprise.

*Your powers are back already?* I ask, rhetorically, of course. It's been less than twelve hours, and he's already got his speed back. He's more than superhuman. *It took mine much longer*, I manage to add silently.

He tosses me a pair of glasses, and I grimace as I slip the glasses on. Familiar and yet also foreign. I haven't worn glasses in over four months now. But I suppose they are necessary since Superman and Clark Kent are going out together.

"I do not miss having to wear these," I confess, glad for the distraction. My anxiety does not ease, however, and I immediately start toward the door.

"I'm not at anywhere near full strength yet," he says quietly, following me. "So, uh, maybe we can just drive there, if that's okay..."

*Of course.* My response is terse, and I hurry, my anxiety fueling me. I jog down the steps outside the apartment and head toward the Jeep, the bright red material of Superman's cape fluttering in my peripheral vision. Shakily, I pull the keys out of my pocket and unlock the car.

His voice reaches out to me, tentatively, and asks, "*Are you okay to drive? I could —*"

"No, I'm fine," I assert. I raise my eyes to meet his over the roof of the vehicle and nervously push the glasses up higher on the bridge of my nose. "I'm j-just... I'm worried about her. And I-I don't like being powerless when she's in trouble."

I lower my eyes and climb into the car, and I sense his agreement as he copies me. We both settle in and fasten our seatbelts — yeah, so Superman doesn't need to wear it, really, but if he's anything like me, it's become a habit to put it on, regardless of whether the suit is on — and I pull away from the curb, racing through the streets at speeds that should probably get me an expensive speeding ticket. Surprisingly, given my state of mind and tendency to easily forget things, I remember how to get to Henderson's house. We head north out of the city, enter the small suburb of Valley Glen, and navigate through a new housing tract.

Minutes later, I pull the Jeep up behind Henderson's old police cruiser, my heart racing, and I sense panic in the man sitting in the passenger's seat next to me. Before I even stop the car, Clark leaps out and flies inside. I look up sharply, following the blue and red blur, and a stabbing pain — his dread, I realize — forces all the air out of my lungs. I hurry to follow him, unfastening my seatbelt and

sprinting up the walkway into the house.

"*Oh God,*" he thinks, unintentionally sharing the sentiment with me. And as I enter the house, I stagger against the door frame, barely managing to keep myself upright. My lungs burn from the short run into the house, but I force myself to breathe as I scan the room. My stomach churns.

Broken windows. Furniture pushed over and out of place. Blood on the floor, staining the carpet.

Superman stands in front of me, holding something in his hand, but his back is to me, and I can't tell what it is. His shoulders hunch as he shakes his head. "*Oh God,*" he thinks again.

*What is it?* I demand, standing up straighter and moving another step into the room toward him.

He turns around slowly, a neutral expression on his face. But I can sense his fear and concern. The object in his hands catches my attention — a familiar black faux-leather bag. Lois's purse.

*No, no, no. God, no.*

The room turns red around me as a terrifying fear builds. I lunge toward him to grab the purse from him. It is all I have of her right now. But instead, I trip and fall to my knees. The carpet slightly cushions my fall, but my hands hit the ground hard, and I grunt in pain. None of that matters right now though. All that matters is her. Where is she? She was here. She had been here. The blood. My head turns sharply toward the dark red stain on the carpet, not more than a few feet from me. Is it hers? *God. No. Lois.* I can't breathe. I shut my eyes tightly.

Two very strong hands grip my shoulders and lift me to my feet, but I stupidly fight against him. This is his fault. Dammit.

My eyes fly open as I scream at him in my mind, *How could you let them take her?! You said you would protect her!*

I have no control over anything right now — not my emotions, my actions — nothing. And so, I again idiotically push against him with all my strength. Unprepared, he actually moves a step backward, and I swing a fist at him, my vision turning an uglier shade of red.

This is his fault.

But I seem to have forgotten that he is Superman, and I'm not. This time, he is ready for my feeble attack, and he sidesteps and grasps me around the waist. A second later, we are soaring several hundred feet up in the air, toward Metropolis. *Dammit.*

I struggle in his grip. Foolish, yes, but I don't care. I'm so angry that my vision begins to blur. *Lois, I'm sorry. I trusted him, and I shouldn't have. Please be okay, my love.*

*"Clark, we'll find her. We'll find her. Please trust me."*

His voice penetrates my mind, and he sounds calm and confident. But I can't contain my fear and anger. And I can't breathe.

*Let me go! I have to find her. I can't lose her. You don't understand!* I yell, silently. I push against him, but he doesn't budge. Stupid superhuman strength. *Dammit.*

"I do understand. I do understand. And I promise you, we will find her. I will not let you lose her. I will not lose her."

Something in his voice breaks through my rage-induced daze, and I stop struggling. Nausea hits me as I stare down at the ground, far, far below us. The Daily Planet globe glints in the morning sunlight to our right, and rows of skyscrapers stretch out in every direction. We're already hovering over downtown Metropolis. I hadn't even noticed that we'd been flying so quickly. I close my eyes tightly, and I feel him slow and focus his attention outward.

*"Please let me focus so I can find her,"* he tells me, a sort of urgency in his tone. Yes. He cares about her too, after all. Probably as much as I do. I force my breathing to steady a bit and channel my thoughts to avoid interrupting his concentration. Not a second later, his head snaps up and to the left. *"She's at the Lexor."*

Something is wrong though. Immediately, he shoots off as quickly as he can in the direction of the distinct building, a towering forty-five-story hotel off Fifth Street and Main. I can hear his thoughts now, though they are not directed at me. He sees her and hears her. And Bill is there too. And that Nigel person. And something is very, very wrong. He suddenly veers us both toward the ground, and I hear a scream pierce the air. Lois.

*"No, no, no. God, why am I not faster?"*

No, no. What? I barely have time to register what is happening as he sets me carefully on the ground in front of the hotel and immediately launches straight up into the air, his burst of speed breaking the concrete at his feet. I look up as the screaming abruptly stops.

Superman has saved the day. Or at least, he has saved the only thing that really matters to me.

He holds her gently with one arm and Bill Henderson a bit less gently in the other, and he floats them down slowly. I feel his fear subside, though my own has still not ebbed. Not until she's here with me in my arms. My hands shake uncontrollably, and I shift uncomfortably. *Come on, fly down here faster.*

My eyes remain glued to Lois, and I step back as Superman lands the three of them lightly on the ground next to me. He stabilizes himself, Lois, and Bill, and then snaps the bonds holding their hands together. Lois grimaces as she rubs her wrists and then turns toward me. Her hair is tousled and her cheeks red from her unplanned

fall off the side of the building. She gives me a weak smile.

"Lois." My voice barely works. She doesn't care. She nods and collapses into my arms, letting out a long sigh. I hold her tightly, burying my head in her hair. She is shaking, as am I, and she loops her arms around my waist. "God, Lois, I was so scared. You — are you — are you hurt?" I pull away from her slightly and study her face quickly. There is no blood anywhere on her. I touch her cheek with my hand.

"No, no, I-I'm fine, sweetheart," she promises.

She glances up toward the roof briefly, and my eyes follow hers. Superman now stands near the ledge, his arms crossed over his chest, and an older gray-haired man leans over the edge about fifty feet away, sneaking a peek down to the ground before refocusing his attention on Superman.

"Nigel — Nigel has kryptonite, Clark," she whispers fearfully. "How did he — his powers — how? When?" Lois pulls me back to her, kisses my cheek, and then rests her head on my chest.

"He'll be okay," I say, holding her against me. I'm vaguely aware of several police cars pulling up along the curb and Bill Henderson sitting with his head in his hands, mumbling something about his wife and son. But my main focus is how soft she is. Her hair, her skin, her lips. My cheek still tingles where she kissed me. And her hands press into my back, bringing us closer together. I close my eyes.

After another moment, however, a sense of panic begins to grow. It's not mine. It's his. I hold Lois tightly still as I look up toward the roof. Nigel has moved closer to the ledge, and Superman now floats a few feet up in the air, maintaining a safe distance from the older man. He is trying to negotiate with Nigel, but the man isn't having it. The kryptonite — Superman can't save him if he jumps. His mind is racing, and it almost makes me dizzy. My shoulders tense, and I shift a bit for a better view. A terrible thought enters my mind. I try to shake it off, but it returns, ballooning until it's all I can think.

*Just let him jump. Just let him die.*

"Excuse me, Miss Lane," says a young police officer as he steps up to us. He's holding a notebook in one hand and a pen in the other. Another four officers congregate lazily around Henderson, occasionally glancing up toward Superman on the roof. They are so certain, so sure that Superman will take care of the problem that they don't even pay much attention to the man about to jump off the roof.

Wait, what?

I look back up sharply and gasp as Nigel pulls himself up onto the ledge, leaning precariously over. I feel Superman's panic. The man may actually jump. And what

can Superman do? Nigel is wearing a ring studded with kryptonite.

The same thought I'd had earlier pops back into my head. *Let him die. He tried to kill my love. He doesn't deserve to live.* I shake my head. Next to me, Lois pulls away.

"Clark, what is he —"

An odd sound escapes her lips as Nigel steps off and over the edge of the roof, and she startles back into my arms, burying her head in my chest. I wrap my arms around her and watch as Superman shoots down toward the man. Pain fills me as Superman grabs Nigel's arm, barely managing to hang on without getting pulled over the ledge himself. The pain is his. Pain, weakness. I start shaking; Lois feels it too.

"Clark..."

"Shhhh, don't look, hon," I say quickly, placing my hand on the back of her head and pressing her gently into me.

He is terrified right now. Nigel is slipping. He has no strength. *"No, no, no!"*

Lois pushes away from me and looks up just as I feel an explosion of pain in my head and Nigel's arm slips from Superman's grip. My eyes widen, and the police officers next to us all jump to attention.

"Oh, God!" Lois cries, gripping my arm tightly.

I can't do a damn thing about anything. I can't comfort her. I can't help Clark. I can't save Nigel. Not that I'd want to, I realize. No, no, that's not right. No one deserves to die. *Oh, but Nigel. Nigel does. So does Luthor. They did this. They almost killed her.* I shake my head and blink back the angry rage growing in my chest.

And then, I see a flash of red and blue tumbling off over the side of the building. My breath catches in my throat. No, he can't be; he's not fast enough, and he was just exposed to that kryptonite. How? Superman swoops down in a wide arc, avoiding getting too close to Nigel. He lands only a few feet away from us, grunting in pain as the ground fractures beneath his feet. He looks upward, his singular focus on saving the man who just tried to kill him.

Superman takes a deep breath and begins blowing air upward to slow the man's fall. It happens so fast that I barely have time to feel all of his emotions. But the final one — relief — hits as Nigel's fall slows until he is floating on a cloud of wind at a safe distance about fifty feet up in the air.

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29

Nigel St. John. Apparently, that is his name. He's a known entity to the FBI and CIA and has been on the no-fly list for decades. Wanted for too many crimes to list, including murder and extortion, by national and

international organizations. And allegedly tied to Intergang, the Russian mafia, and the Clerkenwell Crime Syndicate. I overhear all of this as I sit on the curb and stare at him sitting in the back of a police cruiser, handcuffed and effectively neutralized.

He looks straight ahead, an unperturbed expression on his face. He doesn't see me staring at him. That's probably a good thing.

Lois is off somewhere to my right, explaining again to the police how she ended up at Bill Henderson's house just as Nigel arrived. She tells them she needed to talk to Henderson about a story. They don't know about the kryptonite. Or Luthor. Or exactly how Henderson is connected to Nigel and Luthor. I hear the frustration in her voice as she answers the same questions that they'd asked her minutes ago.

But my eyes remain trained ahead on the man who tried to kill her.

And my thoughts from earlier — scary, rageful, vengeful thoughts — continue to surface. I legitimately want to kill him. I've killed before. It's not that hard, actually. My hands are strong enough now. They could easily wrap around his neck. Or just...snap it. Yeah. That would be faster and cleaner.

*God, what is wrong with me?*

Superman returns, landing with a blonde woman and dark-haired young boy next to the ambulance to my left, where Henderson's wounds are being treated. They'd kidnapped his family to use as collateral if Henderson didn't do what they wanted. That's the kind of people we're dealing with here. My vision turns red with renewed rage.

Nigel St. John. The name will look good on a gravestone.

The thought lingers as I feel Clark nudging me telepathically. He can sense my anger. Good. He should feel it. And part of this is his fault. Why save the man? Why risk his own life to save that monster who tried to kill Lois? I shift my gaze to him and swallow hard as our eyes meet. My fists clench against my knees.

*He tried to kill her. You should have let him die,* I assert. Wind howls around us, dust blowing across the street in front of me and covering everything with an orange tinge. My hands are red with blood. I feel it dripping from my fingers. It's not real though. It's not. Is it? Clark's eyes don't leave mine. He shakes his head slowly.

"No, that's not what I do. You know that," he tells me.

Of course, I know that. Superman doesn't kill. Superman doesn't just let someone die if there's any way to save them. But that man there — Nigel St. John — he tried to kill Lois. My love. My life.

And I'm not Superman anymore.

The anger inside me grows, and I growl in frustration as he refuses to agree with me. I lower my eyes to the pavement.

*I want to kill him*, I admit.

My head starts to pound, a pulsing pain that originates at the base of my skull and works its way around to the front of my forehead, right between my eyes. Ching's voice echoes in my head. Words professing that killing and death are necessary to bring peace. My hands — they were agents of death. They can so easily finish this job that Superman can't. After all, I'm not Superman. I open my hands and stare at them. Blood. Where did the blood come from? The dark red liquid seems to seep from my palms and drips onto the ground, pooling in front of me.

No. It's not real. It's not real.

*God, what is wrong with me?*

I look back up at Clark, who watches me with concern still. My jaw trembles, and I shake my head as I force myself to breathe. Help me, please.

*I need to get out of here*, I tell him urgently. He understands, but I explain anyways. *Away from him. Now. Before I do something that I can't take back.*

He nods quickly and scans the area. His gaze lands on Lois, who is still talking with the two police officers. She is a bit more animated and less frustrated now.

*"I can take you back to the apartment and then come back to get her,"* he proposes, stepping toward me.

No. No, that won't work. I can't leave her. I've been apart from her for too long, and that is how we got into this mess in the first place. I let her stay with him... My Lois. My eyes wander to her. She laughs at something one of the officers said, then shakes her head. She's beautiful. And I can't leave her here. Nope.

*I don't want to leave her*, I communicate silently, my eyes fixed on her. She glances at me briefly and smiles. She's so beautiful. And then she turns back to the officer, her hands on her hips, and continues the conversation. My heart starts to hammer in my chest. I can't leave her.

*"You can trust me. I'll drop you off and come right back here,"* Clark tells me.

My gaze shifts sharply to him. Trust? Trust him? Last time I trusted him... I'm shaking again now. I grip my knees as my vision turns red. I see Lois falling from the roof of the building, screaming. She'd almost died. A few seconds later and... No.

*I don't trust you*, I grumble angrily.

The shaking in my hands worsens, and I feel a stinging pain in my chest. A black blade pushes into my sternum. God, it hurts. No. No, it's not real.

But Nigel is.

My vision tunnels to the police cruiser. The old man

sitting in the back seat. Now he is staring straight at me, a mocking grin on his face. That monster. That man deserves to die for what he did. And this other me, this other Clark Kent, this Superman — he insisted on saving the monster's life. I drop my hands to the ground, and the hard concrete under me pushes back, rough against my palms. Rough like the hard, barren rock of New Krypton. He would be executed there, Nigel would be. Executed for his crimes. That's what he deserves. That smirk taunts me now. I can't hold my anger back.

I shift my gaze back to my doppelganger. *You almost let her die. And you let her would-be killer live. I'm gonna kill him myself.*

I move quickly, jumping to my feet and stepping toward the police cruiser. My hands ball into fists as I imagine pulling him out of the backseat and wrapping my fingers around his neck. That way I can feel when he takes his final breath. But Superman is suddenly standing in front of me, his hands on my shoulders, stopping me. His voice is in my head. Calm but insistent.

*"Let me take you home. Then I'll come back and get her."*

I don't think so.

"Let me go," I snap, my voice low. I stare past him to the police cruiser. The monster glares back at me, sneering. Pain pulses in my head and chest. And rage. But Superman doesn't let me pass.

*"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,"* he pleads.

He shifts slightly so I have to look at him, not at the monster.

*Dammit, Superman. Move.*

I push against him with all my power, but he doesn't budge. Instead, he seems to sigh with resignation as he grasps my shoulders and, for the second time that day, launches up into the sky, me in tow.

*Not again. Oh, no.* I push against him, struggling to get loose. The reddish tint to my vision darkens as we fly higher. I close my eyes and try to twist free. I have to get back there. He doesn't understand.

"Dammit," I yell. The wind blows in my face, and my glasses fall, dropping hundreds of feet down to the street below. Rage fills me. "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," he says quietly, but firmly. His grip doesn't loosen, and I keep struggling against him. He sighs again and raises his voice a little. "Calm down. Please. What good will you be to Lois if you kill him and then go to prison?"

The pain pulses in my head, and I screw my eyes shut



tighter as I finally still. Except my hands — they won't stop shaking. And I can't seem to breathe right. My chest hurts.

We start to descend, and I open my eyes. Lois's apartment is just ahead. He reaches out and pushes open the window. As soon as my feet hit the floor, I move away from him, stumbling toward the couch. But I can't sit. I can't stop moving. My hands grip my chest as the pain amplifies. Blood oozes down my shirt as a black blade slips out of my chest and clangs on the floor.

No. No, it's not real. God.

Please bring her here. I need her. I need Lois. I spin around to face him. Why is he still here?

"What are you waiting for? Go back to her. You're leaving her alone too long. If she's not safe —"

I can't breathe again. I fall to my knees, my shaking hands covering my face as I try to hold back tears. What is wrong with me? I'm a mess. This whole situation. All of this out-of-control behavior.

This is not me. I shake my head. This is not me. I'm sorry, Clark. God.

*I'm sorry. Please, hurry. I can't stand these feelings. I need her.*

Immediately, he responds, his thoughts calm and empathetic, "*I will be back. Please stay here. Less than one minute, and I'll be back with Lois. Okay?*"

*Please, hurry,* I say again, unable to look up at him. My hands fall to the ground as I feel the breeze from his rapid departure.

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### 30

It's not one minute. No way. It is more than one minute.

I think.

Actually, I'm not sure. Everything is fuzzy, blurred by the haze created from my intense fear and rage.

But I'm sure it's not just one minute.

Regardless, when he flies her in through the window, nothing else matters in that moment. All I see is her. She is safe and unharmed and here. I hurry over to her and wrap her in my arms. Immediately, a strong sense of relief flows through me as she returns the embrace.

"Shh, sweetheart. I'm here now," she murmurs in my ear. "You're okay, sweetie. I'm here now."

*God, Lois.* I'm shaking so badly, and my knees are trembling, but she holds me tightly. I love her so much. I breathe deeply, burying my head in her hair.

"I'll, uh, go get your car, Lois, and your purse," Clark says, and Lois immediately tenses up and pushes away from me slightly.

"My...car?"

I tighten my arms around her, not willing to let her go. My eyes close.

"We drove your car to Bill's house to look for you. When we realized you'd been there and saw signs of a struggle, he flew us back into Metropolis to find you," I explain quickly. Lois seems to nod in acknowledgement, and I kiss the top of her head as I hold her, my hands pressing into her back. *Please stay with me, Lois. Please don't leave me.*

From near the window, Clark clears his throat, but I don't look up at him. A part of me still wants to be angry with him. God, Lois almost died. I force out another breath as I carefully block my thoughts from him.

"I'll be back in a few minutes," Clark says, his voice solid and confident now. A moment later, a slight breeze flows through the apartment, and a familiar sonic boom rattles the windows.

"Clark, sweetie, you're shaking."

Lois moves her arms from around my waist and pushes gently against my chest. I almost resist; I don't want to let her go. But she's right, I am shaking, and my legs feel wobbly and unsteady. I allow her to move away from me slightly, and she takes my hand and leads me over to the couch, where we sit. Then, I pull her back into my arms again. I can't seem to bring her close enough to me. And I can't seem to stop my hands from shaking.

After a moment, she pulls away again, kisses my cheek, and scoots back on the couch to face me. Her hands take mine, and she flashes me a brief smile as her dark eyes study me. She seems to have completely recovered from her adventure earlier; her hair is pulled back into a neat ponytail now, no longer messy and tousled from her several-hundred-foot drop off the side of the Lexor, and she appears to be her usual confident self.

"Clark, I'm fine now, you know," she starts, her hands squeezing mine gently. I close my eyes as she continues. "I know it was scary, sweetheart, and I'm sorry. I shouldn't have just run off like that this morning when Clark told me about Henderson. But I had to find out for myself."

"You almost died," I mumble. The muscles in my jaw tighten as the memory of her screaming flashes in my mind. "Two seconds later, and you would have died, Lois. That's... God, Lois, two seconds later. If I'd accelerated slower while driving to Henderson's. Or if I'd gotten stopped at a light. Or if Clark had hesitated at all. Or if — or if his powers hadn't come back. And then what? Lois, I can't lose you. I can't. I — two seconds, Lois!" My voice becomes progressively more agitated as I ramble on, and the feeling of that heavy weight on my chest returns. Suddenly, I can't seem to breathe, and I release her and lower my head into my hands as I'm overcome with dizziness. A gentle hand moves to my back, and I feel her

fingers press into me.

“I know, sweetheart. I’m sorry. I’m fine now, though,” she repeats.

Another gust of wind breezes through the room, and I feel Clark’s presence a few feet away. I grip my head with both hands, forcing myself to focus my thoughts. He doesn’t need to see the mess that I am right now.

Lois stands up and moves away from me for a brief moment. My heart races, but I don’t move to join her. They speak in quiet voices behind me. I sort of hear the conversation, but my nausea grows the longer she is not next to me, and their words are jumbled and confusing. Something about him returning the Jeep, and her thanking him for saving her, and them needing to write up the story. My head snaps up.

“Lois, you can’t leave me here again. Please,” I beg as I stand up and join her next to Clark, who edges closer to the window, his eyes downcast. “Please don’t leave.” I step between them and wrap my arms around her again as my stomach lurches. I feel her sigh. She returns the embrace and kisses my cheek again.

“Thank you again. I’ll text you,” she says, directing her words to the man standing behind me.

“Sure thing.”

His presence fades as the window blows shut. And Lois calmly rubs my back.

“Clark, sweetie, I’m not going anywhere. I’ll work remotely today.”

*Thank God.* I shudder as I hold her tighter. And I hate myself again.

Lois Lane would normally already be at the office, working on the story herself, planning the follow up. Interviewing Henderson and his wife and son. And gearing up to go after Luthor. Instead, she’s forced to stay here with me because I can’t manage my stupid anxiety.

“I’m sorry, Lois,” I whisper, and I lean into her as my legs shake again. “I’m sorry.”

“Shh, Clark. It’s fine,” she murmurs.

No, it’s not. I don’t deserve her. She doesn’t deserve to be put through all of this. And I can’t breathe.

My legs give out, and I slide to the ground, unable to hold myself up any longer. She is immediately sitting next to me, one arm wrapped around my shoulders, and she softly caresses my cheek. I close my eyes and take fast, shallow breaths.

“God, I’m such a mess, Lois. What is wrong with me?”

She doesn’t answer. She just holds me tighter again. And I lean into her, tears now threatening to fall.

*What is wrong with me?* The thought echoes in my head. There’s a lot wrong with me. *Murderer. Monster. No. No, stop it.* But I can’t stop the thoughts anymore. I shake my head as tears wet my cheeks. *Murderer. I don’t*

*deserve to live. I shouldn’t be here. She’d be better off without me. She’d be better off...*

“Clark, whatever you are thinking now, please... Just know that I love you.” How is she always so perceptive? She holds me, rubbing my back comfortingly. Lips press against my cheek and then my jaw. “I love you, sweetheart. It will all be okay, Clark.”

Will it? I’m not sure. But then she hugs me again, and some of the pain and anger begins to fade. I sigh into her as Clark’s words from the previous day echo in my head. “*She loves you. She is worth living for.*” She does, and she is. But she has to always know the truth. All of the truth. I can’t hide anything from her anymore.

“I wanted to kill him, Lois,” I admit quietly, my voice shaking. “I wanted to kill Nigel for what he did to you. That — that’s why Clark got me out of there so fast. I wanted to kill him. I still...I still want him dead. And it terrifies me. What is wrong with me?”

Ignoring my question, or perhaps just giving herself time to think about an appropriate response to my alarming admission, she stands and offers her hand to me. I follow her, and she leads me over to the table. Silently, she directs me to sit and then moves to the kitchen and starts preparing tea. Oolong. Good choice.

While the tea steeps, she scoots a chair next to mine and slowly lowers herself down into it. I don’t like the expression on her face; she is contemplative and serious, and I feel my anxiety building again. I squeeze my eyes shut as her hands reach out and cover mine on the table. After another moment, she leans her head to rest on my shoulder.

“I think your emotions are very human. Normal, even, sweetheart.”

I’m not sure how to interpret her tone, except that I’m sure she’s quite guarded and choosing her words carefully. But I find myself shaking my head. This is not normal. Not at all.

“No, no, no. It’s not normal. It can’t be,” I insist. She moves one hand to my back.

“Actually, Clark, it is normal. Acting on your feelings is not okay, um, obviously, but having those feelings — being angry at Nigel for what he did — that is completely normal.”

“It was beyond just being angry, Lois,” I say quietly. My chin drops to my chest. All or nothing. Admit it all to her. She has to know. She has to understand. “Lois, I-I actually...” *No, I can’t do it. I can’t tell her. But I have to.* “I actually considered how best to kill him. How good it would feel to...to watch the life leave his eyes. How...” I stop myself. I’ve said too much already. She stiffens up next to me, and her hand, which had been rubbing gentle circles on my back, stills. “That’s not normal, Lois. That’s

not okay. I'm not okay. If Clark hadn't been there to stop me, we'd be having a much different conversation right now. And I even got angry with him about it."

