

So Far Away

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Rated: PG-13 for sexual situations and references to war and violence

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Summary: Clark finally made it back from New Krypton, but how can he ever hope to adjust to life back on Earth after everything that happened up there? Can he be the same man Lois fell in love with, be a father to Kallie...be Superman? Or will his own demons defeat him when everything he used to know seems so far away?

Story Size: 82,525 words (458Kb as text)

Read the previous story: [Wherever You Will Go](#).

Author's Note: Honestly, I thought this was the fic that would never get written. Granted, I didn't think that in 2004 when I wrote the first story, nor in 2006 when a wonderfully optimistic version of myself *PROMISED* the sequel would be written. Eventually.

Even when I came back to fandom last year after a long hiatus, I was certain this would remain unwritten. But here we are, 18 years since I wrote the original story, [Wherever You Will Go](#). I've never been more happy in my life to be wrong.

This story would never have been finished if it weren't for two PHENOMENAL beta readers. I'm not even sure how to thank them properly because words really don't seem like enough. It's certain that they went above and beyond, then went ABOVE that. Cheerleaders. Consultants. Researchers. Brainstormers. Hand holders. Editors. Heck, one of them even wrote two and a half chapters for me!

lovetvfan, there were so many times over the past year that I doubted myself, doubted that I should even bother, doubted that anyone even cared to read a sequel after all this time. You were there every time, telling me to care, that it was worth it. Even if we were the only two that would ever read this story (which I believed but you never did), it was still worth it. THANK YOU for doing all of the things above (including writing those chapters) and more! I'm so honored and grateful that you were my fandom comeback buddy last year!

Queen of the Capes, oh my! I can't quite remember if I railroaded you into BRing or if you jumped into the deep end on your own. Either way, I'm SO lucky! I got wonderful feedback and suggestions, begging and nagging (encouragement) for more story along the way, so many

hours of chatting and brainstorming and troubleshooting (aka nerd fun), AND when things got really, REALLY dicey at the end...you did ALL the things! I will forever be grateful for your time and your genius, especially when it came to making the gosh darn ending work! Long live #shirtgate.

AnnaBtG — you!! How wonderful you were to me to spend time looking up and studying Kryptonian grammar and sentence structure and all the things so that I could have accurate Kryptonian phrases in my story (because I am ridiculous and you, my friend, still love me anyway)! Thank you, thank you!!

(And I should note that all stuff came from kryptonian.info — thank you Darren Doyle for having this website so I could nerd out when I found it!)

CarrieRene made some wonderful graphics for the story and series. She was also kind enough to give me feedback and let me know if the end was working as I'd hoped. Thank you!!

I'm also grateful for the help from the FoLCs on the #loisclark Discord server for cheerleading, moral support, and grammar and canon questions! You rock!

This story is a sequel to *Wherever You Will Go* (2004). It's recommended that you read that first (even though I do cringe a bit at my writing from so long ago). *Away From the Sun* (2006) was written as a sequel, but it's set chiefly in the alternate universe from canon; it's not strictly necessary for you to read that to follow this story (but AFTS is a personal favorite, and it's really good, so you should).

Like so many other stories of mine, this one has a playlist of songs that inspired me while writing. Some songs I listened to hundreds of times! Most of those songs were incorporated into the chapter headers, the lyrics becoming the chapter titles. Many lyrics were lovingly borrowed and used within the story. You can find the playlist in the story teaser post (linked in the TOC).

If you feel so inclined, I would absolutely LOVE to know...what gave you the FEELS? What are some of your favorite lines? What's your favorite part? Thanks for reading! I hope you enjoy!

Chapter 1: Keep Breathing, 'Cause I'm Not Leaving You Anymore

Late February 1997

9 Months, 13 Days Since Clark Left Home

"So far away, so far away"

*Been far away for far too long
But you know, you know, you know,
I wanted, I wanted you to stay
'Cause I needed, I need to hear you say
That I love you, I have loved you all along
And I forgive you, for being away for far too long..."*
Far Away by Nickelback

Clark woke with a start. The sirens were blaring again. Another middle-of-the-night attack from Nor's army. He forced himself awake, tossing the sheets aside in the process. Having had so many unpredicted attacks, he'd gotten in the habit of sleeping in his suit, so he was all ready for...