I lower my head into my hands on the table and exhale sharply. Lois stands up, and the loss of contact as she moves away from me sends a chill down my spine as the temperature in the room seems to plummet. My fingers feel numb. What have I done? I shouldn't have said anything to her.

A mug filled with hot, fragrant tea sets down next to my hands, startling me, and I lift my head off the table and sit up.

"Thank you."

She remains silent still, but takes her seat next to me again as she sips her tea. I copy her. It is good — a strong, comforting flavor. But my hands still shake, and my chest aches again as my breathing becomes labored.

Finally, her hand rests on my back again, and she leans over to me and kisses my cheek.

"I have to admit that it's hard to hear you tell me all of this," she concedes, her voice low and unsteady. "But I really appreciate your...honesty." She takes another sip of her tea and then closes her eyes, sighs, and leans into me again. Her voice trembles as she continues, "And I need you to know that I'm here for you, and we'll figure this out together."

Together. The two of us. She'll help me. God, at least I hope she will.

Something is wrong though. I feel her tension next to me. She's not really okay right now. I shift in my seat slightly and twist my head toward her. Her eyes are closed, and her head lies on my shoulder. A single tear falls down her cheek.

"Oh, Lois. I'm so sorry. Please don't cry."

She sits up abruptly and wipes away her tears.

"I'm fine, Clark. It's all fine."

I hold back my own tears as I watch her force a fake smile and reach out to me, pulling me into an embrace. But she is stiff, tense, and unsure.

And decidedly not fine.

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### 31

"Yeah, Clark... I see. Right, if we just move the third sentence in paragraph two... Yes... Yes... Perfect. You can make the changes and get the story in by deadline for us?... Thank you... No, we — we're fine. And you are...? Okay, yeah. I'll text you later... Right. Okay, bye."

I finish making us a late afternoon lunch — turkey sandwiches, which do not require heat of any kind — and then serve her at the table as she hangs up the phone and closes her laptop.

"Sorry, I had to get that done," she says, pushing away her computer. She quickly stacks all her notes and papers into one pile, sets the pile on top of her computer, and pulls the plate with her sandwich in front of her. "Thank you for lunch."

And we eat in silence. I have no appetite, as has been the case for the last couple days, but I manage to down my whole sandwich and a few strawberries. Lois barely touches hers, and although she's sitting less than three feet from me, she seems a million miles away. It's been like this since our conversation earlier. She tried to hide it by working on her story; she spent quite a bit of time on the phone with Clark and doing research or making other phone calls. However, even when we were not directly interacting, I could feel her pulling away from me.

I pick up my empty plate and stand.

"Are you finished, hon?"

My voice seems to startle her, and she looks up at me sharply and nods.

"Sorry, I don't have much of an appetite this afternoon," she comments as she pushes her plate toward me. I blink at the half-eaten sandwich.

"It's okay."

It's probably normal to not want to eat after your fiancé just told you he'd fantasized about killing someone. Right?

I carry both of our plates to the sink, toss her uneaten food into the trash, and rinse off the dishes. As I'm drying my hands, I hear her footsteps behind me, and her arms then carefully wrap around my waist. The first time she's deliberately touched me in several hours. I set the dish towel down on the counter and twist in her arms to face her. My heart pounds in my chest. She still won't look at me; her eyes remain closed as she pulls me tighter into her embrace. She lets out a shaky breath.

"Hon, I — "

"I'm sorry, Clark," she interjects. Her hands move from around my waist and come to rest on my chest. She seems to want to say more, but her voice fails her, and she rests her head on my chest again. I rub her upper arms softly, and I finally feel her relax into me.

"I love you, hon."

"I love you, too, sweetheart."

I lift her chin, and she finally opens her eyes to meet mine. My fingers linger on her jaw and then trace a path up to cup her cheek. Her skin is soft and warm. I hesitate for a second, but then lower my lips to hers. The kiss is tentative; I feel her reluctance still, and she stiffens as my free arm loops around her waist to rest at the small of her back.

My heart pounds harder, and a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach forces me to pull away. She immediately drops her eyes and backs away from me, turning toward

the table.

“Lois?”

“Hmm?”

With her back to me still, she crosses her arms over her chest, and her foot taps lightly on the floor. God, I’ve made her scared of me. That’s the only explanation for her behavior. I run a nervous hand through my hair, trying to keep myself from shaking. I have to fix this. There has to be some way to fix this.

“Lois, please, look at me. Please,” I plead, stepping closer to her. I reach out and settle my hands onto her shoulders. With a heavy sigh, she turns around to face me. I swallow hard as I see the sadness in her eyes. I’ve done this to her. “Lois, this is what I was scared of the other day.”

She frowns, blinks several times, and shakes her head.

“No, you — you said you were scared I wouldn’t love you anymore, Clark, and that’s not it. I just told you — I just said I love you. I do love you,” she argues. But her tone is unconvincing.

“Lois — ”

“No, Clark, let me talk for a minute. I-I listened to you tell me about New Krypton. I heard it — all of it. Even the words you didn’t say. And I understand why you did what you did. I understand how you were forced into — ” She waves her hand around a bit, as though the gesture encompasses all of the awful things I did as Kal-El, and then she pulls away from me again, crosses her arms protectively over her chest, and starts pacing. “I’m trying to understand how much that affected you, and you — you are keeping true to your promise that you’ll be honest with me. And I appreciate that, I really do. But I also just heard you tell me that you actually visualized yourself killing a human being — that you still want him dead. And that terrifies me, Clark. Because — because that’s not who you are...”

I back up until my hands reach the cold granite of the countertop, and my fingers grip the stone as her words hit me. I shake my head.

“I’m sorry, Lois. This is who I am now.” My voice is quiet, but I know she hears me, because she spins around abruptly and marches over toward me, anger in her eyes.

“No, Clark, this is not you,” she insists. She halts not even a foot from me, and I feel the raw emotion radiating off of her. I swallow hard. “This is not you,” she repeats, her voice now trembling. “You had to do what you had to do while you were on New Krypton. I accept that. But I do not — I will not accept that you are okay with wanting to kill a human.”

My eyes close for a moment. She is always careful with her words. That is what she does for a living after all, as a journalist. But here, right now, she is being even more

selective. And so, I can’t argue with her. I’m not okay with it; my feelings from this morning terrify me.

“When you, uh, put it like that, you’re right,” I say, my voice low. I open my eyes to look at her, and she returns the gaze, her dark pupils studying mine intensely. “I am definitely not okay with what I felt this morning. I don’t like these feelings I’ve had — they scare me, Lois, because I can’t seem to always control my actions anymore. It’s like I’m in a daze, everything turns red and dusty and hot, like I’m back on New Krypton, and...” *Honesty. Full and complete disclosure. It’s the only way.* “...and...”

Around me, the room seems to shrink, and I turn away from her and bury my head in my hands as I lean over onto the counter. I feel her presence as she moves closer to me. A small hand on my back. More air in my lungs. The room stops spinning.

“...and all of my anger and...everything...takes over.”

Her fingers press into me; she doesn’t move away.

“We’ll figure it out, sweetheart.”

“Figure out how to make me less of a monster?” I mumble under my breath. She obviously hears me, but she chooses not to respond, I suppose. Instead, she takes my arm and pulls me away from the counter.

“It’s nice and sunny outside. Let’s take a little walk to the park,” she suggests.

I nod and follow her. Sunlight would feel good right about now. Maybe the healing power of the Sun can fix me. Maybe that’s what she’s thinking.

We grab our coats and head outside, her arm looped through mine. She remains silent.

And I think again that maybe the sunlight will fix me.

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## 32

The clock on the nightstand blinks as the time changes. 3:01 a.m. How long now have I been staring at the time? Several hours now, I think. Every minute that passes, my anxiety grows.

But Lois, she sleeps quietly next to me, one arm casually draped over my bare chest and her leg hiked up over my thigh. Her chest rises and falls rhythmically as she sleeps. Not that I’m paying much attention to her chest. No. Not at all.

My fingers caress her lower arm and then trace up to her shoulder. The thin strap of her nightgown has fallen down slightly, and I push it back into place. Dark blue satin. She looks incredible in every color, but for some reason, the dark blue makes my heart race. Did she know that when she put it on? If so, she sure didn’t act like it. She’d gone right to sleep. Said she was tired, which of course she should be after the events of the last few days.

Her eyelids flutter open, and she groans slightly and stretches, her arm brushing over my chest. Then she closes

her eyes again and snuggles up to me.

“Hmm, what time is it, sweetie? Shouldn’t you be sleeping?” she comments lazily, her fingers grazing along my sternum, where the ugly red scar has faded to just a slight discoloration. Thank you, sunlight.

“I’ve been trying,” I admit feebly. My hand once again caresses up her arm, and I shift onto my side next to her, wedging my knee between her legs. God, she’s so warm and soft, and I want to kiss her. But she tenses up as she opens her eyes again, and her hands press against my chest, pushing me away slightly. The same reaction she’d had when we’d crawled into bed together nearly five hours ago. “S-sorry, hon. I know you’re tired. I’ll — ” She turns over, moving away from me. “I’ll let you sleep.”

Copying her, I shift onto my other side, my back now to her, and I pull the comforter up to my chin to protect myself from the chill that sweeps through the room. I feel her shudder, and I burrow my head into my pillow. She doesn’t want me right now. She wants to sleep, and that’s fine. It’s fine. I’ll keep telling myself that.

3:06 a.m.

Gentle snoring behind me tells me that she’s fallen asleep again. Good, she should sleep. Right.

3:07 a.m.

I close my eyes, and a thought flickers in my mind, feeding my growing anxiety. In less than four hours, she’ll be getting up to go to work. I quickly turn back over. The comforter has slipped off of her shoulders, revealing the smooth skin of her back. Her nightgown is cut low in the back, and I stare at her, imagining my hand rubbing along her spine and up to her shoulders. I glance behind me at the clock again.

3:11 a.m.

Stupid clock. Ticking down the time until I’ll be alone again. A wave of dizziness hits me. No, I can’t be alone. Being alone is definitely a bad idea. I can’t help myself now. I scoot closer to her, pressing my body up against hers. My left arm wraps around her abdomen. *Please don’t push me away, Lois.* I feel her tense up, and she shifts a bit. Her hand covers mine across her stomach, and she wiggles a bit back into me, then settles back onto her pillow.

“You really can’t sleep, sweetheart?”

I lower my lips to her neck.

“No.”

She tilts her head slightly to give me better access, and I press another kiss into her, just under her ear. Her arm reaches back and threads through my hair as I trail my lips down to her shoulder. I shouldn’t be doing this right now. Keeping her awake, that is.

“Sorry, hon. Just because I can’t sleep doesn’t mean you should have to stay up too,” I murmur into her. She groans and turns over to face me. Her eyelids are still

heavy, but she cuddles up to me and plants a kiss firmly on my lips. “Mmm.”

She pulls away, but lowers her head to rest on my chest.

“When you were gone, I never slept well,” she admits, her voice almost a whisper. Her fingers trail along my side, and I close my eyes as her touch sends a shiver through me. “It just felt like a part of me was missing. I’d toss and turn all night long, never really comfortable.” Her hand stops its languid exploration, and she presses herself against me. Hesitantly, she says, “Sometimes I’d call your cell phone just to get your voicemail so I could hear your voice. Sometimes that would help me get to sleep.”

Her words almost hurt as I picture her, curled up against her pillow with tears in her eyes, holding her phone to her ear and listening for my voice. “*Hi, you’ve reached Clark Kent. I’m not available right now, so please leave a message, and I’ll get back to you as soon as I can.*” Three months of only hearing that. And then what? Once my doppelganger arrived, did she still have trouble sleeping? Did she feel less lonely? Did she ever call him late at night to hear “my” voice?

I wrap my arms around her and hold her tightly against my chest. She doesn’t push me away this time, but I still feel shaky and anxious. What time is it now? She is that much closer to leaving me again. My jaw clenches as I glance over my shoulder at the clock.

3:19 a.m.

Precious minutes slipping away. I swallow hard. Maybe there is a solution. Maybe... I rub a hand in gentle circles on her back. She won’t like the idea, I’m afraid. In fact, I myself am not sure it’s a good idea. But the thought of her leaving me for work in just a few hours makes me dizzy.

“Hon, I want to go to work with you in the morning.”

It’s the only way.

She shifts in my arms so she can look up at me, and her expression is just as I’d expected — confused, uncertain. She sits up and reaches over to switch on the light on her nightstand, and as the dim light illuminates the bedroom, I push myself up into a sitting position as well and scoot back to rest against the headboard of the bed.

“Clark, I-I don’t... Why? I mean — ”

“I need to be with you, Lois,” I interject, lowering my eyes. She’ll understand, right? She has to.

But she doesn’t respond, and when I venture a quick glance up at her, she is staring at me with dismay, her lips pursed in a frown. I can’t seem to hold her gaze, and I drop my eyes back to my hands, which clasp together in my lap.

“Clark, please, don’t get me wrong,” she says, moving closer to me. Her hands reach out to mine, stilling the uneasy fidgeting of my fingers. “Please, believe me when I

say that I want nothing more than for you to be feeling better enough to start back to work. But, sweetheart, I — ”

“Lois, I can’t be alone without you,” I argue, shaking my head. I shift on the bed, wrap both of my arms around her, and lower my head onto her shoulder. “When you were gone — when you’re not nearby or I don’t know if you’re okay or not, hon, I-I can’t do that again. Yesterday was...”

I can’t even finish my sentence; my head starts to swim, and my heart begins racing as the memory of the previous day — arriving at Clark’s apartment to find Lois gone, driving out to Valley Glen in search of her at Henderson’s, the tense few seconds racing toward the Lexor with a weakened Superman, and the several minutes waiting for him to bring her home to me again.

“Yesterday was so terrifying. I can’t lose you, Lois. I can’t — I need to be with you tomorrow and from now on. I need that. I know it seems sudden, but I need to be with you. Please understand, Lois.”

“Clark...”

“When I’m with you, Lois, I feel better. I feel good and safe and... Please, Lois, please don’t ask me to stay home without you. It’s why I can’t sleep right now. I’ve been — I’ve been watching the clock, and as it gets closer to when you’re going to leave, I get more and more anxious. Lois, please. I can’t stay home without you.”

Her hand touches my cheek, and I raise my eyes to meet hers. A tear slides down her cheek, but she ignores it. She leans in toward me and brushes her lips against mine.

“Clark, I hear you, and I hear what you are saying, but sweetheart, do you really think you’re ready for that?”

*Probably not.*

“I am. I have to be.”

I close my eyes and drop my head into her shoulder again. Red haze across the dusty earth. Howling winds blowing hot sand into my eyes. An entire army behind me, marching in step. Now sprinting together toward the enemy soldiers. No hesitation. No second guessing. There, on New Krypton, I led my soldiers expertly; I was ready to go every day because I had to be. There was no other option.

And this will be the same thing.

I have to be ready because the alternative — staying here at home alone, while she is off getting herself into trouble without me — that is not going to work. I can’t do it.

“Okay,” she whispers.

I hear the resignation in her voice, and I frown as she wraps her arms around me, returning the embrace. But at the same time, the dizziness, anxiety, nausea, unease — they all disappear. She won’t leave me here alone. I will get to go with her.

I need her so much.

“Thank you, Lois,” I murmur, burying my face into her hair. “I love you, hon. I love you so much.”

“Oh, Clark, I love you too, sweetie. I love you too.”

She pushes me down onto my back and curls up next to me, her hand on my chest and her leg drawn up over mine. I kiss her forehead and then settle back onto my pillow. Maybe I can finally sleep now. I glance at the clock.

3:28 a.m.

The number seems much less important now. It’s not ticking down like a time bomb waiting to explode. And in just a few hours, I’ll join her at work at the Daily Planet for the first time in over four months.

I close my eyes again and feel myself drift off to sleep.

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### 33

Morning comes quickly but unfortunately is not entirely stress free. Her alarm goes off at 6:00 a.m., and she rolls out of bed away from me, stands, and stretches stiffly. She then walks over to the window and pulls back the curtain. It is still dark outside, but the faint light from the streetlights illuminates her features, revealing taut facial muscles and a scowl. After a moment, she turns back to me, her expression serious and concerned.

“I have to go talk to Clark,” she explains, swallowing as she watches me.

Clark. The other me. Right. How could I have forgotten? He’s been working in my place for over a month now. Working as her partner, and acting as her good friend. And saving her life on occasion.

Like her, I’m sure he knew this day was coming, but I’m also sure he wouldn’t expect it to be here already. In fact, based on the events of the previous day, I’d bet anything he’s already got a plan for their follow up stories on Nigel St. John and has been thinking about how to find evidence to implicate Luthor. He probably also has other stories he’s working on, with and without her.

It won’t be an easy conversation.

I nod in response and push myself up off the bed as she moves across the room toward me. Her feet shuffle along the floor, and she stares at the ground rather than up at me as she approaches. Her hands fiddle with the sheer material of her nightgown nervously, and she bites her lower lip. I frown and reach out to her, my hands lightly gripping her upper arms. Relief washes over me when she leans into me rather than pushing me away, and her arms wrap around my waist.

“I have to go alone, Clark. Don’t argue with me, please,” she says, her voice firm but low. My stomach lurches, and my jaw muscle twitches. I start to talk, to try to reason with her, but she continues before I have the

chance. “It’s just something I need to do. He’s been too good a friend, and I need to tell him myself, alone. I’ll get you work clothes while I’m over there. Suits and shirts and ties and such.”

I nod again as my arms tighten around her. She’s right; she should talk to him by herself. However, I desperately do not want to let her leave without me. As much as I don’t want to be alone, I also don’t want her to be alone.

“I understand, Lois,” I tell her quietly. “But let me come with you, please. I-I can sit in the car and — ”

“No, Clark. No,” she inserts, cutting me off. She still doesn’t move away from me. At least she gives me that. But I recognize the tone in her voice. Lois Lane has made up her mind, and she will not give in. Even if I had superpowers, I couldn’t change her mind. “I have to do this alone.”

She slides her hands up my chest and around my neck, then reaches up to kiss me gently. As she pulls away, I bury my head into her shoulder, and my hands rub her back, the nightgown bunching up as I do. I slip one hand underneath the hem and run my fingers up along her side, her bare skin soft and smooth. My hand then pauses, and I kiss her neck.

“You’re not safe. It’s not safe for you to go alone. The last time you went somewhere alone... Please, let me be with you, Lois,” I beg, my voice hoarse.

This time, she pushes me away. Not far, not hard, but she puts a definite space between us. My hand slides down to her hip.

“No, Clark. I’ll be fine. Trust me. It will only be a short drive to Clark’s apartment. Then I’ll be with him for a bit. I’ll — I’ll probably go on a run with him. He does that every morning, you know — he goes running. And then, I’ll get your clothes and come home.”

I shake my head again. “It’s too long. That’s too long for you to be alone. And — and for me to — for me to... Please, Lois, let me come with you.”

She kisses me again, but then pulls away and meets my eyes. Nope. I’ve lost this argument. Not a chance. My chest feels tight.

“Tell you what, we’ll compromise.” She loops an arm through mine and leads me out of the bedroom and into the kitchen. She then moves away from me and starts preparing a pot of coffee. “I’ll go, by myself. But I’ll call you to let you know when I get there, and then I’ll have Clark escort me home,” she proposes. Sort of. There isn’t any discussion to be had. So it’s not really a proposal so much as a statement of what is going to happen. I’d be wasting my time to argue, and I know it.

The coffee starts to drip steadily into the pot, breaking the silence that has grown. I stand a couple feet away from her, my arms crossed in front of me and my shoulders

hunched. My eyes stay glued to the floor as she turns to face me.

“I’ll only be alone on the short drive there,” she repeats, closing the distance between us. Her voice has grown softer, as though she realizes how much I’m trying to keep myself from panicking, and she once again envelops me in a comforting hug. “I know you’ll be here by yourself for a bit, but it won’t be too long. And then Clark will drive with me back here.” As I squeeze my eyes shut to try to keep the room from spinning, she adds, “I’m safe with him, you know. He’d never let anything happen to me. I think he proved that to you yesterday.”

And then she kisses me again, on the cheek this time, and pours me and herself each a cup of coffee. As she hands me my cup, her eyes meet mine again, and she gives me a weak smile.

“Okay, sweetheart?”

I want to argue with her. I want to tell her how my chest feels tight with anxiety and how my lungs won’t fill fully with air. And I want to hold her and not let her go. But I just nod. And sip my coffee. And try not to shake too badly as she touches my cheek and then heads back to the bedroom to get dressed.

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### 34

Busy. I have to keep myself busy. Shower. Shave — still not fun. Eat, though I have no appetite. Read the morning’s paper, the bold Lane and Kent byline gracing the front page.

But it’s still not enough. She’s been gone for almost two hours. She’ll be back soon. I promised her I wouldn’t eavesdrop on their conversation using the telepathic connection Clark and I share. Keeping that promise is becoming more and more difficult. Even without trying, I’ve heard tidbits of his thoughts, the ones that he can’t seem to conceal. The thoughts mostly reflect his sadness, disappointment, and concern, as well as an overwhelming sense of love. He loves her. Of course, I already knew that. But it’s quite powerful to feel. And his sadness seems to stem from a deep sense of loss. He’s truly cherished the closeness he and Lois have had over the last month; he will greatly miss spending time with her.

I guess I can understand that as well.

I finish up washing the few dishes in the sink and close my eyes as I surreptitiously try to connect with him. However, he’s deliberately blocking our connection right now, and I can’t even sense where he is. I move to the window, not for the first time that morning, and pull back the curtain as I scan up and down the street. Lois’s familiar black Jeep turns the corner and heads toward the apartment building, and my knees almost buckle with relief. She is

driving, and he sits in the passenger's seat, staring aimlessly out the window. Her fingers tap on the steering wheel anxiously.

Wait a minute.

I blink rapidly several times and take another look. The Jeep is still several hundred feet down the road, traveling slowly in my direction. I definitely shouldn't be able to see this amount of detail. Like the small dry leaf stuck underneath the windshield wiper, and the single strand of Lois's hair that has escaped her ponytail and now falls out of place across her cheek. My hand tightens carefully on the hem of the curtain as I pull it back farther, letting more sunlight into the room.

My powers are returning.

Dammit.

This is not good.

Well, I mean, there are some good things about it, I consider as I watch Lois's car approach. At least if I have my powers back, I'll be able to protect her. I won't need to rely so much on him.

But overall, no, this is not good. Not when I'm not trustworthy. Not when I can't guarantee that I'll always be in control of my actions.

Lois pulls into a parking spot in front of the building, and I can't see her anymore. No x-ray vision yet. That's probably a good thing. Clark, however, I can see him; he is watching her intently, speaking with her. After a few moments, he glances up toward me, his eyes dark with concern, but then looks away quickly, and I feel a strong force push against me as he intentionally blocks our connection.

Dammit, Clark. I almost move away from the window. I also almost smash it; I raise a hand up and start to pound my fist against the glass, but at the last minute, I stop myself. Good thing too. If my powers are starting to return, I need to be extra careful and make sure I stay aware of my strength and speed.

My jaw clenches as I carefully pull my hand away from the glass and cross my arms over my chest. They are still talking. I strain to try to hear them, but apparently, I still don't have my superhearing. What are they talking about that they couldn't already have discussed over the last two hours? Anxiety builds in my chest. My breathing becomes shallow and faster, and my heart starts to race. *No, it's fine*, I try reminding myself. *She's here and safe. She's just...with him.* I stare down at them again, and he looks up toward the window again. Our eyes meet, and he gives me a weak smile, then turns back to her.

A second later, he jumps out of the Jeep, hurries around to the driver's side, and opens the door for her. Chivalrous. Lois is smiling as she exits the car, and I feel my hands start to shake as I watch her. Her long hair is

pulled back into a ponytail, and that single strand of hair that I'd seen earlier remains errantly out of place. She smiles at him and then starts on her way up to the front entrance of the building.

I feel Clark drop the huge barrier he'd set up between us, and I immediately shoot him a simple question. *Is she okay?*

He responds quickly, his tone almost irritable. *"She's fine. I told you I'll protect her. And this will not change that."*

I've never heard him snap like that, out loud or in his thoughts, and I hastily shift my gaze from Lois to Clark. He's looking up at me, a barely concealed scowl on his face, as he removes a large duffle bag and several garment bags from the back of Lois's Jeep. I inhale sharply as a strong sense of unease hits me. But then his expression changes, and he adjusts his glasses.

"Sorry," he apologizes silently, his scowl turning into a much less abrasive half-smile as he raises his eyebrows. He struggles to hide his sense of disappointment from me, and I feel him try to project an air of confidence as he adds, *"She's fine, really. She's still the strongest woman I know."*

I nod briefly, steal another glance at Lois, and then step away from the window and back into the kitchen. Coffee is much needed. With lots of milk and sugar. Maybe even a bit of that cocoa powder that Lois bought earlier in the week. Yeah, that will help too. Although Clark will undoubtedly still drink his plain black. I swallow hard and get to work as the deadbolts unlock and Lois and Clark make their way into the apartment.

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### 35

Lois turns to me and straightens my tie as the elevator dings and the doors open. She looks as nervous as I feel, her eyes darting out toward the busy newsroom, already bustling with activity. The familiarity of the sights and sounds actually provide me a bit of comfort, and I slip my arm around her waist and plant a kiss on her cheek as we start down the ramp toward our desks.

"CK! Smooth haircut, I like it!"

My shoulders tense as I twist to see Jimmy Olsen wave at me from across the newsroom, and I nod in acknowledgement as I adjust my glasses with my free hand. Right, my hair has not yet grown out from the haircut imposed upon me on New Krypton. What other little differences between Clark and I has everyone gotten used to?

"Thanks, Jim!" I try to sound upbeat, but I'm not sure if I succeed. Jimmy just waves again and hurries off to Perry's office, a batch of photographs in hand, while Lois



continues to lead me down into the bullpen and over to her desk. “Jimmy is doing well?” I ask Lois quietly, loosening my arm from around her waist as we reach her desk.

She shifts away from me, opens one of the top drawers, and pulls out a folder stuffed with printouts and notes. Her eyes again scan the room, a hint of worry causing frown lines to appear on her forehead, and then she seems to realize that I’ve asked her a question.

“Yeah, um, he’s good,” she says, forcing a smile up at me. She lowers her voice a bit as she provides me a bit more context. “Um, he just started dating a woman — Melinda, I think is her name. She’s a part-time copy editor here, started at the end of the summer, and is also studying molecular biology at MU. And he recently got an award for some photos he took of Superman carrying a cruise ship full of passengers into Metropolis Harbor.” She sits heavily in her chair and opens up the folder, and I rest my hands on the desk and listen as she finishes. “Oh, he also just bought a new car. He’s really proud of it. Some sports car. I don’t remember the model. He was planning to take Clark — you out for a drive in it next week.”

“Lois, Clark, in my office pronto!”

Perry’s stern voice carries across the newsroom, and for a brief moment, the commotion of the morning seems to grind to a halt as the collective gaze of the newsroom settles on us. I do my best not to shrink down and make myself invisible. That’s not me. I’m supposed to be confident, self-assured, composed. Not this nervous, ragged, uncertain mess.

“Yes, Chief,” Lois responds quickly, and she jumps up out of her chair, grabs my hand, and hauls me toward Perry’s office with her. “I should have told you more about the other stories we’re working on, and did you read the article Clark and I wrote yesterday?”

“Yes, I read it this morning while — ”

“Good, okay,” she interjects, cutting me off as she pauses in front of Perry’s door. She turns toward me again, a look of concern in her eyes, and she reaches up and straightens my tie. Is it really that crooked? Maybe it’s just her way of dealing with her apprehension. Obsessively fiddling with my tie. “Um, just let me do the talking, okay?”

I smile at her, then lean down and kiss her on the cheek again.

“Of course, hon.”

Her eyes close for a second, and when she opens them, a bit of the concern is gone.

“Sorry, I’m just a bit nervous,” she admits. “It’ll be fine. Come on.”

I nod and follow her into the lion’s den. Perry sits at his desk, rifling through a large stack of papers. He glances up at us over the top of his reading glasses as we enter. He

looks the same as I remember, except a few new wrinkles at the edges of his eyes.

“Ah, good, there you are,” he drawls. His eyes linger on me just a second longer than I think they should — maybe it’s just my haircut or maybe I’ve underestimated how different I look now, that is, the expression in my eyes, the tightness of my muscles, how I stand or hunch my shoulders or... But then Perry blinks and lowers his eyes back to the papers in front of him. “Good work helping bring in Nigel St. John yesterday, you two, but you know in this business, we can’t just rest on our laurels. So, that said, uh, where are you on that Luthor story you mentioned yesterday afternoon, Clark? Any closer to getting the evidence you need?”

Lois squeezes my hand as though to remind me not to talk and then takes a small step forward.

“We don’t have anything new yet, Chief, but we’re going to go back over everything with a fine-toothed comb right now and make sure we didn’t miss anything. And Superman is following up on another lead for us too,” she explains, her voice confident.

That’s my Lois. Covering for my lack of knowledge about what ‘I’ said yesterday. Quick thinking on her part. My response would have been something like, “*Uh, I, um...what?*”

“Sounds good,” Perry responds, his eyes darting back and forth between Lois and I. I adjust my glasses and nod. “You two need anything, you let me know, you hear?”

“Sure, Mr. White, thank you,” I say, my arm looping again around Lois’s waist. She leans into me a bit, and although I can’t yet hear her heartbeat, I get the sense that her heart is racing and that she’s not feeling quite as confident as she sounds. I kiss her on the cheek again, and she tenses up even more. Are public displays of affection now considered faux pas? I press my fingers gently into her side, hoping she understands the gesture as an apology. “Shall we, hon?”

Perry raises his eyebrows at me, but then nods and starts flipping through the pages on his desk again, and Lois takes my hand and pulls me out of his office toward her desk.

“Perry knows something is up,” she hisses at me as soon as we’re out of earshot. “Did you see the look he gave you? He knows.”

She’s gripping my suit jacket, pulling me along with her, and I glance over my shoulder back toward Perry’s office. He’s on the phone now, talking animatedly with whomever is on the other end of the line, completely oblivious to whatever Lois and I are doing. But Lois seems almost panicked. She leads me to her desk and grabs a chair for me, then hastily motions for me to sit while she turns on her computer.

“I think we’re okay, Lois,” I tell her softly, my hand coming to rest on her back as I scoot the chair closer to her so we can both see her computer screen. “You think he’s really going to figure out that the Clark Kent who has been working here for the past month is actually from a different universe, and that he pulled me out of the Sun, where I’d miraculously healed after being dead less than a week ago?” My voice is low, but my joking tone earns me a punch in the arm. I feign indignation momentarily, and she almost laughs. Almost. Not quite. She’s not there yet, I guess.

“Okay, so I guess you’re right. No one would think of something so outrageous,” she admits. A little bit of the tension she’d had since we’d left home this morning seems to disappear, and she lets out a breath as she opens up a file on her computer. “He probably just noticed your haircut,” she adds, repeating my earlier thoughts. “Like Jimmy did. And…” She hesitates and swivels around in her chair to face me, her expression quite serious again. But it’s a different serious than before. Almost a guilty look.

“And?” I prompt, curious now. She bites her lower lip and ducks her head.

“Of course, Clark never called me ‘hon,’ like you do,” Lois says quietly. “And he never kissed me, either, of course.” As though to draw attention away from the topic, she shifts back toward her computer and begins searching through documents on her hard drive. I don’t know whether she’s actually looking for something, or whether she’s just pretending to, but I also don’t really care. Her admission just now cleared up a longstanding worry of mine — if he’d ever acted on the feelings he had for her. I’d suspected that he hadn’t, and her confession just now confirms that.

I move my hand back to her shoulder.

“Lois — ”

“We only ever held hands, sometimes hugged, maybe. That was all,” she interjects, keeping her voice low. “We needed to keep the pretext that we were in love, of course, you understand.”

Mimicking her earlier move, she turns in her chair, but now instead of serious, her expression betrays her uncertainty and guilt. Why is she feeling guilty if they never did anything? Her eyes search mine, as though she needs acceptance of her explanation. I give her a weak smile.

“I know, hon,” I assure her. My hand moves from her shoulder to her cheek, and I brush back her loose hair, tucking it behind her ear. She nods nervously, bites her lip again, and then shifts back to her computer.

“I just — we never talked about that,” she says, her eyes still on her computer screen. “I never told you about

all of that. Although, maybe you already knew from your little telepathic connection thing?” Her eyes widen in realization, and she twists her head to me. I smile at her again. She is adorable.

“I didn’t know for sure. I didn’t see everything. Only a few fragmented bits and pieces, and I didn’t really know what was happening until that last day, right before he came to get me. I sort of thought I was still dead,” I explain, lowering my voice even more. The general volume of the newsroom drowns out our conversation, but we’d surely sound quite loony if anyone was listening in. “But, hon, I trust you, and — and I do trust him, and so I wasn’t really worried about it.”

At least, that’s mostly the truth.

My words seem to finally get through to her, and she sighs deeply and then leans in to kiss me, this time full on the lips. I smile into her, and my hand comes up to cup her cheek. As we break the kiss, I open my eyes, and she grins crookedly at me, then turns back to her computer screen.

“So, today, we’re going to go after Luthor. And you have a lot of catching up to do.” Her hand comes to rest atop the folder she’d pulled out of her drawer earlier. “This is everything we’ve got so far.”

Light reading. I nod and lift the folder, opening it up to the first page. As I scan the words on the page, I shake my head in disbelief. Apparently, Clark had taken the time yesterday to go through all of their research; he’d then written a succinct, bulleted list to summarize what they knew and what they didn’t yet know. I hold up the page.

“Did you tell him to do this?”

Confused, she squints at the page for a moment, then chuckles and shakes her head.

“Nope, he’s just that organized. Lucky for you, though — that’s a good summary of where we’re at.” She turns back to her computer. “And look, one of my sources just sent me an email. Luthor is meeting with Bill Church, Jr. tonight in New York. Clark, this could be what we need!”

Her smile grows, and she quickly lifts the phone and dials a number. The light in her eyes — I know this Lois. This is my Lois Lane. My love. She grabs a pencil and urgently motions for me to hand her a notepad. Then, she listens intently to a voice on the other end of the line. She scribbles a few notes on the paper. *Warehouse off 6<sup>th</sup> and Gilbert. 8:30 p.m.* She hangs up the phone and turns to me.

“This is it, Clark, I know it!”

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### 36

Breaking and entering. Crouching for an extended period of time behind a stack of dusty boxes in a dimly lit warehouse. And straining to hear the conversation of two dangerous criminals while remaining unseen. Just a few

more things to add to the growing and very long list of things that are much easier and much less stressful when you've got superpowers.

It had seemed like a good idea at first — heading to New York to try to catch the meeting between Lex Luthor and Bill Church, Jr. Honestly, more Lois's thing than mine; I'd never been terribly excited about this side of investigative journalism. But of course, there was no chance I'd have let her go by herself. And the original plan was to have Superman with us. I was okay with that plan. However, a huge oil spill had hit off the coast of Alaska right as Lois had tried to call and text him. No answer. And when news reports on the television had suggested that his clean-up efforts may take hours, Lois had made the unilateral decision to drive to New York ourselves, without super backup.

And so, that's why we've found ourselves huddled uncomfortably toward the back of a wide, long aisleway flanked by industrial shelving units, peeking out cautiously around multiple rows of boxes covered in a thick gray layer of dust, as Lex Luthor and Bill Church, Jr. edge closer and closer, strolling leisurely while discussing... something.

Unfortunately, neither of them deem it necessary to talk loud enough for us to hear. At times, my superhearing seems like it might be trying to make a comeback; I can hear things I probably shouldn't quite be able to. But it's not controllable, reliable, or sufficiently robust to be useful at this point.

Next to me, Lois stiffens and leans a bit forward. I venture a quick sideways glance at her. In the dim light of the warehouse, her features are nearly hidden from my view, but I can see the tension in her shoulders and the tightness in her lips as she squints harder, her head shaking slightly.

"I can't hear a thing they're saying," she hisses. "Ugh, this is useless." Her fingers inch a bit further up the box in front of her, and she stretches up to peer once again over the top of the container.

"Lois, stay down, please," I beg quietly, tugging on her arm.

"Shh, Clark. I definitely can't hear if you're talking."

I suppose the likelihood of them spotting her is pretty low. After all, it is quite dark. However, my unease continues to grow as they approach. Single words seem to sneak through the fuzzy barrier of my re-emerging superhearing — words like "competition," "negotiate," and "overtake," spoken in Luthor's distinctly sophisticated voice. It seems that Luthor is doing most of the talking.

My back and knees begin to ache as we continue crouching low. I can hear their shuffling feet now as well, though I think that's just because they are closer. Lois

seems to be holding her breath. Are they that close? I glance through a gap in the boxes in front of me as their footsteps stop. Sixty feet away, maybe. Luthor motions to his right at a large stack of army green plastic containers labeled "FRAGILE: DO NOT SHAKE," and he and Church step over to the containers. With their backs to us, Church unlocks and opens the top container, and I hear a distinct, "Ah, yes, this will do nicely," from Luthor. Church nods in agreement and shuts the box again, and the two continue down the aisleway toward us.

Lois leans onto me for a moment and whispers into my ear, "What was in that container?" She pushes me slightly over so she can see them through the gap in the boxes.

"I don't — "

"Shh."

Right. Another rhetorical question. She rests a hand on my knee, using me for balance, as she continues to watch the two through the crack in the boxes. Abruptly, she moves away from me and glances around the edge of the boxes again, rather than through the gap. The aching in my back grows as I shift my weight to my other leg. *I don't like this.* I rest my hands on the floor to try to take some of the pressure off my aching knees, and I watch the two approaching men again as Luthor laughs loudly. As they get closer, I can see a glint of nervousness in Church's eyes. He chuckles, but puts an extra few inches between himself and Luthor as they again stop in the middle of the aisleway.

"How long until the permits are approved? I want this place up and running as soon as possible." Luthor's voice is clear now, superpowers or not, and as usual, there is a hint of malice hidden in his tone. Lois hears it too; I feel her tense up next to me.

Church nods and hastily reaches for a cell phone in his pocket. "My contact at the Department of Buildings says they can push the permit through within just a few days."

"Excellent. Have the construction crews ready to go. Spare no expense," Luthor adds. "And over here..." He gestures ahead, and the two begin moving, once again, closer to us.

They are getting too close. My chest tightens as I hold my breath, and Lois shifts closer to me. For a millisecond, my superhearing seems to kick on, revealing her rapid but steady heartbeat. Her hand moves to my knee again, and she squeezes gently as though to comfort me. Can she sense my unease? I give her a weak half-smile and then peer back through the crack. Maybe forty feet now. Too close.

A sudden sharp pain pulses in my chest and head, and I screw my eyes shut tightly to keep from crying out. Lois's hand shifts to my back, questioningly, but I don't respond. The pain is distinct and instantly saps any energy I'd had.

Kryptonite. I force my eyes open and steal another glance through the gap. A faint green glow from the ring on Luthor's left hand is visible, even in the low light of the warehouse. *Dammit.* I swallow tightly as I look at Lois, who watches me with concern. Weakly, I raise a shaking hand and wiggle my finger, then point through the boxes toward Luthor. She follows my motion, and her eyes then widen in understanding as another throbbing pain stabs through my gut. My only saving grace, I think, is that they are still a good distance away. Yet, the distinct pain, like a thousand tiny daggers digging into every muscle in my body, persists.

"Everything okay?" Clark's concerned voice echoes in my head. Oh thank goodness. Superman to the rescue, as always. He continues, "*I just got in from Alaska and saw Lois's message. Tried to call but no answer.*"

I close my eyes as a wave of nausea hits as well. The ground seems to wobble underneath me, and I feel Lois's hands tighten on my shoulders as she supports me. Carefully, to avoid forcing my pain on him, I reply, *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.* Sure, it's much more than that at this point, but I don't want him to panic or rush in here too hastily. And given everything that I know about him, I'm positive he understands the words I haven't spoken.

I immediately feel his concern, and he tells me, "*Be there momentarily.*"

I twist my head toward Lois, who is studying me nervously. I try to smile at her, to reassure her, but all I can manage is a bit of a grimace. Pain pulses at the base of my skull as I lift one hand up from the dirty floor and trace an 'S' on my chest, then give her a thumbs up, my hands shaking almost uncontrollably. Superman is on his way. She understands. Her hands again steady me as she lets out a slow breath and squeezes between me and the boxes to peer through the gap again. I copy her, and she briefly shifts out of my way so I can look, though my vision is quickly growing blurry.

Luthor and Church continue to move closer, chatting idly about the construction. Church flinches visibly as Luthor claps him on the back, maybe a bit too roughly, and declares, "I'm glad you see things my way, Bill."

*God, please hurry, Clark.* The thought is not intentionally sent to him, but I sense his concern and realize he is close and assessing the situation, just as I knew he would. My eyes close tightly against the nausea and pain. The sickening green glow grows closer, now within thirty feet, and I again clench my jaw shut as my pain level increases and my chest tightens.

A sudden loud noise from near the front of the building causes both Lois and I to jump, though we stay low to the ground. Unbalanced, I lean on her to keep myself from crumpling to the ground, and she wraps her arms around me strongly.

From in front of us, Church's crass voice mutters an angry, "What the hell was that?" and Lois grips my arm as she moves to look through the crack in the boxes again. The debilitating pain from the kryptonite immediately disappears as I hear Luthor and Church retreat toward the entrance of the warehouse, Luthor growling for Church to follow. I nearly collapse into Lois with relief, but manage to stay kneeling, my hands lowering again to the ground for additional support.

*Thank you. I assume that was you,* I communicate to my doppelganger. I sense his presence and almost feel him moving closer to us.

"Yes, it was me," he answers simply. He is focusing, I feel, following Luthor and Church using his keen eyesight and hearing.

If I had any hope of my superhearing returning, the last few minutes are a major setback. I'm much less super now even. A dull aching lingers in my chest and head, but at least I can breathe. Red boots land silently next to Lois, and at the edges of my blurry vision, Superman stands frozen, his eyes trained toward the front of the warehouse, where Luthor and Church had retreated. Lois holds me tightly still, and we both stay quiet and unmoving, waiting for the "all clear" from Superman. The silence presses on as my knees scream at me to stand or move or do something — anything but continue crouching painfully. However, I don't dare move.

Extreme anxiety suddenly floods my mind, and I glance up at him. Something is wrong. A gentle probe into his thoughts, which proves to be unchallenging in this instance, reveals fear and apprehension. "*The modified kryptonite...*" I hear him think, and I abruptly glance out through the gap in the boxes one more time. The two men are too far away to make out much, except a sickening green glow, which promptly disappears as they turn away and begin moving again toward the exit at the front of the warehouse. I look up at Clark as his eyes dart down to mine. "*We have a big problem,*" he tells me, frowning. I nod in acknowledgement, and he then raises his eyes again to watch Luthor and Church as Lois shifts closer to me, perhaps sensing my own unease.

The pain in my chest and head has nearly faded when Clark finally moves several minutes later, shifting away from us a couple feet.

"They're gone. Are you both okay?" he asks, his voice low. Lois pushes herself up to stand, and I stiffly do the same. My chest throbs dully, but I ignore the pulsing pain

and suppress a groan as I force my mind closed to him. He doesn't need to feel my pain. Or my fear. When neither Lois nor I answer his question, he clears his throat and continues, "After I get you two out of here safely, I'm going to follow them."

I almost laugh. Almost. He should know her better than that by now. She'll never agree to leave. She's too invested in this. And Luthor has kryptonite.

As though to illustrate my point, she quickly corrects him as she dusts her hands off on her skirt. "No, we should all follow them." She then wraps an arm around my waist for support, which I definitely appreciate since I still feel wobbly. My eyes dart to Clark's as I feel his concern.

"*I'm not comfortable with this,*" he tells me silently, raising his eyebrows slightly. I know his worry is reflected in my own eyes. He adds, "*I don't want her anywhere near Luthor or Church.*"

I certainly do not disagree with him. If I'd been able to physically stop her from coming up here earlier, I'd have done it. Luthor is bad news. I'd seen enough as Superman to recognize evil when I see it. But she'd insisted; she'd made up her mind. And then when we'd gotten here, she'd led us around the back of the warehouse, sneaking past their security detail, edging around the visual field of the security cameras, picking the back lock of the building, and tiptoeing to our conveniently located hiding spot. I'd protested at each step, but she wouldn't hear any of it. She'd been much too determined, focused, intent on her goal of taking down Luthor. I love her for it; but I love her much more for it when I know I can protect her.

I nod to him almost imperceptibly, though I know he'll see the gesture. I don't want her anywhere near this either, Clark.

*Me neither,* I tell him succinctly.

He hesitates only a second, and I sense his resignation as I loop an arm up and around Lois's shoulders. She turns to him expectantly, fire in her eyes. She's brilliant and courageous and incredibly beautiful. And she's about to be furious.

"*She's gonna be really mad at me,*" he concedes, echoing my thoughts.

Maybe I'm a bit of a coward. Or a lot of a coward. But I deliberately look away from him as I adjust my glasses. He's not going to let her follow him. He will go alone. I feel the plan forming in his mind. She is going to be furious, and not just at him. Even if I don't admit it, she'll know that I know.

"Let me get you guys to the Jeep," he says evasively, and before either of us can object or respond, he moves in between us, grasps us both, and lifts up into the air, silently and quickly transporting us outside and to the Jeep. The darkness provides some cover, although his brightly

colored suit still stands out like a sore thumb in the otherwise dreary tones of the cold, cloudy night. Thankfully, the street is abandoned, with only a single street light providing some illumination, and no one sees us. Lois almost jumps out of his grasp when we land, her excitement palpable. Her keys are out of her pocket and in her hand before I've even settled my feet on the ground long enough to feel stable. He doesn't release me right away, as though he understands how unsteady I feel, and he waits for me to step away to loosen his grip.

*Thank you,* I think, although I'm not sure he hears me. He is terrified of what he's about to do, or rather, how she's going to react to what he's about to do. And I don't blame him. His thoughts race, and I almost have to block him out just so I don't lose my own tenuous grip on my sanity. I watch Lois as she unlocks the Jeep.

"Which way did they go?" she asks easily, unaware of his inner turmoil or our impending deception. "We'll follow and you can tell Clark where they are headed using your little telepathic gizmo thing." A part of me smiles as I see how easily she adapts to the unique talents that the two of us together offer. Her eyes lift to meet his, sparkling in the dim light. She's so energized right now; this thrill is part of the job she loves. And all of these things, I know, are going to make her even more upset at him. And at me. I force myself to act neutral as I watch Clark scan in both directions. My hand finds the small of her back as I move closer to her, and she glances up at me with an enthusiastic smile. Clark clears his throat.

"Luthor is headed back to his penthouse, and Church is headed back to Metropolis," he explains, his eyes shifting from me to Lois and back again. He scans the neighborhood quickly and then crosses his arms over his chest. Very Superman-esque. Using the formal tone of the superhero — which I suppose he needs to detach himself so she doesn't predict what he's going to do and to begin the difficult task of shielding himself from her wrath — he adds, "In the warehouse, after they moved away from you two, Luthor handed Church a lot of money and said he'd quadruple it after Church Sr. is out of the picture. Then Church Jr. will sign over the company and its assets. And Church gave Luthor a stack of very incriminating documents — I'm talking listings of Intergang's assets, profiles of heads of the different branches of the organization, shipping schedules, a signed contract between Luthor and Church Jr. detailing their agreement." He hesitates a moment and glances at me again. Some of the color seems to drain from his face, although he doesn't stumble with his words or show any other signs of uncertainty. "Luthor also gave Church the modified kryptonite; told him to get rid of Superman and he'd double the offer."

Next to me, Lois inhales sharply, and I feel her eyes shift to me. My arm slides around her, and I embrace her gently as I struggle to maintain a confident façade. Clark's expression reflects mine. He doesn't want her to worry. *At least we know where the kryptonite is now*, I think. He nods at me, and the muscles in his jaw tighten.

"Here, get in." He steps over to the driver's side door and opens it for Lois.

"Oh, good idea, you can fly us there to catch up," she surmises, the excitement returning to her voice. "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." She hurriedly moves toward the vehicle.

"Uh, right, yeah, something like that," he replies evasively. His eyes meet mine, and I sense all of his trepidation. His words from earlier seem to echo in his thoughts. *"I don't want her anywhere near Luthor or Church."* And I completely agree. Luthor is dangerous.

Tearing my gaze from him, I jog stiffly around to the passenger's side and open the door as he helps Lois into her seat. With a final glance, which I hope conveys to him that I'm supportive of whatever measures he's about to take to keep her safe, I take my seat inside the Jeep next to Lois, and we both strap on our seatbelts. As the Jeep lifts off into the air, Lois grabs my hand and squeezes gently. She then pulls out her notebook, switches on the overhead light, and begins sifting through her notes.

Even in the cover of darkness, my years of experience flying myself around the world tell me that we're definitely headed south. Definitely away from Luthor's penthouse. Definitely back toward Metropolis. He's flying us quickly too, although the ride is smooth. And Lois sits next to me engrossed in the messy writing on the page in front of her, clueless to this trickery.

"From what Clark said, if we can get our hands on that folder...Hmm..." she mumbles quietly. "You know, maybe Superman should intercept him before he gets to his penthouse." She looks over at me questioningly, to see if I agree. I just shake my head, and I hear Clark's thoughts echo mine. *Too dangerous.*

"No, he has that kryptonite ring, remember?" I remind her. Her face pales again, and she nods slowly. "He has to wait until he can get the folder without Luthor nearby."

"Right," Lois concedes, and she closes her notes and switches the light off as we start descending.

I feel his anxiety increase a notch as we drop down through the cloud cover. And next to me, Lois seems to finally realize something is off. Her hand grabs the door frame, and she leans into the window, peering down toward the ground. I know where we are. I've flown this

way hundreds of times. Even without looking, I can tell that we're just above her apartment building. He's slowed considerably now, intent on making our descent smooth.

"What the —" Lois grasps my arm, shaking me slightly. "Clark?"

Reluctantly, I turn to look at her, but she's twisted around back to the window and is now straining to make out the features of the street below. And then she loses it.

"Dammit, Clark, what the hell?" She mutters several other expletives and then turns to me, anger in her eyes. "You knew about this, didn't you?" She doesn't give me a chance to answer. Instead, she raises her voice, as though he can't hear even her quietest whisper, and adds, "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!"