He stopped short when his feet hit the floor. The wooden floor, not the cool steel of his bedchamber. The siren was still screaming, but it sounded off...smaller, closer. His breathing was heavy as he tried to get his bearings.

There was a figure moving behind him, and he swiveled quickly, ready to strike if it was another assassin. And his breath caught in his chest.

Lois.

It was Lois.

And she was saying something, throwing words desperately in his direction.

Lois.

He was home. Home. Smallville.

And he had a baby. A daughter. Already three weeks old.

Kallie.

He exhaled finally, bursts of emotion hitting him and fading just as quickly.

"Clark!" she yelled, her words finally filtering through. "Get a towel from the bathroom. Now! Don't just stand there!"

Towel. Now. Okay. He started moving in the direction of the bathroom, wholly unsure of what was going on. All he knew was that Lois was frantic and mad.

He came back with the towel quickly and held it out for her as he stood next to the bassinet. And then he saw it.

"Lois! Oh my God, why is there poop *everywhere*!?"

"Because that's what babies do! Now be useful and start cleaning," she said, exasperated, as she hastily stripped Kallie of her pajamas and diaper.

Clark started haphazardly cleaning the bassinet, not entirely sure what he was doing. Kallie was still screaming, but not as loudly now.

"Clark! The baby...wipe the baby!" she cried. "Ugh, the towel is dirty now. Just grab a bunch of wipes and get the majority off of her. No...forget it. There's too much. She needs a bath."

He watched in fascination and horror as she cradled a poop-streaked baby against her clean shirt and marched into the bathroom. He used the clean parts of the towel to get any remnants off his hands and followed Lois to the bathroom.

His heart was still racing, though his breath had returned to somewhat normal. *Control yourself. Restraint. Calm your body*, his mind prompted. This wasn't war, but it was...something. Definitely not something he expected.

Somehow, by the time he'd gotten to the bathroom, Lois was already finishing soaping up and rinsing off the baby in the sink, and she was standing there half-naked, her soiled shirt inside out on the counter. She seemed half asleep — but somehow still irritated with him, he could sense — as she grabbed another fresh towel from the rack to wrap Kallie in.

He felt a little more than disoriented, feelings flitting in and darting away, and definitely out of place. He washed his hands in the sink as she scooted past him back into the hallway, grabbing her dirty shirt on the way. He wanted to help. Should help. But...he clearly didn't have any idea what he was doing.

It'd only been a little more than twenty-four hours, but he had been feeling like maybe he was starting to get the hang of diaper changes? At least the easy ones. But neither his parents, nor Lois, had given him a heads-up on this one. There'd been no training for this.

Back in his bedroom — Lois' bedroom? Their bedroom? — Lois had already put on a clean shirt and diapered and dressed Kallie, and now she was sitting on the bed shushing her, reassuring her that all was right with the world.

Was it, though? *Don't feel*.

He watched as she lay down, but quickly averted his gaze as Lois lifted her shirt to offer Kallie a breast. He still felt a bit like an intruder, like he wasn't supposed to witness this intimate moment between mother and child. Even though *they* were his family, he still felt like a bit of an interloper.

Without saying a word to interrupt, he silently wheeled the bassinet out of the room and over to the laundry room. He stripped the soiled bedclothes and tossed them, along with Lois' shirt, the towel, and Kallie's pajamas, into the washing machine, careful to throw the diaper in the trash. He started the load and went to wash his hands again.

He couldn't remember where the clean bassinet sheets were. Did he even know? He supposed he needed to go ask Lois, even though he was beginning to hate himself for asking so many questions.

He'd been home not even two days, but he still felt more than inept. It'd been the same feeling on New Krypton. Ineptitude. More than one elder and house lord

had accused him of such because he'd been so out of sync with any and all of the strange Kryptonian customs. He hadn't exactly gained trust quickly, but he had commanded respect.

He'd been more than practiced at hiding his emotions when behind the S — the crest of the House of El, he corrected himself — but on New Krypton...just masking them hadn't been enough. He caught his breath and steeled himself, trying not to remember Ching's training sessions.

He was home now. Here. Home. Earth. Smallville. With Lois.