Immediately, I hear his voice in my head. *"I'm sorry. Please tell her I'm sorry."*

My respect for the man wearing the blue, red, and yellow spandex increases another notch, which I didn't even know was possible. His thoughts are filled with guilt; he knows he's acting in her best interests, as do I, but he feels incredibly unsettled by the deception. I sense that he knows he's worked very hard to build her trust, and now he's — rightfully — concerned that this decision of his is breaking that fragile trust. A fleeting memory of his trickles in through the barrier he's set up to block his thoughts from me. The first night he'd come to this world. Her tired voice says, *"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 p-probably get home. And I am really tired, so I guess the tea is doing its job."* She smiles at him warmly, but he is concerned as she struggles to get her coat on. *"Here, let me help you,"* he offers gently. He feels her tense up, but she allows him to help her with her coat. He senses how tired she is; the stress of the day has been too much, and he tells her, *"Lois, please, let me take you home. I don't think you should be driving right now."* Immediately, he recognizes his mistake — it is not his place to tell her what she should or should not do. *"I mean, you seem very tired, and I —"* But she cuts him off, *"It's okay, Clark. Yes, I would appreciate a ride home. You're right that I'm too tired to drive."* And he feels that somehow, for some reason, be it his resemblance to me or his actual good nature, that she trusts him. He vows in that moment never to betray her trust.

And now, he knows he's broken that promise.

*It was the right thing to do*, I reassure him, trying to maintain confidence myself. She's going to be furious. I glance briefly at the woman next to me. Her face is no longer pale, but instead is red with anger. Yeah, she's already furious. *But do be careful*, I add. She'll never forgive you if you get yourself killed. I don't tell him this,

though he probably already knows.

As the front wheels of the Jeep touch the ground, Lois is already unbuckling her seatbelt. I reach over and take her hand.

“Lois, hold on, hon,” I implore, hoping she won’t jump out of the vehicle before it’s stopped and all four tires are on the ground. She twists toward me and gives me a glare that makes me recoil. Then, her hand finds the door handle, and, as the fourth tire touches down, she pushes the door open and leaps out of the car.

But he’s already launched up in the air, heading back in the general direction of New York City. Superman’s sonic boom shakes the ground slightly.

A cry escapes her lips, and she yells up into the clouds, “No fair, you know I can’t fly!”

I hurry out and around the car and wrap my arms around her as she almost collapses to the ground, tears in her eyes. She clings to me and whispers, “God, Clark, please, please be careful.” And then she buries her head in my chest and sobs. My hand rubs her back gently, but it doesn’t seem to help much. I raise my eyes to the sky, toward where he disappeared into the clouds, and I imagine for a moment being in his boots — that is, being the one with the superpowers. I know with absolute certainty that I’d have done the same thing, especially considering her brush with death just yesterday. My arms tighten around her.

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t want her to cry,” he tells me, his mind’s voice again filled with guilt and uncertainty.

I know you didn’t, Clark. Lois crying is about the worst thing in the world. It’s breaking my heart right now, hearing her sobs, feeling her tears wet my shirt, steadying her as she trembles. But you know that she’s only crying because she cares about you, right? You know she’s worried about you.

I think she loves you.

And with these thoughts of mine — these thoughts that are so effectively guarded against his discovery thanks to my months of practicing and training with Ching, these utterly intrusive thoughts interrupted by the stuttering of her breath and the shaking of her body — suddenly her hesitation earlier at the office, that is, the apparent guilt in her eyes when she’d told me that they’d never kissed, and that he didn’t call her ‘hon’, and that every time they touched was just part of the pretense — suddenly it makes sense. My breath catches in my throat.

I am indeed glad that I’ve put up an effective barrier around my thoughts. He can’t feel my shock as the truth hits me.

She does love him.

I mean, I know without a doubt that she loves me. Always, as she has told me so recently. Always. But in this

moment, I realize that she has also grown to love him. Not a romantic love, but love nonetheless.

I feel him waiting for a response, his thoughts pressing into me again. His concern for her well-being burrows its way into my mind, colliding with my own senses, and I almost stagger with the weight of all of this knowledge. However, despite the weakness still pervading my limbs, I hold myself and her upright, and I slowly begin to guide her toward the front door to her apartment building.

*She cares about you*, I tell him, choosing my words carefully. *Don’t be stupid, don’t get yourself caught or killed. And she’ll eventually forgive you.* I pause for half a second before adding, *Maybe*, with just the tiniest hint of a grin.

I don’t know why I’ve decided it’s necessary to try to insert some humor into the situation. On so many levels, there is nothing about any of this that is funny. In any way, really. But I feel some of the heaviness on his mind lift, and I know it was the right approach.

Meanwhile, the fragile woman in my arms decides at that moment to no longer be so fragile. I reach forward to press the button for the elevator, and she jerks out of my embrace, violently, almost. Her fingers, which had only moments before been holding onto me for dear life, jump in front of mine and smash the button repeatedly, frantically. The scowl growing on her face would scare away even the most hardened criminals. I pull my hand back slowly, as though moving slower will give me a chance to think faster, to plan my answers to the millions of questions I know she is currently formulating. The questions she will assault me with when we get back into the safety of her apartment.

Faintly, I hear his voice, explaining to me, “*I’m here. Luthor just arrived back at his penthouse.*”

But I don’t dare take my focus off Lois right now to respond. The elevator doors finally open, and I follow her into the small confined space, suddenly feeling a bit claustrophobic. I take a deep breath and remind myself that I agreed to this. And I knew she would be mad. I’ve seen her mad before. I can handle it. I hope.

She was about this mad when I told her that I was Superman. And that one time, before she knew about my two identities, when I had to leave her in the middle of a date to stop a tidal wave from hitting the coast of Indonesia. And that one time when our “colleague” Ralph had commented on her sister’s appearance just after Lucy had been released from the hospital following her suicide attempt. That one had been a doozy.

I handled her then. So, I can handle her now.  
Maybe.

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## 37

By the time we reach her apartment, unlock all the deadbolts, close the door behind us, and remove our coats, her complexion has turned an even darker shade of red, and the anger in her eyes may as well be heat vision lasers. She spins on her heel and faces me, forcing me back a step. Anger, yes. Rage, even. She feels betrayed, hurt, and that makes her angry. But I see the hurt flicker again in her expression, and a tear streaks down her cheek, followed quickly by another and another. *Oh, Lois.*

Expecting an assault, but bold enough to try anyways, I quickly hang my coat on the rack next to the door and pull her back into an embrace.

“Clark, I’m so mad — I can’t — ”

“I know, Lois. I’m sorry,” I murmur into her hair, my hands rubbing gentle circles on her back as I feel her tremble. “I’m sorry, hon. But — ”

She pushes me back, hard, and my movement is stopped by the door. Her eyes flash red again. She raises a hand and points at my chest, stepping up to me. And then she repeats her earlier question — the one she didn’t give me time to answer.

“You knew about this, didn’t you?”

I will not lie to her. I nod. And she doesn’t hesitate in her response.

“How could you, Clark?!” she demands. She seems more in control than I’d have expected. I expected ranting, raving, hands wildly flailing about. Maybe even a few attempts at decapitating me by throwing heavy objects at my head. She’s done that before too, although that was quite a long time ago, and I think maybe I did deserve it at the time.

But that’s not what happens now. She doesn’t become wild or unruly. In fact, I think it’s worse. She breaks down. She falls into my arms, sobbing again, her weak knees giving out as her arms wrap around my waist. This is definitely worse.

“He shouldn’t be doing this by himself,” she cries into my chest. “He — he’s here to help us. He’s given up so much. He almost died only less than two days ago. And now...” Her voice trails off as she shifts shakily out of my embrace. Her hands slide around to my abdomen, and she slowly raises her eyes to mine. Puffy redness encircles them, and I want to cry myself, seeing her like this. And she’s right, as she always is.

“Of course, Lois. But...” Will she let me speak? Should I speak? She won’t accept any explanation I have. She will think that we — he and I — are trying to dictate her life, control her. And maybe in this instance she is also right. Because, yes, I guess we are. We did. We decided, together and without her input, that it was too dangerous for her to go. And yet, I let him go alone, in a suit of

brightly colored spandex that I should be wearing, even though he may be risking his own life.

“But what?” Her voice is no less demanding than a minute ago, filled with no less anger. But she’s taken the volume down a notch. I swallow hard again. I don’t think I’m articulate enough right now to fix this.

“But, I — he — no, we thought that, uh, that he would have a better chance if — ”

“No, Clark,” she interrupts. And she pushes me away and starts pacing, her hands flailing as she begins carrying on in long, rambling sentences, dissecting our joint deception into tiny pieces and throwing them back in my face.

And I deserve all of it.

I feel a push from Clark, but I sense he’s not in trouble, and I block him for a moment. I need to calm her down so I can be present with him, in case something does go wrong. I step in front of her just after she spins around to pace back toward the kitchen, and I place my hands on her shoulders, exerting a firm pressure. I have no powers. In fact, I’m feeling a bit weak still from the short kryptonite exposure. It probably shouldn’t have taken that much out of me. *Focus*, I remind myself.

She allows me to stop her, but her glare pushes me back a step. Hurt and betrayal. We did that to her. I did that to her.

“I’m sorry, Lois. We both thought it was for the best. So he can concentrate on Luthor and not worry about us,” I explain. That’s sort of it, after all. But I can’t refuse to admit the full truth to her. Not in this instance. “And Luthor is dangerous. I already almost lost you once this week. I couldn’t — ”

“You don’t make my decisions for me, Clark. Neither does he. You know that,” she states, her voice almost monotone.

I know this argument. She and I have had it on numerous occasions, particularly when I’ve had to come to her rescue as Superman and I make the mistake of suggesting that maybe, just maybe, she should have asked me or told me first where she was going and when. “*It’s my life, Clark. I’ll be careful, but I’m not going to stop making my own decisions just because you think it’s dangerous.*” Of course, she’s right. As I said, she’s always right.

“I know, Lois,” I concede. However, I have to make her see from my perspective in this instance. “But, hon, please try to understand why I agreed with him; why he came to the same conclusion as I. *We both* almost just lost you, Lois. Two seconds, Lois, remember!” I drop my hands from her shoulders and lower my eyes to the ground, willing my own fears to please, please not invade right now. Please, no red hazy fog and dusty, hard ground and



Kryptonian nanotech and sneering warlords and painful jabbing of a heavy blade into my sternum. Please not right now. “Lois, we just wanted you far from Luthor’s reach. We just wanted you to be safe. And…” This is probably the most important part to her, what I’m about to say. It’s important in its simplicity, really. I sigh and close my eyes. “And he promised me he’d be careful, Lois. Believe me, please, when I tell you that he’s going to make any decisions carefully and logically. He’s not impulsive, Lois, you know that. He thinks through everything. He will be careful. He will be okay.”

She opens her mouth as though to respond, but closes it again quickly. Her expression hardens again, and she pushes past me to the kitchen, muttering more expletives to go with her nice colorful ones from earlier.

And I give her the space she needs. I move to the couch and sit heavily, my legs weary and my head throbbing again. Oh, how I wish I could just take an aspirin and make it go away. I lower my head into my hands and focus my thoughts on Clark.

*Sorry, I was still calming Lois down. She’s hysterical, I admit to him. I don’t like that I sort of abandoned him earlier, but I feel he is safe and has not made any major decisions himself yet. Just to be sure, I ask, You’re okay, right?*

Quickly, I hear his response, aptly cloaked in a veil of uncertainty. “*I’m fine. Just trying to figure out how to get the envelope in a way that will be legally admissible.*”

*Legally admissible?* I repeat his words. I lean my elbows forward to rest on my knees and close my eyes as I rub my temples with shaking, weak hands.

His statement confuses me. If I’m understanding correctly, he’s concerned that if he confiscates the documents in a way that might be considered questionable, the documents would not be usable in court. Legally admissible...

Memories from early on in my first few weeks and months as Superman pop into my mind. Despite my parents’ fears, which had morphed into my own fears growing up, the city — and for that matter, the whole world — had welcomed their new hero with open arms. Very few times had there ever been an ounce of distrust or even a trickle of unease. I’m not sure why, really. This world just really needed hope, I suppose. It had been immediate and obvious as soon as I’d returned from lifting the Messenger space shuttle into orbit on my very first appearance in the blue, red, and yellow suit that my mother had just finished sewing for me. Everyone looked to me. Everyone trusted me. I’d helped them, for no other reason than that I could.

And so, the police, the FBI, the DOD, even the many international organizations I’d had the pleasure of working

with, they’d never questioned my honesty or integrity.

But for him, maybe it was different. Lois had hinted as much. “*His world was...different,*” she’d told me. I don’t know much more than that. And maybe by now I should. However, right now, what he needs to know most is that he is trusted here.

*Do you know where it is?* I ask carefully. *The envelope.*

“*Yes. In a safe in Luthor’s penthouse. I have the combination.*” His response is almost immediate, and I feel his tension, balled up tight in his stomach.

If I focus hard, I can see what he sees, from his perch high above most of the city, the wind at his back. God, I miss that feeling. Floating among the clouds, free. Powerful, powerful enough to shape the world into something better. To instill hope to the world.

Words that I’m sure I’ve never actually heard before echo like a distant memory. “*I must say, my boy, I envy you... With every eye upon you, every breath held in anticipation, you hold in your hands a world waiting to be shaped... Trust that you’ve found your true destiny. And that in you, a once hopeless world has found its future.*” His memory maybe? I don’t recognize the voice, but the words...the words ring true.

A strong pang of sadness flutters in my chest as I realize I’m no longer that beacon of hope for my world. No, now he is. A mantle that he has so readily taken up, a role that he has so easily slipped into. And now, he needs my reassurance. I shake my head slightly and sit up again. Peripherally, I feel Lois move closer, but she doesn’t speak.

*Good, I start. 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.*

My words come easily and confidently, and I feel him hanging on every one, a mixture of surprise and relief.

*“Seriously? They just take Superman’s word?”*

With these simple words of his, the simple question, I hear his pain, and I instantly know. I know that his world had never accepted him. I feel and see his memories. Long months alone. Surrounded by people, yes, but utterly alone. Alone at his desk pushed off at the edge of the newsroom, next to the stairwell, so he can come and go without disturbing anyone. Alone in his apartment, save for the paparazzi constantly stationed outside. Alone running through the most crowded park in the city, others moving out of the way as he jogs through, whispering as though he cannot hear them. *Alien. Freak.* Alone pulling

victims from the rubble of a fire, only to have fire fighters and EMTs and police and newscasters question how he could have been there first, before everyone else, questioning his motives and integrity. Alone trying to deal with the grief of lives lost after a failed rescue. So alone.

I inhale sharply. Lois hears me. She has calmed down somewhat, and she sits next to me on the couch, close enough that I feel her warmth. I reach out and take her hand, despite knowing she is still mad. No, she is still furious. But she allows it. And then I reply to him, his simple question, with a simple answer. *Yes. Superman is a trusted figure here. They will believe you. Even against a man as respected as Luthor.*

His disbelief is immediately clear, but he trusts me, and so he does not hesitate. I tense as I focus to follow his thoughts and movements. He's scanning Luthor's penthouse again, deciding the best course of action. He'll steal — he hates the word steal, but he recognizes the necessity — the documents from the safe and then take them to my FBI contact, as I've suggested. The room is clear. I can see it through his eyes.

So weird, this connection of ours is. So much more than just telepathy. I wish I understood it.

Next to me, Lois scoots closer, her body still shaking with angry, frustrating hurt and sadness. *I'm so sorry, hon, I want to tell her again. But I don't. I squeeze her hand.*

"He's about to get the documents," I explain shortly, my eyes still closed in concentration. She lets out an unsteady breath.

"Has he — has he checked that there's no kryptonite? Please, Clark, ask him for me," she demands. She grips me tighter. "Ask him, Clark. And — and tell him to be careful. Please."

I nod, unable to refuse her.

*Lois insists that I ask if you've checked everywhere for kryptonite and that I tell you to please be careful, I communicate silently. Then I add, Though I'm sure you have and you will.*

Lois sighs next to me, leaning her head onto my shoulder.

His response is assured now, his uncertainty gone. He is Superman, after all. Confidently, he tells me, *I have, and I will.* And the images in my head become a blur as I feel him launch off the ledge of the building he'd been standing on and swoop down through the unlocked doors of Luthor's balcony, his singular focus now on his heist.

Abruptly, Lois stands and moves to the kitchen table, where her laptop and all of her research sits. I hear her dial her phone and have a brief conversation explaining the situation to Perry. By the time she hangs up, Superman is on his way to the FBI office in New York City to meet with Dan Scardino. I open my eyes, turn to her, smile, and

nod. And she breathes a sigh of relief and shifts her focus to her computer. The story. Her distraction. A tear falls silently down her cheek.

I close my eyes for another moment before moving to the table to help her.

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### 38

An hour and a half later, maybe, is when I sense him approaching the apartment. We've been working diligently, and I've been keeping in touch with him, giving Lois updates as he's worked. Luthor and both Churches (Junior and Senior) are now in FBI custody following relatively uneventful arrests. The modified kryptonite that Church Jr. had been given by Luthor has been unceremoniously tossed into the Sun. Lois and I are scheduled to go in tomorrow and give our statements and research to the Metropolis FBI office. And Superman, well... I can feel his exhaustion. He's as bone tired as ever, and he's (rightfully) wary of what he's going to encounter in Lois when he arrives.

For the most part, she's been detached and quiet; all of her fire and energy is focused now on the story. And what a story it is — one with international repercussions. The dismantling of Intergang, a major crime syndicate with global reach. Combine this with the downfall of Luthor, second-richest man in the world, and there might be another Pulitzer nomination here.

She seems to have channeled her fury to her keyboard, and the clacking of the keys has taken on an intensity that I've seldom heard before as her fingers fly over the letters. There is almost a rhythm to it, except when I calmly interrupt her to make a suggestion or correct a typo. She hates it. I almost feel like she hates me right now, and I don't blame her. But the story is going to have my name on it too, so I will contribute, even if it means that I have to face her wrathful glare every time I speak.

Thankfully, the article is mostly done. Lois just wants a few quotes and clarifications from Superman. His voice resonates in my head, and I force myself to remain stoic.

*"Is she still mad?"*

*Very,* I respond, swallowing tightly. I continue following her typing, trying to ignore his nervous vibe as he hovers outside her window, just slightly up out of her line of sight. A weak throbbing of my lingering headache pulses at the base of my skull. Another typo, Lois. Maybe I'll let the copy editor catch the error. No, I can't do that. I sigh with resignation.

"Here, hon, it should be 'Luthor's numerous other crimes,' comma, 'which include...'" I point hesitantly to the text on the screen, leaning over a bit closer to her. And her anger again becomes palpable. Time. I know she needs

time. This is how she processes things. And she has a right to be angry. But I wish it didn't feel quite so devastating to me. The room seems to grow colder as she turns and stares at me. Now her eyes are ice beams, not heat lasers. A shiver shakes me, and I scoot my chair back.

She sighs and fixes the error, then continues working. A single tear slides down her cheek. The first tear in almost an hour. Absently, I wonder what is going on inside her head, and I wish, not for the first time, that telepathy worked with humans as it does with Kryptonians. I want to hug her, but I don't dare right now. Instead, I glance out toward the window. I can't see him still; he continues to hover just a bit too high. But he's there, contemplating his entrance still. A sudden movement next to me makes me aware of my error. Lois leaps up, shoving her chair back several feet. Her eyes dart to the window first and then lock with mine.

"Is he back? Is he here?"

Her voice is low but anxious, and although I've been watching her and following the flurries of her emotions for almost the last two hours, I cannot read her expression now. Is she angry? Will she explode at him the moment he flies in through that window? Maybe I should just advise him to take off now and let me deal with her. No, that would just make her angrier. So, I nod in response, stand up after her, and reach out to grasp her shoulders in what I hope is a calming touch. However, she immediately shrugs me off and moves toward the window.

A moment later, Superman gently pushes the window open and descends into the room, stepping down lightly. He holds himself tall and upright, though I know he's struggling to remain composed. And he is tired. Maybe more tired than he's been in a long time. His eyes shift to me and then back to her, and he offers her a weak smile before turning around and closing the window behind him.

After a brief hesitation, she rushes him. Her arms wrap around him, and she seems to squeeze him as tightly as she can. To his credit, he manages somehow to not react right away. He definitely is Superman. His arms seem glued rigidly at his sides, and he quickly raises his eyes to meet mine. Although no words pass between us, I know he won't hug her back without my permission. I try not to frown, though I'm not sure I succeed, and I shrug at him and turn away, moving back to the table as I re-establish the barrier to my thoughts. Let him hug her. Let her hug him. She just cares about him. He's a good friend, and she was worried for his safety. And...

And she loves him. The realization from earlier in the day echoes again, but I push it away too and sit at the table, in Lois's seat, my hands automatically shifting to rest on the keyboard. I continue where she left off, forcing myself to ignore the sounds of her sniffles, the rustling of

the long red cape, the scrape of his boots on the ground as he rebalances himself from her onslaught.

I manage to add only a few words to her sentence before the temperature in the room drops another ten degrees. I twist around to look at the two standing behind me. Oh boy.

Superman, Clark Kent, my doppelganger, he stumbles backwards as she shoves him hard, and he barely manages to catch himself before crashing into the window. My jaw tightens as I recognize her fury returning full force. Please take it easy on him, Lois. Remember, this is half my fault. She steps up to him, and I see him shrink under her glare. She lifts a finger and plants it squarely in the middle of his chest — the middle of the iconic 'S' symbol. And she raises her voice and speaks slowly.

"Don't. You. Ever. Do. That. To. Me. Again."

Her back is to me, but I see the panic growing on his face. His eyes dart quickly to mine, almost begging for help, but I can't bring myself to react.

"I-I'm sorry," he stutters. He moves sideways, away from the window, putting just a little bit more distance between them. "I-I thought —"

"I don't even want to hear it."

And then she's heading back to me, her eyes glowing again. Fire now. I jump out of her seat and move back to my own, but that doesn't seem to be far enough away given her renewed emotional frenzy. She pauses, glaring at me, and then shudders. I want to hug her. I want to go back and take away this pain. But I know I would have made the same decision if given the chance again, so I just blink and hold her gaze.

"And don't even get me started again with you," she hisses angrily. *I'm sorry, hon.* The words have repeated in my head so many times, I'm surprised they are not just etched in my forehead by now. I hold up both hands as though to surrender and scoot my chair away from her another few inches to give her more space. Then, she turns back to Clark, who stands, shoulders hunched and brow furrowed anxiously, just a few feet away. One of his hands holds a fistful of the red material of his cape, although I'm not even sure he realizes it. She points an angry finger at him and tells him, "Sit," her voice now empty and hollow.

He follows her command and takes the seat across from mine. Not wanting to anger her further, I assume, he keeps his eyes downcast, staring at, or maybe through, the smooth woodgrain of the table.

"*She's been like this for the last hour and a half?*" he asks cautiously, skillfully managing to limit our connection so I can't sense the rest of his feelings.

*Pretty much, I reply. 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,” he apologizes, and I see him frown, though he still doesn’t lift his eyes to me.

*Don’t be. I didn’t want her anywhere near Luthor just as much as you.* I quickly remind him, *I would have done the same thing if it were me with the superpowers.* And this seems to ease his anxiety, albeit only slightly.

We both watch in silence as Lois continues her furious typing, her jaw clenched tightly and her shoulders stiff. Finally, she seems to be happy with whatever she’s written — though I don’t dare edit her copy right now — and she picks up her notebook, shifts toward him, and begins a rapid-fire set of questions to collect the last bits of information she needs to finish the article. For the most part, I sit quietly and observe, and Clark allows himself to sit up taller, take on a slightly deeper voice more characteristic of Superman than his other mild-mannered persona, and respond with well-formulated answers.

As I absently drink my third cup of coffee for the evening, I wonder if I was ever as competent as he seems. Every aspect of being Superman appears easy for him; it’s as though he slips into this larger-than-life persona that was made for him. This really is his true destiny, I think, to be Superman. Whomever was speaking to him in that memory of his that inserted itself into my mind — they were right. He embodies what it means to be Superman.

I watch him still, and my own place here also now makes sense. I represent what he cannot allow to ever happen. I am the anti-Superman. I broke the rules. Or, at least, I broke the most important rule. Never kill. Always protect life. My fingers tighten on my coffee cup.

Across from me, Clark wearily rubs his eyes, and I hear his thoughts, though he is not consciously sharing them. He still has patrols, both domestic and international, and he’s exhausted. Even Superman needs to rest. Lois stopped questioning him a few minutes ago and is now typing furiously again, ignoring both of us. I glance at the clock; it’s just before midnight. *Speak up, Clark. Tell her you need to leave,* I think to myself.

And as though he hears me, he quietly clears his throat. I look over to meet his eyes briefly, and Lois pauses her typing as she too glances at him.

“Um, if you don’t have any more questions for me, I should probably — ”

“Oh, no,” Lois cuts in, her eyes turning dark. I recognize this Lois too. I’d met her briefly one of the nights when we’d been discussing whether or not I should go to New Krypton. This Lois is a manifestation of the abandonment she’d felt when her parents divorced. This Lois hurts. And lashes out because of that hurt. My heart aches for her, and I again chastise myself for what we’d done to her. I move to touch her shoulder, but, like earlier, she shrugs me off, gives me a mean stare, and then turns

back to Clark. “No, you can’t just leave again. I’m not done — ”

I know how upset she is, but it isn’t fair to him either, to keep him here so she can be angry. She can stay angry at me tonight. So I try to help him out. Again, I place my hand on her shoulder, squeezing gently. “Lois, he needs to go,” I say, my voice low but steady. *Please, Lois. Let him be. He already feels badly about it.*

After another of her burning glares, she growls at me, something that I can’t understand, and then drops her eyes to her computer. I rub her back gently, but her muscles remain taut, unyielding, angry. Finally, she sighs and resumes her typing as she concedes, “Fine, go.”

Clark hesitates as he watches her. I’m not sure whether he understands the depth of her emotions right now. She only gets this upset when she cares. That is, when she cares a lot. His eyes fall to his hands a moment, and a strong feeling of uncertainty radiates off of him.

He must sense that I’m watching him then, as he raises his eyes questioningly, pain and loneliness filling his expression. No, don’t worry, Clark. It’s only because she loves you. I don’t tell him this, but I give him a crooked sort of half-smile and tilt my head toward the window as if to say, *Go ahead, get going. I’ll take care of her for you.* He swallows tightly but doesn’t move immediately.

*I take it you’ve never seen her angry like this before,* I comment silently, my eyes not leaving his.

“Definitely not like this,” he admits with another pained expression.

*Then trust me when I say you should probably just leave. I’ll talk to her more after we get this story done.*

I shift my eyes back to the computer screen, reading along at the text she’s added. Another typo. It’s almost like she’s making them on purpose so that she can yell at me when I correct her. I suppress a laugh. Across the table, I feel his acquiescence. He stands and moves his coffee mug to the sink, then heads over toward the window. I glance up to watch him go.

“*If it’s okay with you, I’ll stop in tomorrow morning, just to check in,*” he proposes, and I nod slightly. Then, he adds, “*And to give her the birthday present I bought her. It’s nothing big, but...*”

And everything around me seems to slow down. Her birthday. Dammit, how could I forget? What sort of lousy fiancé am I? I mean, I know I’ve been a bit, well, dead, but I know what day it is today. And I know what day her birthday is. Why am I so incredibly stupid? I close my eyes and suppress a groan. And immediately, I feel his sympathy and understanding. My eyes fly back open and meet his as he pushes the window open. He smiles at me.

“*I had made reservations for dinner tomorrow night at 8 p.m. at Le Chène, the French restaurant she likes*

downtown. I was going to call and cancel, but it's yours if you want it."

I blink in surprise at the generous offer, and I think again what a true friend he is. He's been nothing but considerate, kind, helpful, and compassionate. And, I mean it really shouldn't be so surprising, should it, that he understands me so well. We are practically brothers, really.

*That would be really great. I appreciate it. Thank you, very much.* I manage to keep my breathing even, and I think my heart rate doesn't change too much, but I find myself giving him a grateful smile. He nods back and begins to raise himself up off of the ground.

"Goodnight," he says, and then he takes off out the window.

Lois pauses her typing and shuts her eyes as she inhales with a quiet sob.

"Goodnight. Be careful out there." It's a gentle whisper, but I know he hears her. She knows too. She sobs and leans into me.

"I know I said this already, hon, but I'm really sorry. He is too." I hold myself still against her, fighting to suppress my fears from the previous few days. "We would both do anything to protect you, and I know we didn't give you a say in the matter. But please understand, Lois, I can't...I can't lose you, hon." She shifts in my embrace, but I keep my eyes squeezed shut and continue, reiterating my arguments from before. I know it's not enough. I know she'll still be mad and that she has every right to. But I try anyways. "If you got hurt, Lois, I couldn't —"

"I know, sweetheart," she whispers, cutting me off.

There is defeat in her tone, and I hug her tighter as the room around me begins to spin. *I'm so sorry, hon.* The room seems to grow warmer, the heat stifling my breathing. Lois feels it too, I think, or at least, she feels my anxiety growing. That's probably it. After all, despite her outbursts, she's at least mentally stable.

And although I've had a pretty good day today, I feel my control slipping. I burrow my head into her hair and force a deep breath. Her hands, which had been sitting passively in her lap, move to my chest, and then one drops to my knee. My knee that betrays my fragile mental state. My knee that trembles apprehensively. I lower my hand to rest over hers, which helps me stabilize myself, and I clear my throat.

"I love you."

"I know, sweetheart."

I pause a moment, and my breath catches in my throat. "He loves you, too."

Very quietly, almost inaudibly, she repeats, "I know."

My stomach twists itself into a knot, and I bury my head deeper into her shoulder.

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39

"Yes, Perry, thank you... Yes. And again, sorry to call so late... Of course... I know, I know... You too, Perry. See you in the morning."

Behind me, quiet sounds of papers rustling, dishes clinking together, and water dripping run together, and I seem to be unable to distinguish what Lois is actually doing. Cleaning up the table? Loading the dishwasher? Something I should be helping with, I'm sure. I hold my head in my hands, my fingers rubbing my temples to try to sooth my persistent headache. My back rests against the soft cushions of her sofa, and I close my eyes again as I try to fight off the nausea that has been threatening me for the last half hour.

The water shuts off, and a moment later, two gentle hands begin massaging my shoulders. Lips press into my neck.

"Bedtime?" Her voice is sweet, soft, and I lean back a bit into her touch as she continues her massage.

"Uh huh," I manage. I reach over and place a hand on top of hers, then turn my head and kiss her knuckles. "Perry got the article?"

"Yeah, he's trying to get it on the front page of the morning edition," she explains. "Although he's not sure if it's still possible since it's already after 1 a.m."

"Mmmm." Such an articulate answer. But it is late, and I'm exhausted.

Her hands drift downward, meeting about half way down my chest, and I breathe deeply at the comfort her embrace provides. She pats my chest gently.

"Come on, sleepyhead."

Again, her voice is filled with a tenderness that I wouldn't have expected given the events of earlier. I open my eyes, but the room seems to tilt sideways, colors blurring and running together like one of my mom's abstract paintings. A groan escapes my lips as I screw my eyes shut again. Almost immediately, her hand is back on my shoulder.

"Are you okay, sweetheart?"

"Yeah, sorry, I just —"

Everything around me suddenly pulses, as though the air itself is taking a deep breath, and I feel her heartbeat slow to almost a stop. The clock on the wall hesitates in its persistent, rhythmic ticking. My fingers heat up as individual fibers in the couch play across my sensitive skin. My eyes open and immediately take in every detail of the room, before my vision breaks through the walls of the apartment. Layers of dry wall, wood, and brick dissolve right in front of me, and the darkness of the street outside filters into my view.

I blink rapidly, and as quickly as the sensation had

come, it disappears. The clock regains its rhythm. Lois's heartbeat is stable and steady. And the wall once again blocks my view.

I swallow hard and press my hands into the couch.

"Sorry, I'm just tired I suppose. It was a long day. How are you?"

I force myself to stand, and my knees wobble traitorously, contradicting the hint of power I'd just felt in that very brief second.

Lois has no idea; why would she? She reaches out to help me, her arm looping comfortingly through mine, but she doesn't answer me immediately. Instead, she leads me toward the bedroom, flipping off the lights as we go. Darkness enshrouds the room, and a faint light coming from the bedroom illuminates our path down the hallway. Her breathing is measured, controlled, almost too even, and her steps are too deliberate.

She's putting on a brave face for me now.

But why? Is it because she realized how exhausted I am? Because I wobbled when I stood? Because she noticed the slight trembling in my hands and knees?

As we enter the dimly lit bedroom, her arm loosens from around me, and she steps away toward the dresser. I see the tension in her shoulders, and my guilt again overwhelms me. I blink a couple times and then follow her. My arms encircle her waist from behind, and I press myself up against her, lowering my lips to her neck. Her skin is soft and warm, but she tenses up as I touch her.

"Let me help you, hon," I suggest. My hands lower to her hips and then skim under her shirt, pushing the fabric up as she raises her arms. It slips off easily over her head, and I discard the material as my open palms caress the smooth skin of her abdomen. Her head tilts back slightly, resting against my cheek, and I run my hands down her sides. Her breath catches in her throat, and I smile into her as I flutter gentle kisses down her shoulder.

Then she suddenly straightens and shifts away from me, her hands moving up to cover herself.

"Clark, I don't think we should..." Her voice trails off as she meets my eyes, and I see how upset she is still. Her anger has faded, true, but the hurt and betrayal are still raw. I manage a small nod.

"You're right. I'm sorry," I agree, and I turn away from her and run a shaky hand through my hair.

What have I done? Will she ever trust me again? Tonight conspiring with Clark, and that on top of everything else...

"I'm sorry," I repeat, my voice low.

"It's okay. I just — I'm going to get ready for bed."

She stoops to pick up her shirt from the ground, then steps back to the dresser, her back to me.

I strip off my own clothes, slip on a pair of sleep

shorts, and sit heavily on the edge of the bed while she moves silently into the bathroom. I hear sounds of her brushing her teeth, and then a moment later, she exits the bathroom, moves to her side of the bed, and crawls under the covers. No words are exchanged, and I close my eyes briefly before I stand up and take my own turn in the bathroom.

*Maybe she needs more space; maybe I've overstayed my welcome here,* I wonder dejectedly as I settle down onto my side of the bed a few minutes later.

We'd only been engaged for a few months before I'd left for New Krypton, and although we'd talked about it a few times, we hadn't really reached a decision about when we'd move in together or whether we'd wait until after the wedding. I recall her being somewhat reluctant to make any move until after we were officially married, but we'd certainly spent our fair share of nights together, most often at my place, but sometimes here too. And now, without even considering how she might be feeling about the invasion of her space, I've found myself taking over half of her apartment as her live-in roommate, fiancé, lover, boyfriend... whatever I am.

Maybe she doesn't really appreciate that anymore.

Maybe she wants some space to herself.

Maybe we really should sit down and talk about it.

And maybe... maybe...

I shake my head. No, I think she'd tell me if she needed me to leave. She's just upset still. I think. I turn to face her. She is curled up on her side of the bed, almost as far away from me as she can get, her body stiff and still. I can't let us go to sleep like this. Cautiously, I move a bit closer to her and reach out to touch her shoulder. She flinches.

"Lois, may I hold you?"

A simple request.

Her answer is apparently not simple, however. She says nothing right away, opting instead to turn over onto her back and push herself up into a sitting position. Her eyes avoid mine, and she takes several deep breaths to steady herself.

She then nods, murmuring "Yes, that's fine," before settling back down closer to the center of the bed, her back to me again. Despite her words, her body language clearly says 'Don't touch me,' and I wonder whether I actually should. Not wanting her to get the wrong idea, however, I quickly shift over toward her and mold my body up to hers, her comforting warmth seeping into me as I wrap both arms around her. Some of her tension vanishes, and she exhales deeply while leaning back into me. This acceptance of my touch, the faint hint that she might need me as much as I need her, the catch of her breath as I graze the back of her neck with my lips — all of this quells my

fears, and I think that it might be possible for me to sleep tonight after all. I close my eyes and tighten my arms around her just enough that I know she feels it, before relaxing again into the bed.

It has been a very long day — too many emotions spent, for both of us.

I allow my eyes to close as I settle deeper into the bed next to her and breathe in her familiar scent. My Lois. I press my lips into her neck again and then whisper gently, “I’m sorry. I love you more than life itself, and I never meant to hurt you. I only ever wanted to keep you safe. I hope you can forgive me.”

She doesn’t respond.

Maybe she’s already sleeping.

Or maybe she doesn’t want to upset me. Either way, I feel myself drifting off into an uneasy sleep just as her breathing also settles into a clear, even rhythm. *I love you, Lois. Please forgive me.*

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#### 40

Flames engulf everything around me, whipping around in the deafening roar of the wind. I call out her name; I know she was just here, but now all I see is the menacing orange, red, and yellow fire, consuming everything in its path. Terror fills me, and I spin around, crouching low to the ground as I scan the immediate area. A warehouse of some sort, maybe? I push myself off the ground, my red cape catching under one hand.

Wait, what?

My eyes drop to my chest, now covered by the familiar ‘S’ shield, the crest of the House of El. Why am I dressed as Superman?

“Lois?!” I call out again, but she doesn’t answer. And I doubt I’d hear her even if she did.

If I’m Superman, that must mean I’m invulnerable, right? Logical.

I step toward the flames, cautiously reaching out one hand. Pain lances around my wrist as the fire jumps at me, searing my sensitive flesh. I cry out and pull my hand back. The skin is already blistered and raw, and the pain spreads rapidly from my hand up my arm.

Nope. Very much not invulnerable.

“Clark?!”

Her panicked voice echoes from behind me, and I spin around toward the sound, but I can’t see her through the wall of flames. Damn superpowers. Come on now. Work. I squint harder, as if that will help, but nothing happens.

“Clark, help!”

To my right now. I turn again. Through the heavy black smoke filling the room, I make out two figures about fifty feet away, huddled against the far wall of the room.

One is taller, an older man maybe, and the other is a shorter, much more petite figure. Lois!

She tries to call out again as she sees me, but her cry is cut short as the man standing next to her grabs her by the throat and slams her up against the wall. Her eyes widen as she gasps for breath.

And intense rage builds in my chest. At once, I recognize the man. Nigel St. John. But he’s supposed to be in police custody, isn’t he? I break into a sprint, quickly navigating around fallen debris to close the distance between us.

“Lois?! Let her go, you monster!”

My voice booms through the warehouse, audible even over the din of the flames. The man laughs maniacally, shoves Lois up against the wall, and pulls a gun out of his coat pocket, aiming at me. For the briefest of moments, I hesitate. I’m very much not invulnerable, I remember. Then, my eyes meet hers again, and I see her terror and pain as his hand tightens more around her neck.

“Clark, help,” she whispers through gritted teeth. Her eyes close, and she stops struggling.

Instantly, I lunge forward, somehow managing a burst of super speed, and wrench the gun out of Nigel’s grip. He falters, releases her, and then swings his fist at me as she slumps unconscious to the ground. Nigel’s hand connects with my jaw, and a jolting pain erupts in my head and neck. I stumble backwards, crashing into a stack of boxes, and the sudden movement seems to fuel the fire around us, which lashes out again, catching my cape. I ignore it, instead choosing to refocus my efforts on the man standing in front of me. He casually picks up the gun from where it had fallen, and rather than pointing it back at me, he turns, a crazed gleam in his eye, and aims the barrel at my fiancée, who still lies in a crumpled heap on the ground.

“No, please, don’t hurt her,” I beg, moving toward Nigel again.

His finger tightens on the trigger.

I hear the click as the bullet explodes out of its chamber.

And time slows down around me. The familiar feeling of moving faster than humanly possible, the speed of everything else slowed to a near stop, washes over me. I leap forward, my hand closing around the end of the gun barrel before the bullet can exit. The metal collapses under the pressure. My other hand swiftly, deftly reaches out and closes around Nigel’s throat.

His eyes don’t even have time to register my movement before his neck snaps in my grip. Just as I’d pictured outside the Lexor. The monster is dead. I allow the world to speed back up around me as I hold Nigel up. His head is now twisted at an unnatural angle, and his lips have a slightly blue tinge. I push him away from me, and

his body falls limply into the flames, which continue to inch toward me. And Lois.

“Lois?”

I turn around abruptly, but she is no longer there. My chest constricts.

“Lois?!” I hear the fear in my own voice.

“What’s the matter, Kal? Can’t seem to keep your woman under control?” The snide, malicious voice of Lord Nor, dripping with hate and malevolence, sneers from somewhere behind me, and movement out of the corner of my eye startles me. I spin around, grabbing a wrist in my grip as I do.

Bones crunch in my hand.

And her eyes fill with pain and shock as they meet mine. She screams and pulls away from me. The fire surrounding us explodes with the sound, and she stumbles backwards toward the flames.

“Lois, no!”

In the blink of an eye, Superman — the real one, my doppelganger — swoops in and scoops her up into his arms. He holds her gently, yet firmly, hovering several feet off the ground in front of me. His eyes meet mine, and I see his anger and distrust. He turns away, inhales deeply, and extinguishes the flames with a single, well-aimed blast of his freezing breath.

I fall to my knees as the smoke envelops me, my blistered hand shaking badly as I hold it to my chest. Superman sets Lois down and then steps up to me.

“Stand up,” he commands, barely concealing his anger. I do as he says, awkwardly pushing myself to my feet. My eyes flicker to Lois, who cowers away from me, and Superman’s right hand shoots out and grabs me by the throat, much as I had to Nigel only a few minutes ago. “You hurt her. You were supposed to let me be Superman. But you couldn’t control yourself, and now you hurt her.”

His voice is steady and even, but his eyes betray him. He loves her.

“I-I’m sorry. I thought I heard Lord Nor. I didn’t know my powers — I didn’t know my strength was back. I didn’t mean to hurt her,” I stammer, again glancing briefly toward my fiancée. She recoils as my eyes fall on her, shrinking back behind Superman.

“That is no excuse, Kal!” he roars, and he slams me back against the wall. “I won’t kill you, because that’s not what I do, Kal. But if you ever — ever — hurt her again, I might have to bend my rules just a bit.”

The floor around us dissolves, and suddenly we are floating hundreds of feet up in the air, somewhere above Metropolis. The clouds around us turn a dark red, and a viscous rain begins to fall, the drops splattering on and staining the yellow ‘S’ shield on my chest. Superman continues to hold me up. His suit stays clean. The rain —

no, the blood, because that’s what it really is, isn’t it? — it beads up off his suit and slides down without soaking in.

So he stays clean.

While I am covered with the thick blood-rain.

And Lois steps up on a wisp of a cloud behind him, wraps her arms around his waist, and whispers something into his ear. He nods, glances down toward the city below briefly, and then releases me from his grip.

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#### 41

My eyes open with a start, and I stare at the ceiling. The ceiling. Lois’s bedroom. Right.

It was just a dream.

Or, rather, it was a nightmare.

God.

A warm body shifts slightly next to me, and a hand laid flat against my chest inches down toward my abdomen.

“Mmm, Clark, sweetie, is everything okay?” she mumbles sleepily, cuddling up closer to me. One leg rests over the top of my thigh, and her head burrows deeper into the crook of my shoulder.

My hands are balled up into tight fists, and I force myself to relax.

It was just a dream. She’s fine. I’m fine. Right?

I venture a quick glance at her. Her eyes are closed, and her breathing is steady and even. My hand moves to cover hers on my stomach, and I note that her wrist is undamaged. My thumb brushes softly over the unblemished skin on the back of her hand. She’s fine. It was just a dream.

God, what a nightmare.

I kiss the top of her head.

“Sorry, hon, just a bad dream. Go back to sleep now,” I murmur.

She doesn’t respond. She’s already sleeping again.

I close my eyes, but I keep seeing the flash of her terror-filled eyes, her mouth open in a scream as my hand crushes her wrist, and then her cowering in fear behind Superman. The message is perfectly clear. I’m a danger to her when my powers return. I’m a danger to her and others.

I swallow hard and glance at the clock on the nightstand. It’s already 6:15 a.m. Almost time to get up. Almost time to start the day. Cautiously, I raise my hand to my face and rub my eyes. What am I going to do? Last night, despite the brief kryptonite exposure, I had a moment where I felt my power returning — mostly my vision and speed — but it was so momentary, so fleeting, I could almost have just imagined it. And earlier in the day, when Lois had been returning with Clark, I swore my telescopic vision had been starting to return as well. I stare



up at the ceiling, willing myself to look through the wall. Nothing happens. I close my eyes and try to focus my hearing, but nothing is amplified. I can't even hear Lois's steady heartbeat next to me.

No, my powers are still dormant. Thank goodness. Soon though. They're going to return very soon. And what will I do then? The woman snuggled up against me breathes deeply in her sleep, reminding me of the importance of keeping myself under control.

If I trusted myself...if I knew I wouldn't lose myself into some sort of panic-induced rage...then maybe, maybe I could accept my powers returning. But, no... I'm a danger to her, and to others.

I screw my eyes shut tightly. Stupid superpowers.

I will have to make sure to not hurt her. Even if that means asking for more help from the one person who is capable of helping me. The one person who will not let me hurt her, or anyone else.

He will be stopping by this morning to drop off her birthday present. Probably early, since he knows we have a 9 a.m. staff meeting. I can talk with him then.

Great. Just what I want to do.

I suppress a shudder as the look in his eyes from my dream — the anger, disgust, contempt, and most of all disappointment — flashes in front of me. Although I know it was just a dream and that he wouldn't ever react that way, even just imagining such a response makes me want to recoil.

I shift carefully out from under her and onto my side. She mumbles in her sleep and presses up against me, her hands resting on my chest. A loose strand of hair falls over her face, and I gently brush it back behind her ear. My beautiful love. How could I ever hurt her, even in my dreams?

Her eyes flutter open, just barely, and she smiles up at me as our eyes meet. I try to smile back, but I hide my unease by leaning in and kissing her lightly on the forehead.

"Good morning. Happy birthday, my love," I whisper, planting a string of kisses down her cheek and along her jawline. She doesn't tense up or back away like last night. Actually, quite the opposite. With one hand lingering on my bare chest, she reaches up to cup my cheek and then brings her mouth to mine for a long, deep kiss.

"Mmm, good morning. You remembered my birthday." She sounds mildly surprised, but I don't dwell on it. Not right now, when she's so receptive to my touch, and when I need her so much.

"Most important day of the year," I explain between kisses.

My lips leave hers to trace a path down her neck, then her shoulder, as my fingers brush along her upper arm. I'm

rewarded with a quiet moan, and I continue showering her with kisses until I find myself undoing the buttons on the front of her nightgown one by one. Pale, smooth skin hides underneath the satiny material, and with each button undone, I plant a gentle kiss on the newly exposed flesh. After reaching the final button, my hands, seemingly of their own accord, stray back up from the hem of the nightgown, pushing it off of her. I shift my body back up alongside hers, and I groan as I take in the sight in front of me. From my new position, propped up on one elbow, my left hand resting expectantly at her waist, I can see all of her. Her lips, still curled in a soft smile, are full and pink from our kisses, and her cheeks are flushed.

"You are so beautiful, my love. So perfect." I know I've told her this before, but I can't help telling her again. I pause as my eyes meet hers, and I recall her reluctance to let me touch her last night. "Is this okay, hon?" I inquire, my voice low.

She ducks her head almost shyly, clearly remembering when she'd stopped me the previous night. But her shyness does not last long. No, she only hesitates for a moment; then, she removes her hand from my chest, grasps my hand in hers, and guides it to her hip as she closes the distance between us and recaptures my lips in hers.

I groan again, both at the sensations that her action causes and at the definitiveness of her response. And then I carefully, lovingly, and slowly show her how much she means to me.

A bit later, we cuddle up together, my arms wrapped around her and her head buried in my shoulder. I kiss her cheek and rub my hand in gentle circles on her back.

"Happy birthday, my love," I murmur breathlessly into her ear.

She giggles and hugs me to her tightly. But then, her mood shifts suddenly, and she inhales as her body shudders.

"I love you, Clark," she says quietly. "I-I know that things have been a bit...strained lately, and part of that is my fault. I-I've been... Oh, well it doesn't even matter anymore. Because... Because this — you — having you home, back with me — this is all that matters. This is the best birthday present I could have imagined. I — God, I thought I'd lost you forever, Clark."

"Oh, Lois." I kiss her jaw and her forehead and then her lips, and I reach a shaking hand up to wipe the tears from her cheeks. "I'm so sorry to have put you through that, hon. I'm so sorry. And I...I'm sorry about yesterday and the day before that and...and my...all of my outbursts in the last week... I can't seem to... I..." My voice wavers, but I hold her steadily, solidly. Unshakably. "I love you."

She doesn't speak again, but I feel all of her love

enveloping me as we embrace. And I close my eyes as I struggle to forget how I'd died. How I'd failed her. How I'd come so close to never seeing her again.

If not for my doppelganger, if not for our odd telepathic connection that had allowed me to see her through his eyes and keep my mind anchored to my body, if not for the immense and incredible healing powers of the Sun — if not for all of these factors — I'd have never made it back here to her.

It was stupid, dumb luck. Nothing I did. No, I died. I failed. But somehow, amazingly, I returned to her.

Even death could not keep us apart.

I silently thank this mysterious H.G. Wells person, whom I've never met, for bringing my doppelganger to this world, and Lois for making the decision to have Zara and Ching take my body to the Sun, and of course the other Clark for maintaining the telepathic connection he and I share and figuring out that I had actually returned from the dead, that I was alive, floating around in the Sun's layers, soaking up the healing warmth and radiation that reanimated me.

*Stupid, dumb luck.*

I sigh into her and whisper again, "I love you." And she continues to cry quietly into my shoulder as the morning light peeks in through a break in the curtains.

*Stupid, dumb luck.*

The phrase repeats itself in my mind, and I kiss the top of her head as a weight begins to settle on my chest. I have been given this second chance... People don't get second chances like this. Yet, somehow I did, and somehow, I've been screwing up every step of the way.

...My fractured mind, my inability to control myself, this darkness inside of me — this anger and rage, which has turned into something far scarier than I'd ever thought possible...

I close my eyes and hold her tighter.

I need help.

Yes, help from Clark, and I will approach him about that this morning. But also, maybe something more.

And, as usual, Lois seems to be able to read my thoughts. With a quiet snuffle, she murmurs, "Sweetheart, about your...mental health... I really think we should talk about...finding you a therapist. Someone who specializes in PTSD..."

I swallow hard, but don't answer right away. She's right. She's always right, of course. But in this instance, it's perfectly clear that I need help. I have no idea how it could work, logistically — would I go as Superman or as Clark? How could I possibly navigate that without giving myself away? Yet how I could get the help I need without being able to speak openly?

And that's why she's right. We need to talk about it.

I feel her tense up in my arms. She pulls back a bit and looks up at me, her eyes red with tears. I shake my head, sad that I've made her cry again.

"Yeah, I... You're right. You're...you're right, Lois. We...should talk about it."

She nods and buries her head back into my shoulder as her body shudders. Her soft whisper of "I love you" breathes against my neck, and I close my eyes again as I hold her.

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## 42

Razor blades. We have an interesting albeit brief history. That is, in all of my twenty-eight years on this planet, I've used razors only five or maybe six times now, if you don't count the shaving device I was forced to use on New Krypton...which I don't. That had been a sort of laser-based instrument, nothing like a razor.

No, nothing like this cheap, disposable razor.

I shudder as I push the memory of New Krypton out of my head and stare at the instrument in my hand. A plain white plastic handle topped with a fresh, unused dual-blade razor. Sharp enough to nick my skin, at least in my current state. Frowning, I set the razor down and squeeze a dollop of shaving cream into my hand before raising my eyes to the mirror.