It should be easier to be here.

Assuming the royal birthright of his home culture and heritage and stepping directly into a leadership role in a politically unstable government? Making life or death decisions that... He closed his eyes against the memories. Somehow, all that had been easier than this.

And maybe because this meant more. This meant everything. It was the life he'd always dreamed of and was never sure he'd ever have.

New Krypton had been, in a way, like an extended Superman rescue. Sure, it had been more important, knowing these were his people, that he wasn't the last of his kind. He'd felt honor-bound and obligated to see it through, as much as it had killed him to leave Lois behind. And he'd wanted the opportunity to learn about his heritage. But all the same, it was something he'd wanted to complete — something with a clear beginning and ending — so he could return home. To Lois.

It hadn't been that simple.

And, God, had he paid for it. He hadn't known all that he was leaving behind. He hadn't known it would take that long. He hadn't known...hadn't realized...what he'd have to do and what it would cost him.

He reached under the neckline of his t-shirt for the chain, her ring. His lifeline, his talisman these past nine and a half months and the key to his vault of emotions. He had liked to pretend he could feel her in his heart across the miles, through space and the stars. But he'd known it was only an echo of what he'd always felt in her presence. And after training...he'd barely had the echoes to hang onto.

He felt the familiar pang of her absence and sought his way back to the bedroom to quell the pain in his chest. He stood in the doorway, at once arrested by and awed at the sight before him.

Lois was sprawled out on her side of the bed, facing him, asleep in almost in the middle of the queen-sized bed. Her shirt was scrunched up on one side, leaving a breast and nipple bare. Kallie was close by her side, mewling lightly in her sleep. He watched, captivated, as her tiny mouth formed an O and started moving rhythmically. She

leaned and wiggled her little body ever so slightly and latched expertly onto her target, all without opening her eyes. Lois murmured something unintelligible even to his super ears and reflexively brought an arm around Kallie to hold her more closely.

Clark slowly released the breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. How could she have ever doubted that she'd be good at this?

It was both magical and heartbreaking to watch, and he didn't have the heart or courage to risk waking them, so perfect an image all on their own. He gave them one final look and heaved a quiet sigh, then turned to head for the living room. He'd sleep on the couch tonight.

All the events of the past year...the leaving, the war, the customs, the training, the impossible decisions, the death, the destruction...they'd unmoored him.

He'd wanted, needed to do something good. Help them. Lead them. Learn from them. And come home.

He wasn't at all sure where home was anymore.

The longer he'd been gone, the stronger his aching for home, for Lois had grown. And the more feelings he'd had to lock away, only to be felt alone at night in his bedchamber, lest he find himself back in the training room with Ching.

But down here on Earth, it seemed that the longer he'd been gone, the further his family had drifted from him. Oh, not that he didn't think they weren't overjoyed and beyond relieved to have him home; he didn't doubt that or their love.

But they'd...adjusted, had their own metamorphosis, and learned to live without him. Already he'd seen how fluidly and effortlessly they moved together, how they tended to chores and the baby, how she called them Mom and Dad now...

It was his fondest wish come true, but somehow he'd been left on the outside, an observer. He felt strikingly out of place in his childhood home, in his relationship with his parents, in his relationship with Lois.

And Kallie.

His breath hitched, and tears pricked at his eyes. He reached out with his senses for her heartbeat, their heartbeats. He found Lois' easily, though he was long out of practice. It was slow and steady. Then a faster, staccato rhythm joined in. A new and unfamiliar, but wholly comforting rhapsody. He held fast to the sounds of their heartbeats, wanting to keep his emotions flowing for this. This...indefinable feeling.

They had a baby. He was a father.

The thought, and the truth of it playing in his ears, filled him with awe and reverence and the most profound appreciation for whatever force in the universe had deemed him worthy of such a gift.

He lay down slowly on the couch, closing his eyes and letting the sound of their heartbeats wash over him, calm him against the threatening overwhelm of emotions. The tears slipped out slowly.

"I'm sorry, my loves," he whispered into the pre-dawn hours. "I'm so sorry for leaving."

Chapter 2: When I'm Gone, You'll Need Love

Late February 1997

9 Months, 14 Days Since Clark Left Home

"I know now, just quite how,

My life and love might still go on.