The first time I'd attempted this, I was seventeen. My dad had shown me how he shaved every morning, but until junior year of high school, I hadn't grown any facial hair to speak of and hadn't needed to learn. I don't know what we'd expected. We really should have anticipated that the blade would fracture, unable to cut through the rough stubble that began to grow on my chin and above my lip. And we were pretty foolish to have thought the blade was the problem. My dad and I had gone through three razors, coming up with various excuses, before my mom poked her head into the bathroom, saw the broken blades in the trash can, and suggested that, like the rest of me, my annoyingly itchy facial hair was probably invulnerable. Just like the hair on my head, which we'd been unable to cut using traditional methods since I'd turned 15.

Yeah, sometimes my dad and I could be kind of dense, I suppose.

My mom had suggested that I try using my heat vision to "shave," much like how I managed to keep my hair short, and she and my dad had stepped out into the hallway, a safe distance away, while I'd figured out the right intensity, angle, and duration to apply my heat vision and remove the stubble. It had taken quite a bit of practice, but I'd gotten good at it without too much fuss.

So the first time I'd been exposed to kryptonite — my dad and our neighbor Wayne Irig had found the glowing

green rock under a tree that had been ripped out of the ground during an intense storm, and he'd called me up to come and take a look at it — I'd lost my powers for two full days, despite the short exposure, and I'd been forced to either live with a stubbly chin, which I hated, or learn to use a razor. I think I'd cut myself five times that morning. I remember staring in awe at the viscous red liquid oozing out of the first nick on my chin. I'd never seen my own blood before. I was twenty-three then. Yep, twenty-three years old before I'd seen myself bleed.

Lois had laughed at me (or with me, I suppose) when I'd told her the story.

But right now, I'm grimacing, not laughing. I spread the shaving cream on my face and get to work, carefully running the razor along the contour of my jaw, rinsing the blade in the sink, and repeating the process. To my right, Lois steps out of the shower, one towel wrapped around her and another twisted up in her hair. The bathroom is maybe too small for both of us, but we're already running late, and I really can't say that I mind when she allows her hands to graze along my back as she squeezes past me.

My eyes meet hers in the mirror, and I return her smile with one of my own, while being careful not to nick myself with the razor. There's a twinkle in her expression now, quite different from just a few minutes prior, when we'd been in bed, and my heart pounds in my chest as her fingers linger on my skin just above the towel I have wrapped around my waist. She pauses behind me and leans into me for a moment, pressing her lips into my back. I close my eyes, and my hand holding the razor hesitates under the stream of warm water in the sink.

And last night I was worried that she might want me to move out. To give her space.

I almost laugh. Instead, I open my eyes to meet hers again. She peers at me curiously over the top of my shoulder. Then, wordlessly, she brushes her lips against my neck again, smiles, and leaves me to finish shaving. My progress is slow, but I am thankful at least that my hands have decided to not shake today. A few minutes later, Lois saunters back in the room, now clad in her favorite bathrobe. She hangs up one of the towels on the rack behind me and then reaches around me to grab her toothbrush.

Right before the knock comes, I sense his presence — my doppelganger. Despite his attempt to hide his feelings, his anxiousness and uncertainty hit me, and I exhale sharply as I almost slip up with the razor. Absently, I wonder how he gets by as Superman, which he actual does extremely well, given his obvious insecurities in other aspects of his life. He and I are quite different in that regard, or at least, we were; I've experienced more uncertainty and doubts in the last week than I had probably

in the entire last year before leaving for New Krypton.

I wish I could find that confident, self-assured person again. He was much easier to be than this mess of a man I've become.

His light knock at the front door surprises Lois. She looks at me questioningly, her toothbrush now sticking out the side of her mouth, but I'm suddenly distracted by how incredibly adorable she is, and I become lost in her eyes. My lack of a prompt response, however, garners a look of exasperation, and she turns on her heel and heads back out of the bathroom, muttering, "I guess I'll get it," under her breath, followed by "Just a minute!" a bit louder, so Clark can hear her. I flinch at the minor annoyance in her voice and turn back to the mirror.

Almost done shaving. And I know Clark is here to see her anyways, not me. Although I do need to speak with him before he leaves.

I rinse the razor again and finish up as I sense him entering the apartment. After I clean the residual shaving cream off and apply a small amount of aftershave, Lois reenters the bathroom, runs a brush through her damp hair, and then disappears into the walk-in closet, emerging fully dressed in a smart burgundy work suit a moment later as she tugs on her pantyhose and slips on a pair of black pumps.

She pauses and looks at me as I exit the bathroom.

"It's Clark. But I guess you probably knew that," she surmises, tilting her head slightly as though waiting for my confirmation.

"Yeah," I confirm, nodding. "Sorry, I forgot to mention he was planning to stop by this morning. I'll be out in a couple minutes. Just let me get dressed."

A mischievous smile plays on her lips, and she closes the distance between us. Her hands splay across my abdomen, just at the top edge of the towel still wrapped around my waist, and she reaches up and brushes a light kiss on my cheek.

"I wish we could just spend all day here, where there's no need for clothes. It is my birthday, after all," she whispers into my ear as her fingers dip below the top of the towel. Groaning, I return her kiss, this time on the lips, but she pulls away, smiles at me cheekily, and turns toward the bedroom door.

"Don't take too long. I don't want to be late to the staff meeting," she says calmly, and then she glances over her shoulder at me, grins again, and hurries out into the hallway.

I groan and step into the closet to pick out an appropriate suit. Several minutes later, I'm fully dressed in one of my nicer charcoal suits, a light blue dress shirt, and gray striped tie. As I slip on my socks and shoes, I surreptitiously tap into my connection with my

doppelganger. He doesn't sense the connection right away, but I gather he is distracted by my fiancée, who has enveloped him in a surprising embrace. I swallow tightly. It's okay, really; she can hug him if that's what she wants or what he needs. And I am okay with that. Right. Totally okay.

Mustering up as much positivity as I can, I exit the bedroom and walk briskly down the hallway. A hint of tension flickers in his mind as he senses me coming, and by the time I exit the hallway, he's stepped out of her embrace and is smiling tightly at Lois, whose hands linger on his waist for another second. I remind myself again that it's fine, and I paste a smile on my face.

"Good morning!" I keep my voice light and cheery, and I'd like to think that I'm able to project a sense of confidence, though I don't quite feel it right now.

Clark backs away from Lois almost nervously, lowering his eyes and stuffing his hands into his pockets. Lois turns slightly to look up at me as I approach, a small smile on her lips, and I lean over and kiss her cheek.

*Possessive much?* I think to myself, a silent reprimand for being so childish.

Lois's arm slips underneath my jacket and around my waist, and she squeezes me gently as I shift my focus back to my doppelganger and offer a handshake.

Reluctantly, he reaches out and grasps my hand, returning my greeting with a quick, "Good morning." His grip is strong, as I'd expect, but I feel his surprise at my apparent strength, and words in his head form a brief statement, a declaration full of certainty.

*"Your powers are returning."*

His eyes meet mine, and gone is the nervousness and tension from just a moment ago. I'm overwhelmed for a moment as I see Superman, not Clark Kent, standing in front of me. Superman from my dream, his eyes full of distrust and disappointment. I blink, and the image is gone. Instead, I see him as he is now — a Superman full of hope and expectation. I manage a weak smile.

*A little bit, I think. Slowly though.*

I don't want to talk about it, but I remind myself of the resolve I had to ask for his help, of my reservations regarding my powers returning and my ability to control them. So when he responds with a quick, "Good," I feel my jaw tighten and my hands start to shake. Immediately, I know he senses my apprehension. *"It is good, right?"*

"I should probably be going so you two can finish getting ready for work," he says hastily, and he shifts his gaze to Lois, who still stands next to me supportively, as though she can feel that something is bothering me. Clark smiles at her, a warmth in his expression, and adds, "I hope you have a great day, Lois. Happy birthday again!"

"Thank you, Clark," she replies, and her arm tightens

around me before she releases me and steps back up to him.

He doesn't meet my eyes, but he easily accepts her embrace, and I feel his flood of emotions as she hugs him again. Overwhelming barely describes it. A blonde woman, whom I've seen a glimpse of before in other memories of his, tainted with a mixture of sadness, loneliness, and self-doubt. They'd been engaged, Clark and this blonde woman. Lana. I hear her name in his thoughts and see flickers of moments from their life together. She was awful to him, but it took him meeting the other Lois Lane from the other universe — the Lois Lane who'd helped him to become Superman — to figure out just how awful Lana was. Her vitriolic words echo in his thoughts. She'd called him many things. *"Freak."* *"Alien."* *"Abomination,"* even. She'd taught him to hate himself — to hate the amazing gifts he'd been given.

I shudder as I imagine being in his shoes, having lived his life. Alone, made an orphan at 10. Forced into unloving foster homes, bounced around with none of the love and stability I'd grown up with. And then, latching onto this one person who'd pretended to love him, only to realize it was a sham. Then along comes this other Lois Lane, who helps him break out of his abusive relationship and become the superhero he was destined to be.

And then he'd been brought here and met my Lois. My Lois, who made him feel like a person, who helped him to feel wanted, and yes, loved.

No wonder he loves her. Until her, he'd never truly felt the acceptance that I'd lived with my whole life. He'd never felt like he belonged, like he was more than just a freak...an alien.

She made him feel human.

So overpowering is this revelation that I don't realize he's heading toward the door until Lois steps back into my arms and leans up against me. She glances at me and frowns slightly, then reaches up and touches my cheek as though to ask if I'm okay. I give her a weak smile and kiss her forehead.

"Hon, uh, why don't you go finish up in the bathroom, and I'll walk Clark out," I propose. She nods at me; I know she senses that I have something important to talk to him about, and I'm sure she'll grill me about it later. But for now, she is accepting, and she kisses me on the cheek and then heads off toward the bedroom to finish getting ready while I jog up behind Clark.

Immediately, he is uneasy again, concern wafting off him in waves. My expression must reflect his, I realize, as he nearly crushes the door handle in his grip when he twists back to look at me.

"What's wrong?"

I shake my head and point to the hallway. The last

thing I want is for Lois to overhear us talking. And, well, I don't want him in my head right now either, since my thoughts are a jumbled mess as I try to get used to the idea of him loving her and her having strong feelings for him, so I resolve that we'll have this conversation out loud. I think I can control which of my thoughts he hears better that way.

We step out into the empty hallway together, and he closes the door behind us. As I try to gather my thoughts, I realize I should have planned this better. I should know what I want to say and how I want to say it. But instead, I've just jumped right in, relying on a confidence that I no longer possess. I run a nervous hand through my hair and let out a breath.

"Nothing is wrong, per se," I start, keeping my voice low. "But I'm a bit worried about my powers returning. I —"

I falter, wondering again how I should present this to him. He stands patiently next to me, his gaze steady now, and his mind centered. Superman. He slips so easily into this role, as I've noted before. I sigh and blurt out my concerns.

"I don't trust myself right now. I-I don't want to hurt anyone, and I —"

My voice halts abruptly as I shake my head and screw my eyes shut. He will understand me, right? He will understand without making me tell him about my horrible dream. He saw me lose the tenuous control I'd had after Nigel had tried to kill Lois. And he is the only person on the planet who knows what it means to have such incredible power. He knows how much restraint is necessary every moment of every day to avoid hurting someone. He knows how easy it would be to maim, injure, kill, if perfect control is not exercised at all times. So he will understand me. I know it. I open my eyes and meet his. A sense of calm washes over me.

"What can I do to help?" he asks softly. "And have you talked to Lois about this?"

"I...haven't, yet. But I will." I lower my eyes to the floor and stuff my hands into my pockets. My resolve falters again, but I try to continue. "I'm not sure how you can help, except that, uh..." I shake my head and drop my eyes to the ground as I voice my concerns. "We're already asking too much of you, Clark. It's not fair to you to ask more."

"No," he says quickly, mimicking me as he shoves his hands into the pockets of his jeans. "No, whatever you need, especially this, I'm here to help. Please tell me what you're thinking."

Of course. I expected nothing less from him. He will help me. My jaw trembles as I force out my request. "I-I think if you could just keep yourself open to our, um,

connection... You can sense when things are wrong, I think."

And that's really it; that's my amazing plan to keep my love safe. That is, I need him to keep tabs on me, to keep me in line. Tentatively, I lift my chin and straighten up slightly, and as soon as our eyes meet, he nods without any hesitation. Steady and strong and clearly accepting. Just as I knew he would be.

But his voice then echoes in my head, "*If you don't deliberately block me out.*"

It's like my breath is squeezed out of me suddenly, and a tightness in my chest pulls me into myself. My shoulders hunch again, and my hands shake in my pockets. I can't look him in the eye anymore, and my gaze drops to the floor.

My voice is nearly a whisper as I explain to him, "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..."

A dull pain resonates in my chest — directly in the center, where the ugly red scar used to be. It's not real, I remind myself. But a red haze begins to inch in at the corners of my vision. I blink rapidly several times. It's not real. God, I do need help.

"*Until you...?*" His kind voice probes my mind, requesting clarification. I swallow hard.

"Until I stop having these panic attacks, or anxiety attacks, or whatever they are."

He doesn't hide his concerns from me, although his thoughts are not directed clearly enough in fully formed sentences. Instead, I get snippets of half-formed ideas. How long will it be until I'm triggered again? And will he be strong enough to stop me once my powers return? These are his two main worries. The latter is an easy one.

*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.*

I've felt his power, and I know it to be true. Whether it's the times he's flown to the Sun to "power up" or just that he's really legitimately stronger than me, I can't say for sure, but I have no doubt that if needed, he can and will stop me from hurting Lois. Or someone else.

There is a hint of surprise in his expression at my assertion, and as I've felt on occasion, I get a strong sense of his respect for me. I almost shake my head; I want to remind him that I'm not deserving of his respect, that I've broken too many promises, that I'm broken. But at that moment, the door opens, and Lois peeks out, eyeing both of us questioningly.

"You okay out here? We should be leaving now if we're going to be on time for the staff meeting," she says, and I nod and try to reassure her with a smile, although I'm

probably the one who needs the reassurance right now, since I just admitted my biggest fears to my doppelganger, this better version of me.

“Yes, of course,” I manage. “I’ll be ready in just a minute.”

“Okay,” she replies. Her eyes see right through me, and I know she’s already formulating the many questions I’m going to have to answer on our drive into work today. I’ll answer them all. I will not keep things from her anymore. She seems to understand that now, and her gaze shifts to Clark as a small smile grows on her lips. “Thank you again, Clark. I’ll see you around.”

I blink as she disappears back into the apartment.

“I should probably…” My voice trails off, and I motion weakly toward the door.

“Yeah, of course. And, uh, don’t worry about — you know… I’ll stay nearby as much as I can, and I’ll keep an ear out.”

He shifts a bit, like he wants to say more, like he knows we have a lot more to talk about still. And we do, really. At the very least, I probably should have mentioned to him that Lois and I will be having a conversation about finding me professional help as well. However, now is not the time, and he seems to know that as well. So, he just waves with a sort of unconvincing half-smile and silently promises, “*I’ll be nearby.*” He then gives me a faint nod and turns toward the elevators.

*Thank you.*

He hears me and everything I haven’t said in those two simple words. As I reenter the apartment, Lois smiles at me from the kitchen, where she’s grabbing us each a bagel to eat on the way into work, and I breathe deeply, pushing away my fears and doubts.

I step over toward her, noticing for the first time the unwrapped gift sitting on the table. A book of poetry — a book I recognize as one she’s been trying to find for some time. I smile. Leave it to him to find probably one of the last copies of the rare anthology.

“Good talk?” Her tone is curious, but not demanding, and I tear my eyes away from the book to meet her gaze. I nod.

“Yeah, I’ll tell you about it on the way to work,” I promise, reaching out to take her hand. She smiles at me, filling me with love and warmth, and I pull her in for a brief but meaningful hug. My lips brush her cheek as my arms wrap around her lean frame. “Shall we?”

We separate, and she hands me a bagel, grabs her purse, and leads the way out of her apartment.

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Jimmy claps me on the back, clinks his champagne glass against mine, and lifts it to his lips, taking a long swig of the bubbly liquid as he meanders off across the newsroom, a copy of this morning’s paper in his hand. I sip my own drink slowly, savoring the familiar flavor and feel of the fizzy liquid, and I shift from my perch on the corner of Lois’s desk to gaze again at my fiancée, who stands near the coffee station, deep in conversation with Marcy Burns, the travel editor. I smile as I watch Lois’s animated features. She is relaxed and at home here. And she’s happy and comfortable with all the attention our story has gotten.

INTERGANG DISMANTLED! LUTHOR AND CHURCHES ARRESTED, by Lois Lane and Clark Kent. It’s a bold headline, especially written in all capital letters, at Perry’s insistence, Lois assured me. I’d argued, because that’s really not my style, but it was Perry’s decision. And it feels odd to be taking credit for the article. I did very little work on this story, after all. It was him and her. Sure, Lois Lane and Clark Kent. Ah, this is so confusing.

My hand tightens ever so slightly on the stem of my champagne flute, and I cautiously take another sip as Jimmy’s words echo in my head. As I’d learned the very first day I’d come home, my doppelganger doesn’t drink alcohol. Though he’s never told me specifically, I’ve gotten the sense it’s related to his parents’ car accident. In any case, I need to be aware of this difference and maybe only have this one glass. I lower my eyes to the amber liquid in my glass and watch as bubbles rise rapidly. How long until Jimmy or someone else notices that Clark Kent has mysteriously switched *back* to being left-handed as well? I chuckle to myself and stand as I swallow the rest of the champagne.

A few moments later, I settle into my seat at my own desk and switch on my computer. The party continues around me, and Lois remains off… somewhere, celebrating what will probably be the biggest story of the year — that is, excluding Superman’s return to Earth. I pull a small notebook out of the top drawer of my desk, grab a pencil, and start scribbling off ideas to outline our follow up story, which will be due this afternoon for the morning edition tomorrow. The chief of police is holding a press conference in an hour to brief the public and press on all the details of the pending case, and Lois and I intend to be front and center. I flip to the next page in the notebook, but pause as I see it is already filled with words, written in handwriting that is quite distinct from mine. I quickly scan the writing at the top of the page, my eyes widening as I realize the implications.

*Congress of Neurological Surgeons (October 6, 1995). 9:30 a.m. Rm 205, Suite A. Presenter: Dr. Sam Lane – MRI-guided focused ultrasound neurosurgery (MRgFUS)*

*in patients with Parkinson’s disease.*

Dr. Sam Lane.

Lois’s father.

There is a slip of paper stuck in under the page, and I pull it out. It’s an official press pass for the Congress of Neurological Surgeons. He’d actually attended Sam’s presentation.

Lois had never mentioned him meeting her parents. And, given my relationship with Sam — I cringe inwardly at the thought — I cannot understand how Sam had permitted this. But the evidence is here. The notes on the presentation, the press pass with his — my — name on it. Had he planned to write this up? It would be a great story, if all the pieces fell into place. Right up my alley, and connected well with an article I’d written last year sometime on the increased prevalence of Parkinson’s disease in the homeless population. A quick glance through the rest of the notebook shows mostly blank pages, with an occasional note here or there on some other story.

Two hands rest gently on my shoulders, and my fiancée’s lips brush lightly against my cheek.

“Whatcha working on? We should leave soon for the press conference.”

I nod absently and flip back to the page of notes from Sam’s presentation.

“Lois, what is — ” I swivel the chair around so that I’m facing her, and she straightens up abruptly, her eyes studying mine. I lower my voice. “Did Clark...attend a talk your father gave last month?”

Her eyes widen, and she looks down at the notebook in my hands, scanning the words on the page. Then, she nods and moves to sit on the edge of my desk.

“He, um, smoothed things out a bit, with my dad, that is, actually,” she admits quietly, dipping her head as she speaks as though she is embarrassed to confess this truth.

I can’t respond for a moment. Sam Lane hates me. Or, at least, he used to hate me. Not that it was my fault; no, it was a misunderstanding because of Superman.

“H-how? How is that possible?”

Lois glances up and around the newsroom hastily, and I sense she is deciding whether we should retreat to a conference room to discuss this. But with the ongoing celebrations, it seems unlikely that anyone will interrupt or overhear. Her eyes drift back to mine, and she smiles.

“He came to lunch with me and my parents when they were in town for a medical conference in early October. He’d just arrived two days before, and he offered to come with me. I think he knew I needed the support. Anyways, uh, of course he got called away on a...” She lowers her voice further. “...rescue, although he was only gone for a few minutes. My mom and dad were both livid, but poor

Clark, he had no idea why.”

“You hadn’t warned him?”

I find myself gripping the armrest of my chair a bit too tightly, and the plastic cracks underneath my fingers. Great, perfect time for me to be getting stronger. I relax my hold and consciously try to calm myself. Sam Lane doesn’t bring out the best in me, unfortunately.

Noticing how fragile my control is, Lois reaches out and takes one of my hands, squeezing gently. And then she shakes her head and drops her eyes to the floor for a moment.

“I completely forgot until it was too late. Maybe it was for the best though, because he was able to approach the situation without any history. He thinks quickly under stress, actually, and he surprised me, and my parents, I’m sure. When he returned from the res — from where he went, he probably heard my dad prattling on about, um, your incident — ”

I cough at her choice of words and shoot a look at her.

“My incident?”

“Well, yeah. I mean, well, Clark, you know what I mean,” she sighs. She shifts closer to me and moves to sit on my lap — not an uncomfortable position, I suppose, and my arm encircles her waist as I hug her to me.

“It wasn’t my fault when — ”

“I know, sweetheart,” she assures me, leaning into me a bit. “But my dad doesn’t know that, and we decided not to tell them. So from his perspective, you took off in the middle of our lunch and didn’t come back for an entire hour, when we were done eating, and then — ”

“I saved nearly three hundred people on that cruise ship,” I interject, feeling the need to defend myself. It’s dumb, I know. Lois doesn’t blame me and isn’t mad at me, not in the slightest. But I remember being completely blindsided by her father’s anger toward me when I’d returned to them leaving the restaurant, Lois nearly in tears.

“I know, sweetheart,” she repeats, her hand cupping my cheek. She bends down and kisses me lightly, then sits back up. “And you know I was crying because of *him*, not you. Anyways, Clark was only gone a few minutes, and when he got back, he...played into my father’s interests and managed to get him talking about his research work and the clinical trials he’d been working on. Clark linked it to that story you did last year, you remember?” I nod. “And somehow, he connected with my dad. Daddy offered for him to attend his presentation the next morning, and...I dunno, magic happened. He healed the rift between the two of you. I couldn’t believe it.”

I don’t believe it either.

But the evidence is right in front of me. He’s a miracle worker, this Clark Kent. Offering me yet another

something I didn't think I'd ever have — the acceptance of Lois's father.

She stands up, but I keep my arms around her waist, holding her tightly to me.

"We should probably get going," she says quietly, shifting back a step.

I nod and release her, and she moves to her desk, where she can grab her purse and coat. A few minutes later, we're walking briskly toward her Jeep, a comfortable silence between us, and she slips her hand into mine. I allow my fingers to play absently with the engagement ring she's still wearing, and I think back to when I'd left for New Krypton.

I'd never told her this, but her father had gotten wind that I was leaving before we'd actually announced it publicly. I think her sister Lucy might have told her mom, who told her dad. He'd called me the day before I'd left, while Lois had been finishing up some work at the office, and, for a good fifteen minutes, he'd yelled at me through the phone, his voice filled with rage. I'd sat silently on my couch, sometimes having to pull the phone away from my ear and wipe tears from my eyes, as he'd accused me of using her, betraying her, dishonoring her, cheating on her. How could I just up and leave her for a story, he'd asked me. Finally, she'd knocked on my door, and I'd told him I had to go, but that I hoped we could try to work things out when I returned. He'd screamed furiously into the phone one more time before hanging up on me, and I'd had to compose myself very quickly as I'd answered the door to let her in. That was my last memory of the man she calls 'Daddy.'

Yet somehow, Clark Kent is now respected enough by Dr. Sam Lane to be invited to hear him speak at a medical conference. Clark Kent is now worthy of Dr. Sam Lane's time. Nothing short of a miracle.

Lois lets my hand go and moves around to the driver's side of the car. On a whim, I jog up around and ahead of her and open the door for her. She gives me a crooked smile, which I return in kind, and then she leans in and kisses me, hard, before dropping down into her seat, a twinkle in her eye. I shut the door behind her and jog around to my side of the car.

Maybe I can learn a thing or two from this other Clark Kent.

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44

Her eyes smile at me, thick lashes blinking shyly as she drops her chin and giggles at whatever joke I told.

And I smile back.

My beautiful Lois.

Dinner is almost over; we're both comfortably full, and

the hour is late. Perfect. It had been perfect. As I reach forward with my fork to feed her the final bite of our shared dessert, I send a silent thank you to my doppelganger for allowing me to have the reservations he'd made for her birthday dinner. Her lips close over the small bite of strawberry and chocolate, and I'm suddenly feeling much too warm. She licks a bit of chocolate from the corner of her mouth and makes a low sound deep in her throat as she closes her eyes.

"So good," she breathes.

"God, Lois. Do you know what you're doing to me?"

Her smile grows knowingly, and she raises a hand up as our waiter passes by. "Can we get the check, please?"

The man nods and hurries off to print up our bill.

Five minutes later, we're again walking briskly toward her Jeep, but this time, my arm is looped around her waist, my fingers rubbing gentle circles against her hip.

And I again open the door for her. And she again kisses me, one warm hand pressing into my chest.

"Happy birthday, hon." I lean in and graze her cheek with my lips before hugging her to me.

And we head home to celebrate more in private.

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45

"Are you okay?"

The three simple words of his morning check-in echo in my mind. Every day at 9 a.m. for the last week, he's contacted me for a sort of wellness check. My typical response is short, usually something like, *Yep, doing fine. Maybe a bit stronger today.* Yesterday, I'd told him that my freezing breath had reemerged. A fairly innocuous superpower, not likely to accidentally hurt anyone. And the day before that, I'd noted some minor fluctuations in my vision abilities. However, like my superhearing, which had sort of activated a bit in the warehouse when Lois and I had been following Luthor, my vision abilities had disappeared again, leaving me blinking at the solid wall of the conference room behind my glasses.

Today something feels different though, and I don't answer him right away. Lois and I walk together, hand in hand, down the ramp and toward her desk. I cautiously monitor my grip on her, a terrifying sense that I'm going to hurt her overcoming me. I drop her hand from mine and move half a step away from her, pretending to suddenly be interested in my coffee. She stops in front of her desk and turns around to look at me. Our eyes meet, and she narrows her gaze at me briefly. I smile and sip my coffee.

*I'm fine. I think.*

"Do you want to get started on that article about the new high-speed train connecting Metropolis and Chicago, and I'll work on the warehouse fire?" she proposes,



reaching over to turn on her computer.

I nod a quick agreement and force myself to take a deep breath as I move the few feet across the aisleway to my own desk.

*“You think? Are you not sure?”*

I feel his concern and then sense that he is close by, hovering up above the Planet. He gently prompts me to let him deeper into our connection, but I push back.

*Sorry, yes. I’m fine, really. Just, something seems a bit...*

*“Off?”* he suggests, finishing my sentence.

Immediately, I sense his focus shift, and I hear a distinct sonic boom outside as he severs our connection. Several people around the newsroom comment on the rattle of the windows. Whispers of “Superman’s nearby,” and “Hope everything is okay,” circulate around the room.

A moment later, he allows our connection to reestablish, and I stare vaguely at my computer as I see the scene of a terrible car accident through his eyes. Three eighteen wheelers had crashed, one flipping over on its side in the middle of the highway. The driver is pinned in his seat, unable to move. Six other cars are piled up against the underbelly of the truck, and a fire begins to grow as gas leaks from the fuel tank of the overturned truck. With tremendous speed and care, he extracts all occupants of each of the vehicles and moves them to safety before extinguishing the fire with his freezing breath. I shudder as I “watch” the rescue unfold, all the while hearing his thoughts, which jumble around in his head at superspeed.

I close my eyes.

*Good job. That could have been really bad,* I communicate to him, interrupting his train of thought only when I know no one else is in harm’s way. I hear a brief acknowledgement, but he stays focused on his task, and I drop the connection again so he can concentrate.

A hand gently rests on my shoulder, and I flinch involuntarily as I open my eyes again. Lois stands next to me now and points at one of the televisions up on the wall. It shows him, Superman, flying back and forth, working to clear the vehicles from the highway, then transporting victims to the hospital. Police, firefighters, and several ambulances have arrived on the scene. I nod absently and reach an arm out around her, again careful with the pressure I apply, frightened of having an unwanted and unexpected surge of strength hit me while I’m touching her. But nothing happens. Together, along with half of the newsroom, we watch Superman continue to aid the emergency workers to clear the wreck.

“Judas Priest, it’s a good thing he’s back,” Perry’s voice bellows from across the room. “Jimmy! Hurry and get down there. Maybe you can catch a few photos and get quotes from the first responders.”

“Sure, Chief, right away,” Jimmy calls out. He grabs his camera and sprints up the ramp toward the elevators as Perry disappears back into his office, the door slamming behind him.

“Is Superman...is he okay?” Lois asks quietly, sitting on the edge of my desk and crossing her legs. I rest one hand on top of hers and give her a weak smile.

“Yes. We were, uh, checking in when the crash happened. He was there instantly. No one died,” I explain.

She nods. She knows about our daily check-ins. I’d told her about our plan the first day, the morning of her birthday, just as I’d promised him I would. And she’s been supportive and helpful, as I’d expected.

From behind me, I hear a low whistle. Lois tenses as her eyes dart up toward the sound, and I twist in my chair.

“Lois, Lois, Lois, is that a new skirt? Wow, I like.”

Ralph MacDonald inches closer, a smirk on his face as he stares brazenly at her legs. He growls a bit and then reaches down and adjusts himself in his pants. Heat and anger grow in my chest as I shift in front of Lois, blocking his view of her. He just laughs and wiggles his eyebrows at her.

“I’m sure if Kent doesn’t appreciate it, I can show you a good time, Lo-Lo.”

And just like that, something inside me snaps. Seething, I lunge at him with maybe a bit more speed than is normal. He jumps back, but I grab the lapels of his jacket and push him into the wall with a satisfying thud.

“You crossed a line there, Ralph,” I hiss, shoving at him again.

“Clark, sweetheart, it’s okay. I’m fine — ”

“Yeah, yeah, Kent, y-you should l-listen to her,” Ralph stutters, holding his hands up in a sort of placating gesture of surrender.

“Shut up, Ralph,” Lois warns. Gusts of wind seem to flail around me as my vision turns red. The wind roars in my ears, and I barely hear Lois’s pleading voice. “Clark, sweetie, please, let him go.”

My hands tighten on his jacket, and he grunts at the pressure of my fists against his ribcage. My anger continues to bubble up and over. But then Lois presses a firm hand into my chest, and I allow my eyes to shift to her.

“Clark, it’s okay. He’s just an idiot,” she says.

“Yeah, yeah, Kent, you know, I-I’m just — ”

“Ralph!” Lois shushes him. She moves in between us, and my hands drop from his jacket as I growl at him angrily.

“Sheesh, Kent, you’d think you shouldn’t need your little woman here to keep you in check,” Ralph mutters. My hands ball up into fists, and I scowl at him as he straightens his jacket.

“Ralph, you just don’t know when to shut up, do you?” Lois retorts.

Her arm loops in mine, and she drags me away from the scene, pushing through the throngs of other reporters who have gathered around to watch. My vision is still red, and pain settles just behind my eyes. I follow her reluctantly, but I glance back toward Ralph, and he recoils at my glare.

“Hey, what’s going on there? Are you...is everything okay?” Clark’s concerned voice resonates in my mind as Lois leads me into the conference room and over to one of the chairs closest to the door.

Nothing. Fine. It’s under control, I respond shortly, lowering my head to my hands. I don’t want to admit to him that I almost lost myself. He knows anyways. Lois saved me this time, though I’m sure he would have stepped in if needed.

The red haze is fading now, and I feel comfort from Lois’s hand, which comes to rest on my back again.

“S-sorry, hon, I — ”

“It’s okay, Clark. Ralph deserved that. I should file a harassment complaint,” Lois says as her arms wrap around my shoulders.

I nod weakly and lean back into her, suddenly feeling quite tired.

“It doesn’t excuse...I need to be more in control, hon,” I concede. Closing my eyes, I contact Clark again, and I again sense that he is close by, finished with the wreck on the highway.

*Sorry, I shouldn’t have been so short with you, I apologize. Rubbing the bridge of my nose under my glasses, I add, Ralph made an inappropriate comment to Lois, and I got angry. My...reaction time is faster than it has been, and I’m definitely stronger. I don’t know how strong yet. But Lois helped me regain control. I’m... calmer now. Thanks for being nearby.*

Lois shifts her position to sit in the chair next to me, and she scoots up closer to me and settles her hands on my knees.

“Are you feeling okay now? You looked quite angry and...” She hesitates, her eyes lowering to her hands momentarily. “...strong.”

A loaded word if ever I heard one. Strong. Super. No, no. Ex-Super.

I nod again, rest my elbows on my knees, and bury my head in my hands with a sigh. Holding two separate conversations is draining.

“Ralph is a piece of work. I’ve almost lost my temper with him a couple time as well,” Clark admits, though I sense he’s just trying to lighten the mood. He’s suddenly distracted, however, and he continues hastily, “There’s a mudslide in Brazil. I should go, but I want to check that

*you’re okay first.”*

*Go, of course. I’m fine. Lois is here with me. I’ll be okay. Thank you, Clark. See you tonight.*

*“Yes, tonight. 7 p.m. should be fine, but I’ll let you know if I’m going to be late.”*

*You got it.*

His presence fades, and I recenter myself, focusing on Lois’s touch. She kisses the top of my head.

“S-sorry, I was — Clark is — ” I shake my head as my thoughts refuse to form into complete sentences. The power I’d felt earlier seems to again have seeped away, leaving me exhausted. I force a deep breath. “It’s hard to carry on two conversations at once. I — Clark is headed to Brazil now, though. A mudslide. He says Ralph almost made him lose control a few times as well.”

I manage to raise my eyes slightly to look up at her, and she gives me a weak smile.

“He’s been a nuisance ever since you left over the summer,” she divulges. “Although I don’t understand why he seems like he’s getting bolder, now that you’re back. Even in the last month.”

“You should report him,” I say, echoing her earlier thoughts. Then I clear my throat. “I have been feeling more power today. It’s as though there’s something, a force, growing deep inside me, and I...I have to be very careful that it doesn’t surge up when I’m not expecting.” Both of her hands rub up my forearms gently, and I continue. “The feeling is gone now, like I used up the energy. But, I’m a bit worried. So...” She drops another kiss on the top of my head and then rests her cheek against me. “So if I stay a bit distant today — I mean, physically — it’s because I’m concerned and don’t want to hurt you.”

“I understand, sweetie. Thank you for your honesty.”

She’s said that a lot recently. “Thank you for your honesty.” As though I’m doing something noble by not hiding from her. It’s not noble, though. It’s the least I can do. The absolute minimum, really. Especially since I promised her.

And I suppose this incident also serves to emphasize how much we need to make it a priority to find me a therapist. We’d started a serious discussion about it earlier in the week, but we still hadn’t made any major decisions.

I make a mental note to bring it up again later, when we have a few uninterrupted minutes. Tomorrow maybe. Then I nod and sit up straighter. She copies me, and our eyes meet as I blink back my concerns and fears and maybe a couple stray tears that threaten to fall. She gives me another small smile, and I reach up to touch her cheek carefully. Her skin is soft and warm, yet I shiver. My eyes close again tightly, and I pull my hand away.

“I had a nightmare last week. My powers were coming back, and I...hurt you when I...lost control of myself.” I

don't mean to make this admission, but it slips out. A light scraping of wood against the floor is followed quickly by her arms enveloping me. Her breath feels hot against my neck, and I allow myself to lean into her. "I don't want to hurt you, Lois. I'm...scared."

"I'm here, sweetheart," she soothes. Gentle as always. Loving and kind. She has the most beautiful soul. God, I love her.

My breath catches in my throat, but I manage to kiss her cheek, again carefully, and tell her quietly, "I love you."

Another three simple words. But loaded with so much more meaning. She repeats them to me, and then, she pulls me to my feet, and we get back out into the bullpen. Back to work.

For the rest of the day at least, Ralph is sure to keep his distance. Maybe he's not quite as stupid as we thought.

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#### 46

The dinner had been his idea. He'd wanted to give me the first draft of the memoir, which he'd already finished writing, as well as discuss some of the logistics of him staying here on our world. And thankfully, his Superman duties don't keep him busy all day. I say thankfully because Lois is right — wow, he can cook! Chicken piccata, sautéed spinach, and homemade egg noodles in a light garlic sauce.

My jealousy at his skill lasts only for a few moments, and then I just feel appreciative. And pleasantly full.

"Clark, this all tastes amazing. Maybe you can teach me to cook," I suggest with a lopsided smile. I shove the final bite of chicken into my mouth, and next to me, Lois laughs.

"Sweetheart, I don't think that even Superman can help with a task that monumental!"

She pats me gently on the back and then sips her wine, her eyes twinkling as she glances across the table at my doppelganger. My eyes follow hers to where he sits, a comfortable smile on his face.

He's much more relaxed this evening than I ever remember seeing him, although I know he'd been flying around all over the globe earlier in the day. He'd dealt with that traffic accident, then the mudslide in Brazil, followed by a hostage situation in Mexico City and what would have been a nasty train wreck in Toronto if he'd been just a few minutes later. But he always seemed to get where he was needed on time.

"You're probably right, Lois," I laugh, sitting up a bit taller and pushing my plate back from the edge of the table a bit. "My mom tried to teach me growing up, but it seems like the more I try, the worse I get. Who taught you to

cook, Clark?"

Lois sets a hand on top of mine and then empties the last of her wine. Across the table from us, Clark runs a hand through his hair and then takes a quick sip of his tea.

"Uh, well, Mom did teach me a little, although I was too young before the accident to really learn. Mostly, I picked up a lot of what I know during my travels. And then it's just a matter of experimenting and, uh, taste testing."

He absently taps his fingers and then stands to clear the table. I move to help, and within a few minutes, the table is cleaned and the dishes are washed. Lois and I then settle together on the couch with refilled wine glasses. Clark takes a seat in the armchair across from us, and we chat idly for a few minutes. Then, Lois clears her throat and scoots to the edge of the couch. Clark and I both shift to watch her as she first meets my eyes and then Clark's.

"I speak for both of us, Clark, when I say thank you again. For everything. For this wonderful meal. For helping both of us without question, without hesitation," she says, her voice filled with sincerity and gratitude. I nod and lift my arm up around her shoulders.

"Definitely. I know we've said it before, but we'll keep saying it. Thank you," I add.

Humbly, he nods an acknowledgement and lowers his eyes to his mug, which he grips maybe a bit too tightly. He's not used to being praised or thanked, I glean from his jumbled thoughts. He's not hiding them from me, but I'm also not really trying to pry. It's just part of our connection. He raises his eyes and smiles at both of us.

"I appreciate — I, uh —" His voice catches, and he looks down again, inhaling sharply.

*We know*, I tell him silently. He nods, and I squeeze Lois's shoulder gently as she settles against me a bit.

"However we can help to make you feel at home here, Clark, if there is anything you need, anything we can do, just let us know. Okay?" Lois says.

Clark nods again, stands, and stuffs his hands into the pockets of his jeans. I remove my arm from around Lois and scoot closer to the edge of the couch as he begins to pace the room a bit, his earlier relaxation replaced with anxiety and our earlier connection severed. His thoughts are now a mystery to me, and I frown slightly as I sense the strong barrier he's put up. Lois places her hand on my back, and her eyes follow him as he moves from one end of the room to the other. Finally, he stops and faces us, but still doesn't look up.

"I think you probably both know this already, but I just want to be perfectly clear that, um, that I don't want to go back. If at all possible, I'd really like to stay here." His admission is quiet but solid. He doesn't allow himself to pause for long. "You have both made me feel welcome here, and although it's been a challenge to adjust the last

couple weeks — um, that is, being Superman but not publicly being Clark Kent anymore — I, um...” He takes a deep breath and glances up at us briefly before continuing. “Even that is vastly better than how I was living on my Earth. I had no one there. No one to talk to, no one to be myself with. No Lois Lane...” He smiles weakly at her as their eyes meet. “No Martha and Jonathan Kent.” His jaw tightens again as he mentions my parents, but his thoughts remain inaccessible to me. Then his eyes shift to me. “No one who possibly understands what it is like to be me. An alien. All alone.”

He turns away from us for a moment, and I feel a hint of his loneliness trying to claw its way out from the barrier he’s erected around his thoughts. It’s profound. And overpowering. I drop my head into my hands as he lets me feel it. Lois senses something, although I’m sure she cannot know the extent of it, and she gently rests a hand on my knee. I cover her hand in mine and raise my eyes again. He is watching me now, almost apologetically.

*I understand. You are welcome here. We have already agreed that you should stay.*

He nods at my acknowledgement and blinks several times.

“If it’s not too much to ask, I would also really like to be able to stay here. In this apartment, I mean, if that is okay with both of you.” His nervousness grows again, and he reaches up with his left hand to rub the back of his neck. “It’s so well suited to being able to come and go undetected from the balcony. For Superman, of course. And the location is perfect, near the park and close to downtown and everything. And I think the little bit of familiarity is nice too. But, um, I understand if — ”

“The apartment is yours, Clark,” I say quickly, interrupting his rambling. Lois’s hand grips my knee, and I realize my mistake immediately. “I mean, if — ”

“It’s yours, Clark,” she confirms, smiling up at me as I turn my head slightly toward her. “We’re happy sharing my place.”

A tentative smile grows on his face as he regards both of us.

“Thank you both,” he breathes. He moves back to the armchair and sits heavily, leaning back into the plush cushions for a moment before sitting up straight again.

“I would like a chance to go through all of my stuff,” I admit quietly, allowing myself to glance around the apartment.

My journalism awards are still on display on the shelves near the bookcase, and then there’s the painting from my mom on the wall, and I don’t want to leave behind many of the books I’d acquired on my travels. My eyes settle on a small wooden box sitting next to a green ceramic vase on an otherwise empty shelf of the bookcase,

and as though something is compelling me, I stand up and move across the room toward it. Reaching up above my head to the top shelf, I slide my fingers between two books and pull out a tiny silver key. After a brief glance over my shoulder at Lois and Clark, I unlock and open the box and carefully grasp the softball-sized blue and red globe, which hums to life at my touch. I feel Clark move up behind me, curiosity and trepidation radiating off of him in waves.

*“What is that?”*

*It is Krypton,* I explain. I turn toward him and hold the globe in one hand, up to about shoulder height, so he can see. He stares at it, and I feel it pulse with energy as though sensing his presence like it does mine.

“C-can I...?” His question does not fully form, but I nod and offer the sphere to him. He takes it from me almost reverently, cradling it in both hands. “This — this is what Krypton looked like?” He raises his eyes to mine, and I nod in response. “Before it...?” I nod again. “Where did you...?”

It’s a good thing I know him well, since he cannot seem to finish a sentence.

“It was with the spaceship I came to Earth in. My parents kept both the spaceship and the globe hidden in a cellar under the barn. The globe activated for the first time when I turned seventeen. There was a message from my biological father, Jor-El. He told me about Krypton and why they had to send me away.” I pause as I watch his reaction, but he just continues to stare dumbfounded at the small object, which now pulses with an indistinct rhythm in his hands. “You didn’t have a globe?” I ask hesitantly.

He shakes his head slowly, not taking his eyes off the object.

Then, without warning, it rises up out of his hands, and a bright light flashes, enveloping both of us in a swath of white warmth. Our eyes adjust to the brightness, and we both take an involuntary step backwards as two figures emerge from a fog just in front of us. I immediately recognize Jor-El and Lara, my biological parents, whom I’d seen in the original visions the globe had sent to me. However, this vision is nothing like those visions... Jor-El and Lara step right up to us and raise their hands up in front of them, both palms up, in a familiar Kryptonian greeting. Familiar to me, that is, since I’d spent three months on New Krypton. I return the gesture, and Clark, despite being completely in awe of what is happening, manages to copy me.

Jor-El’s eyes meet mine — another divergence from my previous visions with the globe, which had been nothing more than prerecorded holographic messages — and Lara steps up to Clark and reaches her hands up to rest one palm against each of his cheeks. He swallows tightly as she smiles at him and then steps back to her husband.

“My son,” Jor-El says, clearly addressing me. “You have been on a long journey. You have seen the results of Krypton’s attempt to save its culture. You have seen the failures of that culture. And now you have returned to Earth a different man.” He pauses and glances to Clark, who is still mesmerized by the sight of Lara. “You also have a new friend, who has not experienced the atrocities you have.” The words flow around us, seeming to take up the empty white space in the room, and a sudden feeling of unbearable weight presses down on me.

“Y-yes, Father. He has traveled from another universe, and he is here to help us,” I manage. What else can I say? How does his hologram know what happened to me?

Jor-El nods and then shifts his attention to Clark again.

“Lara and I knew of the existence of multiple universes. However, despite all of our scientific advancements, our people never harnessed the technology necessary for interdimensional travel. We are glad you are here to help our son. But I sense you have been on quite a journey yourself and that you have not had contact with your own Knowledge Sphere.” He pauses and regards Clark, waiting for an answer.

Still in a daze, it takes Clark a second to realize that Jor-El is waiting for him to respond. But then he nods tensely.

“Right. That — that’s right. I-I didn’t know about any globe — Knowledge Sphere, I mean,” he fumbles, his voice shaking. His hands travel back into his pockets, and he glances nervously at me for a moment.

Lara smiles at him with a kindness not unlike that of my mom.

“You are a good man and will do amazing things,” she tells him. She steps back until she and Jor-El are standing shoulder to shoulder. “I am thankful that you are here to help my son.”

“Th-th-thank you,” he stutters.

Jor-El places his arm around Lara in a clear gesture of his love for her, and then he smiles at the two of us standing before him. How is it that they are so different from the Kryptonians I met on my journey? They love each other, openly. They show emotions. They seem to value life.

“Be well, Kal-El, my son,” Lara says to me. Kal-El. The name that I’d come to loathe. And yet, when she uses it, I feel only love. A mother’s love.

I smile.

“Thank you, Mother.”

“And be well, Kal-El from beyond this universe.” Lara again smiles softly at my doppelganger. “You have a lot to give, but never forget that those around you care about you and that you can rely on them as much as they rely on you.” Her eyes shift to me and then back to Clark, and she

addresses both of us with her final parting words. “True friendship is always a gift worth living for.”

“Th-thank you, Lara,” Clark murmurs.

The silence that follows his words grows as the white light begins to fade around us. And a moment later, the colors of the apartment shift back into focus. The globe lowers into my hands, and the pulsing energy wanes until the small sphere no longer glows.

Next to me, Clark’s breathing becomes erratic, and he slumps into the closest armchair and buries his head in his hands. Lois still sits on the couch, but her concerned eyes dart to him and then to me.

“You didn’t see that vision?” I ask her, although I already know the answer. She shakes her head in confirmation, and I nod back.

I step back toward the bookshelves and begin to set the globe back into its box.

*Are you okay? I had no idea that was going to happen,* I communicate to my doppelganger.

I feel his distress now, although it’s not the same as before. No, I realize quickly. It’s more of a sensation of being completely stunned, dazed, in awe. He has no idea what to think. How to feel. How to react.

I turn around to face him, and he’s watching me, almost in anguish.

He tears his eyes away from me and stares at the box.

“*I don’t know,*” he confesses. “*That was a lot to take in. Lara was...beautiful.*”

He suddenly stands up again and moves toward the kitchen, grabbing his tea as he goes.

“Do — do you want more wine, Lois? Or coffee? Or — or anything?”

“No, thank you, Clark. I’m not finished with my wine yet,” she answers. Our eyes meet, and she frowns as she pushes herself up off the couch. She steps over to me, plants a gentle kiss on my cheek, and then says quietly in my ear, “I’m going to go talk to him. Can you just give us a few minutes?”

As she pulls back, I give her a weak smile and nod. Then I lean in and use the same pretense she just had, kissing her on the cheek before whispering back a short explanation.

“The globe showed us Jor-El and Lara, and they actually spoke with us and addressed our situation here. Clark didn’t have a globe of his own. He’d never seen them before.”

I kiss her cheek again and then step out of her way so she can follow him to the kitchen. I settle on the couch and watch as she approaches him, rests a hand gently on his shoulder, and whispers kind words to him as his body shakes with emotion. Then I lower my eyes and purposefully avoid eavesdropping on his thoughts as she

embraces him warmly.

True friendship is an incredible thing, really.

Somehow, despite all the mess of the last few days, the last few weeks, the last few months, the three of us share that now — true friendship. And I feel it. I feel it overcoming his loneliness and my darkness.

Where there was isolation, there is now companionship.

Where there was fear, there is now assurance.

Where there was despair, there is now hope.

I sip my wine and raise my eyes to watch her wipe away tears from his cheeks and smile at him. Her smile brightens up the room.

She is hope. My hope, his hope, our hope. She is the anchor that holds us, that heals us, that grounds us.

He nods at whatever she tells him, and they hug again. Yes, now there is hope.

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#### 47

“Clark, I just think you’re off base a bit here,” Lois argues, settling at her desk and motioning to me to pull up a chair. She sets her coffee down and twists in her chair to look at me as I sit. “The union rep said that they expect the contract to be signed this afternoon. Why would he mislead us?”

We’ve been going around in circles discussing this for the last thirty minutes, and her patience seems to be wearing thin. And I’m feeling frustrated as well. For the first time since I started working again about two weeks ago now, I almost wish we could be working on separate stories.

I reach out and take her hand in mine as I consider how to respond. I’ve already given her my reasons for suspecting that the dock workers are about to strike, regardless of what the union rep is telling us. And she’s already argued her point. My thumb absently rubs circles on the back of her hand, and I stare down at the smooth skin as I think.

“If that’s the case, why can’t they give us any details of the agreement that they have supposedly reached? And why won’t they let any of the workers talk to the press?” I repeat my argument from earlier, but I don’t look up to meet her eyes, and I can feel her intense gaze on me. It’s weak, I know — repeating the same point. But it’s honestly that and a gut feeling. Reporter’s intuition, she’s called it.

She shakes her head. “I just don’t see it.” Her voice betrays her exasperation, and she sighs as she pulls her hand out of mine gently and turns on her computer.

A familiar voice in my head unobtrusively tells me, “*The memoir is done. I’m sending the draft to your email*

*now.*”

I try to hide my agitation from him as I watch Lois open up the story we’ve been working on and scroll to the bottom of the document. However, a weak pulsing pain just behind my eyes distracts me, and I know he senses that something is not quite right. I close my eyes as he gently inquires, “*Everything okay? Do I need to stop by?*”

I take a deep breath and try to calm myself. The last thing he needs is to worry about me when Lois and I are just having a little argument. Nothing else is wrong. I think.

*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,* I respond, maybe a bit more abruptly than I should.

The clicking of the keys on Lois’s keyboard seems to rattle my skull, and I reach out to still her hand for a moment as I sever the connection with Clark. Immediately, I feel her hand rest on my back.