In your heart, in your mind,

I'll stay with you for all of time."

Wherever You Will Go by The Calling

"Mom?" Lois said with a yawn as she walked into the kitchen to find Martha already cooking breakfast. Kallie was cradled in one arm, snug against Lois' side.

"Good morning, dear. You're up a bit early. Is everything all right?" Martha asked, setting the spatula down for a moment to turn and greet her granddaughter. "Good morning to you, too, little one," she cooed in a soft voice as she wiggled her fingers lightly on her cheeks.

Kallie wobbled her head towards the voice and grunted with an apparent smile.

"That's right, sweetie," Martha continued. "Smile for Grandma!"

"Mom, you know as well as I do that was just gas." Lois couldn't help but smile.

"Oh, pfft. Don't be a spoilsport!" she scoffed with amusement before she softened her face. "Now, was there something you needed?"

Lois ran her free hand through her longer locks. "Do you know where the bassinet is? I have vague memories of a 3 a.m. poop explosion and a dream that Clark was here. So I'm a bit confused and sleep deprived, if you can imagine." She chuckled at herself. "All I know is I woke up with Kallie in bed again and a missing bassinet."

"Lois, honey..." Martha said, trailing off as she moved to put her hands on Lois' shoulders and turn her gaze and her body to the couch. "He is home. Remember?"

She gasped when she saw him, and all the emotions of the past day and a half came flooding back. The relief, the love, the pain and sorrow, the exhilaration and joy. "He's back?" she whispered.

Martha just nodded at her side, giving her shoulders a light squeeze as they both looked towards his sleeping form, hovering three feet above the couch cushions.

"He's...floating," Lois said.

"He does that sometimes when his sleep is troubled. Nightmares or even just stress or lack of sleep can bring it

on."

Lois looked down at Kallie in her arms and back over to Clark. "Should I...go to him? Calm him? Wake him?" She fretted, unsure what to do when she felt like she *should* know. Kallie started fussing quietly.

"He'll be okay, I promise," Martha soothed. "I'm guessing he didn't sleep very well...up there. We should probably just let him sleep for now." She frowned as she lifted her eyes skyward. "Besides, it sounds like someone is ready for breakfast."

Lois nodded, still feeling off balance, and headed towards the padded rocking chair Jonathan had moved into the kitchen for her. As she got herself settled and Kallie latched and suckling, Lois felt the guilt creep in at the fact that she hadn't even remembered Clark was home.

All she'd wanted from the moment he'd left was for him to come home. And while they'd had the joyous homecoming she'd imagined, or something close to it, anyway, things had been markedly different in the morning and the rest of the day. Not bad. Just...different.

She rocked gently as Kallie ate, and Martha started making biscuits while humming softly to herself. She closed her eyes and let her other senses take in the smells and the sounds and the gentle motion of the rocking chair. The routine and familiarity of it all was comforting, even while her heart warred with too many different emotions.

After three weeks, she, Jonathan, and Martha had settled into their own new routine with the baby. And then Clark was back. It was a thought that filled her with overwhelming relief and joy, but she couldn't help but feel ashamed of herself for being a bit annoyed with him.

This might be his childhood home, his parents...but for almost six months now, it'd been her sanctuary. And it hadn't quite started out that way; it had taken them some time to get used to each other, learn a new routine, and then it'd felt like they'd had to start all over again when Kallie had come. While they all loved and respected each other, living together was a whole different thing.

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Early October 1996

5 Months Since Clark Left Home

Lois felt like she was overstaying her welcome. Oh, she knew Martha and Jonathan loved her as part of the family and that they wouldn't dream of letting on that there was anything wrong. But Lois could feel it. There was a tension in the air, and she knew it was because of her.

She looked over at the clock. 8:47 a.m. Martha and Jonathan had been up and at it for hours already. All she'd done was doze on and off for an hour and pee twice. She felt another guilty pang at the thought that she wasn't exactly earning her keep...unless gestating their first

grandchild counted? She'd have to ask Martha if she could help with...mortgage, utilities? What else was there to pay for on a farm? Hay? Groceries! She could pay for groceries.