“Are you okay?” she asks quietly.

I nod as I try to push away my unease. I pull back my hand and open my eyes so I can read her screen again. She’s written several sentences where we’d left off earlier this morning, detailing the comments from the union representative.

“I think we should hold off on this. I really think in the next hour or two, they are going to announce a strike,” I reason, sitting up tall and trying to maintain my composure as the pain behind my eyes grows stronger. The words on the screen blur, and I blink several times as I shift my gaze to my fiancée. She’s no longer scowling; no, it’s more of a grimace now.

“Clark, we’re not going to publish anything until their announcement anyways. I’m just trying to write what I think will be the most likely outcome to get a jump on the story,” she grumbles. “We have to leave to get down to Metropolitan Harbor for their announcement in a few minutes, and I just wanted to — ”

She stops talking as I close my eyes again, take a deep breath, and rub the bridge of my nose under my glasses. The pain is growing, a sort of throbbing ache, and spots begin to dance around, even in the semi-darkness I see when my eyes are closed. I struggle to remember what we are even arguing about. It doesn’t really even matter, does it? Probably not. God, this hurts.

“Okay, Lois, that’s fine. We’ll — ”

The throbbing ache suddenly explodes between my eyes, and the dancing spots turn into a diffuse red tint. I screw my eyes shut tightly and lower my head into my hands as I suppress a groan. I try to form words. To explain to her what is happening. But I’m not entirely sure I know what’s happening. Do I?

“Clark...?”

I’ll be okay. I’ve felt this before. It’s just... God, it hurts. Did it hurt this much the first time? Such a long time ago now. I think it did. But my thoughts are fuzzy right now.

Lois. She is concerned. And Clark — I can feel him hovering above us. He is nearby to help. He is concerned. And he knows too. The red haze is not a remnant from New Krypton. It is deadly hot laser beams trying to escape from my eyes. I blink back the pain and the redness as I shake my head. Lois.

“I-I’m fine, Lois. It’s just a headache,” I explain, my voice trembling. I hope I’m not lying to her. It is a headache, but am I fine? The pain is now accompanied by heat, and the redness flickers darker, stronger. I cover my eyes with my hands and desperately try to control it. Or try to even remember how I used to control it.

Her hand touches my back again, pressing gently into me, and from a thousand feet above us, Clark tells me, “*I’m here.*”

I am not alone.

But I can’t control it.

I press my hands stronger against my eyes, but I feel the heat begin to radiate. I shake my head again. Please go away. I don’t want this superpower. I — God, it hurts.

“Clark, you don’t seem fine, sweetheart. Should we —”

I cut her off and scoot my chair back as I lower my head down between my knees.

“Lois, I need to —”

My hands squeeze my head as the pain grows again, and I groan. Her arm grabs mine and pulls me up. I keep my eyes screwed tightly shut, but I sense as she leads me through the maze of desks and into one of the conference rooms, helps me sit, and shuts the door. Blindly, I grasp the table and pull myself closer until I can rest my elbows on the thick wood surface. I then remove my glasses and lower my head into my hands.

This is bad.

I can control it. Right? My heat vision. I don’t even want it. It’s destructive. And angry. It feeds my anger. I feel it — the heat, the energy, the malice — surging, wanting, demanding. Demanding to be released. But, no. I can’t. Not here. God, what do I do? Holding it back hurts. Letting it out would hurt her. And others.

“What’s going on, Clark?” Lois’s kind voice breaks through the pain and fear. I feel her hands on my knees. A gentle squeeze to remind me I’m not alone.

That’s right. Not alone.

He’s here. Right?

“Can’t control it. Need help,” I blurt out. If he’s here, he’ll hear me. He’ll help me. He said he would always help

me. And he’ll protect her from me. I grip the sides of my head again as the pain from my eyes shudders and stabs and pricks its way around my skull, and my hands then move back to cover my eyes again as it screams to be let out. The energy, the power, the destruction. Please help me, Clark. Superman.

*I can’t control it. I don’t want to hurt anyone.*

He’s next to me, his hand on my shoulder now. When did he get here? It doesn’t matter. We have no time. Now. Get me out of here.

A strong arm grasps my waist, and wind is suddenly whipping around us. My feet hit the ground, snow crunching underneath my loafers. I don’t know where we are, and I don’t much care. All that matters is that I sense from him that I’m safe to let it out, so I do.

I uncover my eyes and stop trying to hold it back. The energy flows bright and hot, and through the red beams, I see a white landscape, towering snow-topped mountains, and a huge crevasse growing in front of us where my heat vision is focused. The destructive force melts thick layers of snow and ice. I try to blink it back, to stop it, but I can’t. It’s too powerful, and I’m not strong enough anymore. I growl in frustration, but that just serves to feed its power.

Fire.

Heat.

Pain.

Death.

Death. No, stop. Please, stop.

I can’t.

Then, from behind me, a solid hand sets on my shoulder, and a sense of incredible calm washes over me. A sense of control. Focus. Steadiness and certainty.

He is lending me his strength, just like the first day he’d brought me from the Sun.

I breathe in deeply and will the heat to stop. Slowly, the intensity of the energy shooting from my eyes wanes, and I blink several times as the redness fades away. In front of me, steam rises from the newly created fissure in the snow and ice. Water drips down the edges of the ice. So destructive. Too powerful.

*“The fear cannot control you because you can control the power,”* he thinks to me.

I fall to my knees, exhausted, my hands sinking into the cold snow. My heart pounds in my chest, and my breathing is rapid and irregular. Superman shifts behind me, his aura of power and strength reminding me of what I need to be to keep those around me safe. I have to control my anger and my fear and my frustration.

I can control it.

Unlike several days ago, when my strength manifested and then receded again, I can feel the power of my heat vision is still with me now. Tappable. Reachable. Usable.

But I will control it.

He is right. It will not control me.

I let out a long breath and push myself back up to my feet.

“Th-thank you,” I mumble. My hands feel numb with cold. How odd, the order in which my powers are reemerging — I’m still not invulnerable. I’m freezing. Yet I can now shoot heat lasers from my eyes. I shake my head and start to brush the snow off my trousers. “I thought I could handle it by myself, but...”

“No problem,” he assures me.

A memory surfaces, and I glance up at my brightly clad companion as I run a hand through my hair. The first time this deadly superpower had emerged. It had been terrifying. Was it the same for him? I stand up taller and cross my arms over my chest, mimicking his stance. And then I quietly tell him my story.

“I was 14 when I first got my heat vision. 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.” I hesitate as I recall the fear that had clouded my ability to control my power. Shaking, I add, “I nearly burned down the barn. Scared my parents to death.”

My eyes raise to meet his, and he nods in acknowledgement, but I sense a reluctance and uncertainty on his part now. He lowers his eyes to the ground and kicks at the snow with his boot.

“I was 12,” he starts, his voice low and unsure. “The foster family I was staying with at the time, uh, they...”

He doesn’t want to tell me. But not because he is embarrassed of the memory itself. No, I sense it’s just too painful, looking back on that part of his life. His eyes close, and I feel his memory pull me in.

I’m him. A short, thin woman with jet black hair and too much makeup on screams profanities at a tall, overweight middle-aged man, who reeks of alcohol. The man is home late, and he has been drinking. They argue. Loudly. Yelling indistinct words at each other with angry red faces. The sounds are overwhelming, hurting my ears. I reach up and cover them, but it does little to stop the barrage of sounds. A plump brown dog races into the room, barking at the man, and he kicks it viciously. It yelps and races out. I stand and start to leave; the barn outside should provide some quiet or at least allow me to focus my hearing on something — anything — else. But a rough hand grabs my shoulder, trying to stop me from leaving, and the man then turns me toward him. He lowers his face to me, only inches away, and I back up, nearly

tripping over a wrinkle in the carpet. His hand tugs on my shoulder, bringing me back closer to him, and he yells right in my face, spittle catching in his overgrown beard. *Leave me alone! Leave me! Let me go!* The thoughts are overpowering, painful, angry. The anger is directed not only at this man — this horrible man — but also at the woman, and the world, and most of all at the drunk driver who’d killed my parents.

God, no, *his* parents. This is *his* memory. I feel myself shudder as the vision continues.

Using all my strength, I push myself out of his grip and rush out of the house, to the barn. Redness clouds my vision. Pain grows behind my eyes. The barn doors open and then close, and then, red beams of intense heat blast from my eyes, and the barn erupts into flames. I panic, try to blink it to a stop, and raise my hands up in front of my eyes, which painfully burns my palms but does nothing to obstruct the heat. I drop to my knees and cry out to my mom and dad to help me. But they don’t come. They can’t come. They are not here.

I am alone.

And I alone must control it. With everything I possess, all of my strength and willpower and resolve, I force myself to breathe deeply. I feel an embrace from my mom. A proud pat on the back from my dad. I hear his laughter. I see her smile. And the heat fades. Tears stream from my eyes.

Loud voices from behind me scream my name, but I ignore them as the flames leap from the hay stack to the ceiling. Rafters fall. Smoke envelops me. Two large hands grab my shoulders and pull me out of the burning building, then shove me onto the ground outside in the darkness. Several minutes later, sirens wail, followed by more yelling and voices asking me rapid-fire questions. Did I start the fire? What happened? Why are my hands blistered? But I can’t answer.

The memory jumps ahead a day, when I’m removed from the home and taken to a new home. Disoriented. My hands bandaged. The new family wary of me and my past. The stories that have started to follow me wherever I go. This is, after all, my fifth foster home in only two years.

*His.* This is *his* memory, I remind myself again. God, how awful.

He stops sharing abruptly, and I feel him shift away from me, the pain evident in his stance.

“Oh, man, that’s rough,” I say quietly.

“Yeah, it wasn’t my best day.” He laughs, but there is a bitterness to it that is unfamiliar to me. Scuffing his boots into the packed snow again, he pushes away the ugliness of those memories and firmly plants himself in the here and now. “Are you good? In control now? Maybe you can test it,” he suggests, raising his eyes to meet mine.



Right.

Yes, I can control it. I feel it. But it is better to confirm that out here, in the middle of...wherever we are...safely away from anyone who could be injured if I'm not really in control. With a scowl, I turn away from him and find an undisturbed patch of snow. I then narrow my focus to a single point, will the heat to release from my eyes, and watch through red-tinted vision as a small hole grows in the ice, steam rising up. With an ease that comes from years of practice, I shut it off, blink a couple times, and then turn back to him and smile weakly.

"I'm good now." A bitter cold breeze causes me to shiver, and I tuck my hands under my arms to try to keep warm. He is of course unperturbed by the frigid temperatures. My smile turns into a grimace again, and I explain, "Although I'm still not completely invulnerable, and it's freezing out here, so maybe we can get back to Metropolis?"

An expression of guilt crosses his face, as though he feels he should have anticipated my discomfort. "Right, of course," he says quickly. With a lopsided grin, he steps toward me, lifts me with one arm around my waist, and then launches us up into the air.

As we soar south, over miles and miles of deserted forests, steep mountain ranges, and glaciers, I absently wish I could fly of my own power again. That is the superpower I miss the most.

I hear him agree with me silently as we swoop down toward the open window of the Daily Planet's newsroom and straight into the conference room, where Lois waits.

Yep, flying is definitely the best superpower. I actually look forward to that one returning. He releases me, and Lois shuts the door behind us, rushes to my side, and wraps her arms around me. And I forget everything else as I allow her hug to comfort me.

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48

Forty-five minutes later, I hold the door to the taxi open as Lois exits the vehicle, shouldering her purse. I glance up at the Daily Planet globe and then loop my arm through hers, and together, we walk through the revolving doors into the lobby.

"So, you were right. The dock workers are officially on strike," she says unenthusiastically. She reaches out and presses the 'up' button to call the elevator. Her smile gives her away though, and I wrap my arms around her from behind as she leans back into me.

"Hmm, Lois Lane admitting she was wrong. Can I quote you on that?" I joke, lowering my lips to kiss her neck. She inhales sharply and tilts her head sideways, exposing more of her soft, pale skin.

"Hmm, maybe. Since that's the only time you'll ever —"

I don't hear whatever she says after that. My head raises up off her shoulder as my stomach lurches. An overpowering sense of dread hits me, pressing on me, weighing me down. I feel her shift in my embrace and try to pull me toward the elevator, but I don't move.

Something is wrong. Something is very wrong.

"Clark, come on," she insists, her hand tugging on me.

I shake my head and pull my hand out of hers. I'm trembling now. Badly. My knees wobble, and I force myself to move toward a bench seat a few feet from the elevator. Barely aware of my surroundings, another strange sensation washes over me, and I feel dizzy and nauseous. I collapse onto the bench.

Him. Something is wrong. I connect with him automatically and sense that he is hovering high up above Metropolis. He felt it too. His heart is racing, and his superhearing is desperately searching, trying to find whatever it is that has caught our attention.

*What's going on?* I ask urgently. I feel Lois grip my arm next to me, but I don't see her. I see what he sees. He rises up higher, extends his senses out even farther, beyond Metropolis, beyond New Troy, beyond the eastern seaboard.

"*I don't know,*" he admits. He turns around above the clouds, his hearing filtering thousands or even millions of sounds, scanning. "*I just —*"

Then he hears something. Something that hits him like an asteroid. Or worse. He loses altitude fast, but quickly recovers.

I blink as everything blurs, and I realize he's traveling so fast right now that I can't keep up with him. He seems to put up a bit of a barrier between us, and I can no longer see his vision or sense anything other than dread from him.

A heartbeat.

A heartbeat that stops.

"*Oh, God, no.*"

"Clark, what's wrong, sweetheart?" Lois sounds terrified next to me. I lean into her as I get a brief glimpse of his thoughts and then see an image of my dad, lying on his back on the floor in the kitchen of the farmhouse, my mom kneeling next to him with tears rolling down her cheeks.

The heartbeat has stopped.

No.

*Dad? God, no. Clark, what is going on?*

My mind's voice is surprisingly calm, though I feel anything but calm. Lois's hand clutches mine.

"Clark? You're scaring me," she whispers, a note of panic in her voice.

"M-my dad. My dad, Lois. S-something is wrong," I

mumble. The weight pressing down on my chest grows heavier, and I find myself struggling to breathe.

*“No, I won’t let him die,”* Clark thinks.

*Please don’t let him die.*

I screw my eyes shut, turn to Lois, and pull her into a tight embrace. Please be with me, hon.

Clark’s thoughts become a jumbled mess that I can no longer interpret, and so I sit there, on the hard, unwelcoming bench in the lobby of the Daily Planet building, clinging to my fiancée and waiting. Something is happening. He is moving fast, talking to someone, trying not to let fear overtake him.

*“He will not die.”*

It is a mantra repeating in his head. Over and over I hear it. I’m only vaguely aware of Lois next to me, rubbing my back now.

*“He will not die.”*

*Clark, what is happening?*

He seems to startle at my question, which is no longer delivered in a calm manner. My fear is growing, and I feel his as well. Valiantly, he tries to push his fear away. A nurse is talking to him, but I can’t make out what she is saying. I bury my head into Lois’s shoulder, and she holds me tighter.

*“One minute,”* he tells me.

I almost scream in frustration and fear. Then I hear his words as he tells a nurse about my father. *“His name is Jonathan Kent. 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.”*

God. I feel lightheaded, although I’m already sitting down, and I shudder.

*Please, Clark. I’m imagining the worst here, and I’m not sure what to do. What is going on?* I practically beg him now. I sense he is flying again, and then I feel my mom’s presence with him. Finally, he pauses as he lets me see my mother, her hands grasping her purse anxiously, a look of alarm in her eyes.

*“Your father went into cardiac arrest,”* he starts. He steps toward my mother. *“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.*

I can’t stop myself. I jump up off the bench and pull Lois with me. Dragging her over to the elevator, I wipe a stray tear from my cheek, slam the ‘up’ button, and watch impatiently for the elevator doors to open. Lois holds me tightly still, and I steal a glance at her. Her eyes are full of concern, and I realize she has no idea what is going on.

“H-he — my dad, he — he had a heart attack. Clark got him to the hospital,” I tell her, my voice trembling with fear.

“Oh, God, sweetheart.” She hugs me, and I immediately feel a tiny bit of relief. The elevator doors ding open, and she ushers me inside. She starts to push the button to take us to the newsroom, but I reach out and stop her.

“The — the roof. Let’s go to the roof. He’ll come pick us up,” I explain. My hand shakes as I press the button for the top floor.

Lois nods and then encircles her arms around my waist again, and we stand together, holding each other, as the elevator rises up. We exit on the twentieth floor and take the stairs for the last few flights to the roof. The rain pounds down outside, but neither of us care. My mind races, and I begin a nervous pace back and forth, alternately pressing into Clark’s consciousness to see what is happening and forcing myself to breathe. Lois stands nearby, her coat pulled tightly around her.

After several more minutes, I hear his voice tell me, *“I’m on my way.”*

*We’re on the roof of the Planet.*

Hurriedly, I move over to where Lois stands and bury my head into her hair, which drips with water from the rain. I feel him flying toward us, and I shift to look up to the sky in the direction he’s flying in from. As the blue and red streak breaks through the clouds and comes to a quick stop in front of us, I tighten my hold again on my fiancée and lean on her slightly to avoid collapsing with fear.

Superman doesn’t look terribly super right now. His face is contorted with concern. He looks from me to Lois and then back again. Then he nods, and without another word, he wraps one arm around each of us, and the ground drops away as we rise up into the air, flying hastily in the direction of Wichita, Kansas.

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#### 49: Epilogue

“Mom, please remind Dad that the doctors said he needs to take it easy. I can do all the chores for at least another few weeks,” I repeat, for probably the fifth time in as many days, as I hold the door open. My mom enters first, her hand clasping my father’s, and he steps in behind her, still carrying a basket of eggs fresh from the chicken coop.

“I’d hardly call collecting eggs a workout,” Dad says, releasing my mom’s hand and continuing on into the kitchen. He sets the eggs down on the counter and turns to face both of us. Mom stands with her hands on her hips, glaring at him.

“Well, Clark, I’ve told him now, several times. But you

know how stubborn he is,” Mom says.

Dad doesn’t back down. He stares right back at her, and then after a moment, he moves the eggs to the sink and begins methodically washing them.

“I have to do something. I’m going stir crazy just sitting around. You know that, Martha,” Dad complains in a quiet voice.

The last two weeks since my dad’s heart attack have been hard on all of us, especially him. Emergency coronary artery bypass surgery and a five-day hospital stay can take its toll on a man who is used to being up and outside working the farm from dawn until dusk every day of the week. Maybe this will finally convince him to slow down. Clark had taken care of the farm and all the farm chores every morning while my dad was in the hospital, and then I took over as soon as I regained the ability to fly, a little over a week ago now.

And oh, how I’d missed flying of my own power! Of all my superpowers, flying is easily the best.

I hide a small smile as I watch my parents interact. Mom hurries over to his side, hugs him briefly, and then pulls him away from the sink and over to the table, whispering threats in his ear in her always-kind voice. He sits obediently, but makes a bit of a scene of settling his elbows on the table — one of Mom’s big pet peeves — and resting his head in his hands.

“Jonathan Kent, where are your manners?” she huffs, swatting at his arm. There is a sparkle in her eye, however, and she quickly turns back to the kitchen to finish cleaning the eggs.

Having already completed all the barn chores outside — thank you, superspeed — I shift my focus to the living room, which is still in shambles from our paint job yesterday morning. Mom had wanted a fresh coat of the light olive paint applied, so I’d taken care of that for her, but I’d had to leave before the paint dried, and all of the furniture is still out of place. With another short burst of speed and a small show of strength, I rearrange the couch, bookshelves, and coffee table and then reset all the family photographs, art pieces, and other trinkets to their usual spots on the walls and shelves.

I feel my mom’s hand rest on my shoulder as I stand and scrutinize my work.

“It’s perfect, honey. Thank you for your help.” Her hand lowers to my waist, and then she steps in front of me and gives me a long, tight hug. “It’s really nice to have *all* of you back, you know.”

My powers. Right.

Besides the flying, I’m really not sure I want the burden of these powers, but I’ve been managing. The superhearing is the worst. It kicks on at all hours of the day, picking up calls for help and sirens and police

scanners...and reminding me of the superhero who I will never again be. Clark has been a huge help, of course; anytime I hear something that might be a job for Superman, I connect with him, and, if he’s not already there or on his way or otherwise occupied, he takes care of it.

It is hard. Very hard. But I know I cannot be him anymore. I cannot be him ever again.

And that is another reason I’m now lingering in my parents’ living room, staring blankly at the olive-green walls while hugging my mom with one arm and listening to my dad turn the pages of this morning’s *Smallville Post*.

Lois knows. Clark knows. I know. But my parents don’t know. They don’t know that I will never again don the blue tights and red cape. And so I need to tell them.

I clear my throat and turn back toward the kitchen table, where my dad sits. He looks up at me, his untroubled expression morphing into something a bit more serious. Mom turns with me and places a small hand on my upper arm.

“Mom, maybe you should sit with Dad. I have something I need to talk to you both about,” I start, finally finding my voice.

Silently, she acquiesces, and an air of tension creeps into the farmhouse. Before sitting with them, I move into the kitchen and pour us each a fresh cup of coffee. I then set the three mugs down at the table and take my place in the seat across from them. A sip of the dark brew, no added milk or sugar this time, further sobers me. I raise my eyes to the couple sitting and watching me anxiously.

How am I so lucky?

How is it, that out of the billions of people on the planet, I just so happened to have landed here, with them?

I smile, knowing that whatever comes from this conversation — as painful as it will be to explain to them the horrors of what I was forced into on New Krypton and as difficult as it will be to admit that my doppelganger is not leaving to go back to his home because I can no longer be Superman — no matter what, they will still love me.

Always.

As will Lois.

I lower my eyes to the table, but only for a moment. They deserve to hear what I have to say without me hiding my face from them. I owe them that after everything that they’ve given me.

“I love you both so much,” I start, my eyes shifting from my mom to my dad and back again. I see only love and acceptance and kindness from both of them. My smile falters as a flash of a memory haunts me — the first time I took a life. Somehow, maybe through super strength of will, I push away the anger that accompanies the memory, and I allow myself to meet my mom’s eyes again. I clench

my jaw and start my story. “I need to tell you both about New Krypton so that you will understand.”

Mom’s breath catches in her throat, and after a short pause, my dad asks, “Understand what, Clark?”

I blink a couple times, draw on the strength they have taught me to have, and imagine Lois sitting next to me with her arm gently wrapped around my shoulders and her kind voice anchoring me, reminding me that she loves me too. I take a deep breath.

“So that you will understand when I tell you that I cannot be Superman anymore and that my doppelganger will stay here, on our world, and continue to act as Superman in my place.”

Their reactions are as I’d have expected. My mom tilts her head slightly, but does not change her expression. My dad’s eyes light up with mistrust and a flash of resentment.

I shake my head.

“No, Dad, you’ve got it all wrong. I should have discussed this with you much sooner so you’d understand, but... well, I’ve been working through a lot of things myself, and... I’m still coming to terms with everything. What’s really important, Dad, is that you know this — Clark has done so much good, and he’s...he’s a good, honest, kind person. And an incredible Superman, really. The truth is, I think he’s a better Superman than I ever was...”

I hesitate and glance at my mom for a moment. She frowns, but nods, as though giving me the go-ahead.

“Whatever happened between you two, Dad, I need you to know you’re wrong about him. He’s never been anything but helpful and thoughtful and generous in everything he’s done. He saved my life. And yours.”

I’m not sure which part of my little speech finally got through to him, but I see something in his eyes change, and he blinks and looks to my mom for a moment. His hand moves to cover hers, and he lets out a long sigh.

“Your mother has been trying to tell me the same thing for weeks, and I — well, I just...” Dad shakes his head again.

“I can’t tell you what to do, Dad. But I know that I would really, really appreciate if you could give him another chance. Please.”

My mom gives me another tiny nod, and she wraps an arm around my dad.

“We have leftover pie, Jonathan. This afternoon, you can call him and invite him down for a visit,” she says. “That would be a good start.”

Much to my relief, my dad sighs again and bows his head in agreement.

“You two are right. It’s just that... No, I...I’ll do that as soon as we’re done here. I’ll...give him a call. But I’m guessing you had more you wanted to tell us, son?”

I close my eyes briefly and gather my thoughts.

“Yeah, I... I needed to tell you both this... There’s a really good reason why I cannot be Superman anymore. And it has nothing to do with my superpowers or the other Clark’s even-more-super powers and everything to do with...” I hesitate and swallow hard as I try to maintain a semblance of steadiness and confidence. I allow myself to drop my eyes to my coffee for a second. “Everything to do with what I went through when I was away.”

Across the table from me, Mom moves her arm from around Dad’s shoulders and takes his hand in hers. With another gentle nod, she encourages me to continue. Dad says nothing more, but his expression softens noticeably, and they scoot their chairs closer together.

And I tell them about the three-month journey that culminated in my death.

We share tears, and then, when I am done, we share hugs.

And through the tears and hugs, I feel what I’ve always known to be true — that I am loved.

I close my eyes as I hold them both tightly, one arm around each of them. And at the same time, I sense Lois through my connection with Clark. They are jogging around the edge of the pond in Centennial Park, the early morning sunlight shining brightly down on the path ahead. She is happy, and he is content.

I bury my head into my mom’s shoulder and murmur, loud enough so they can both hear, “I love you both so much.”

And our embrace tightens as they both repeat my words.

It’s true that everything has changed and that I still have a lot of healing to do. I’m a different person, and I know I will never again be who I once was.

But I have to move forward and into this new life, with this new me, in this new reality, which is filled with hope and love and friendship.

And with these things as my guide and Lois as my anchor, I know I will find my way.

THE END

Read the next story in the series: [\*Anchor: Epilogue – Jonathan Kent\*](#).