Especially since she was eating for two. She groaned at the overused phrase. But she *was* actually hungry. Ravenous, really. The smell of bacon and coffee still permeated the air. Oh, how she missed caffeine. Her doctor had said she could have a cup a day, but she'd found that coffee didn't agree with pregnant Lois, and the resulting heartburn and all-day jitters wasn't a price she was willing to pay. She put her hand on her belly. "You're not Mommy's favorite person right now. I love you, but you'll learn eventually that I work best with at *least* one cup of coffee in my system."

She smiled wryly. If you'd asked her a year ago if she'd be the type of woman to talk to her stomach while pregnant...well, she would have scoffed at the mere idea of being pregnant, let alone talking to a fetus.

She pulled herself out of bed with more effort than she was used to using, and then she half-waddled — five and a half months pregnant and she'd started waddling already! — to the kitchen. Martha was off in the living room, sitting on the couch and reading the newspaper. Lois wondered idly if it was the *Planet* or the *Smallville Press*.

A plate was waiting for her on the counter. Bacon, scrambled eggs, a homemade biscuit, and a small bowl of fresh-cut melon on the side. She couldn't help but note that the kitchen was already clean, no evidence of preparation or Martha and Jonathan's breakfast remnants to be found. How was Lois supposed to help out around the house if Martha kept doing all the dishes? The guilt played at the forefront of her mind again, but it was quickly replaced by the swift return of her hunger.

"Thank you, Martha," she said, raising her voice a little to be sure she'd be heard across the way.

Martha half closed the paper to look over at her. "You're welcome, dear. You'll just need to heat it up for a minute."

"I really appreciate it." Even when she'd first been engaged to Clark, she hadn't received quite the ministrations as she had so far staying with his parents. It filled her with a sense of love and gratitude...yet still tinged with guilt. "I wish you'd at least let me do the dishes or something."

"Oh, it's no trouble at all," Martha said, giving her a brief smile before returning to the paper.

Lois eyed the coffee pot wistfully for a moment before sighing. Instead, she got some orange juice from the fridge and poured herself a glass while her food heated in the microwave. She gathered the glass and the bowl of melon and set them on the table, then she grabbed her food as

well when it was ready.

Today was like most days had been in the past three weeks, unlike the first week when Martha would keep her company at the kitchen table while she ate. Now, she ate alone at the table while Martha read the paper on the couch in...companionable silence.

She should be brainstorming and researching for her next op-ed piece, but she was distracted. She couldn't help but fret a little at the idea that she was any sort of bothersome or annoying to Clark's parents. They hadn't done anything to make her feel unwelcome, just the opposite. But lately it seemed like they were giving her a lot more space, a wide berth, even. And not just because of her increasing waistline, she thought sardonically.

She knew living with anyone took some adjustment, for all parties. She tried thinking back to when she'd lived with Lucy. It wasn't like they'd hung out all the time or eaten every meal together. Maybe Martha and Jonathan were just giving her space because she was transitioning from guest status to resident? That seemed logical, at least.

She'd feel better if she could clear the air. Hopefully, Martha would be willing to have a little chat before Lois started work for the day.

When she'd finished up the last of her breakfast, she stood and took her dishes to the sink. She washed them slowly, trying to think of exactly how to approach the subject with Martha. One by one, as she rinsed off the soap, she set the glass, the plate, the fork, and the bowl neatly in the drying rack. But she still hadn't thought of what to say by the time she'd finished. She sighed heavily, placing her hands on the counter on either side of the sink and leaning against it.

"Something wrong, Lois?"

Lois squeaked, jumping back slightly, and turned around. "Martha! You startled me!"

"I'm sorry! I didn't mean to startle you," she said gently. "I was just coming to check that you didn't need anything before I head out to the art studio to work on my latest project."

Lois smiled and ran a still-damp hand through her hair. "I'm good. I'm fine," she rushed to assure her, but then continued, "No, wait. Actually...I, uh..."

Martha smiled at her, that warm, would-be-mother-in-law smile, and waited for her to finish.

"Do you have a minute to talk? I mean, it'll obviously be more than a minute...but the expression...and..." she trailed off. Even her babble was fizzling out, though that was probably a good thing.

Martha nodded and gestured to the kitchen table. "Here, why don't we sit? What's up?" she asked as though trying to sound casual. She sat, and Lois took the seat to the right of her.

“I just...wanted to...check in, I guess,” Lois started, fussing at the tufted fringe of the maroon placemat in front of her.

“Oh?” Martha raised her eyebrows in question. “About what?”

“Oh, just things, you know.” Lois gestured casually with a wave of her hand. “How’s your art project coming along? And crops...how are the...uh, corn? Crops? Jonathan’s been spending a lot of time outside lately. In the barn? Fields? Which makes sense, of course. Duh, Lois.” She laughed nervously. “Farmer. Farm. You know, outside. So...things. How are things?” she finished weakly and looked down, studying the placemat and smoothing the fringe she’d just mussed.

It was quiet for a long moment before she saw Martha’s hand come to cover hers, stilling her anxious movements. She chanced a look up from behind her hair, biting her lip. All she found was Martha’s loving, concerned eyes.

Lois smiled weakly and let out a shaky breath. She didn’t think she’d be this worked up about it. “It was the babbling that gave me away?”

Martha smiled, her eyes crinkling. “Yeah. Clark warned me about that, one time,” she said, her smile turning a little wistful.

They actually hadn’t talked about Clark much, she realized, which struck her as a bit odd, considering *he* was the one and only thing they all had in common. “I miss him,” Lois said quietly.

“Me too, honey. Me too.” Martha grasped her hand and squeezed gently, and then she released it and patted Lois reassuringly before giving her a bit of space again. “So, something on your mind? Anything I can help with?”

“Well...” Lois started. She bit her lower lip again before she continued. “I was wondering...” She chickened out and went for the low-lying fruit instead. “Can I help out with expenses, pay for the groceries or something?”

“Sure thing,” Martha replied, smiling. “That’d actually be a big help. Thank you.”

Lois smiled back, glad to be able to help and to have another of Martha’s warm smiles. “You’re welcome.”

“Now, what’s really on your mind?” Martha asked, leveling a different kind of smile at her.

Lois should have guessed. Nothing could get by this woman. She smiled weakly at her. “Have I done anything to...upset you or Jonathan?”

Martha’s reaction was instantly one of reassurance. “Oh, Lois. Of course not! What makes you ask that?”

“It’s just that...it feels a little like you’re avoiding me. But I’m probably just being paranoid...” she trailed off, entirely uncertain whether or not she was indeed being paranoid.

“Oh, no. I’m sorry we’ve made you feel that way! We’ve just been trying to give you your space. We figured you’ll be staying for some time now, and you probably didn’t want two old fuddy duddies hovering over you all the time.”

Lois laughed. “Fuddy duddies?”

“Well, we’re no spring chickens, I’ll tell you that.” Martha chuckled. “I guess maybe we should have had a family meeting to discuss it, though, instead of just assuming?”

“Yeah, I guess that would have been good,” Lois agreed, smiling and ducking her head a little. Then she cocked her head a bit. “Family meeting?”

Martha raised a questioning eyebrow at her.

“I know what one is...it’s just...never been to one, is all.” Lois shrugged shyly.

Martha nodded in understanding. “Well, let’s fix that! And we’ll go ahead and fix that feeling of paranoia you’ve been having, too,” Martha said, winking at her as she stood and pulled Lois out of her chair too.

“Where are we going?”

“To the barn!” Martha declared as she marched out of the house into the slightly muggy October morning and across the yard, Lois in tow. She didn’t stop until they’d entered the wide barn doors that were already open to allow the air to flow through.

Jonathan didn’t look up until they were nearly in front of him, the sound of the loud floor fan masking their entrance. He looked a little startled, like he’d been caught at something. “Martha! Lois! I...what brings you two out here, *Martha*?” he asked, emphasizing her name, clearly trying to convey some secret meaning.

She waved him off. “It’s fine, Jonathan. We’re here for a family meeting!” she announced, almost a little too ceremoniously, but it made Lois smile anyway.

“Oh?” Jonathan asked in a playful tone.

Lois looked between the two of them, sure she was missing something. Was this what people were fussing about when she and Clark talked in tandem in the newsroom?

“Yes,” Martha said, with mock solemnity. “It’s Lois’ first, actually!”

“Well, then,” Jonathan said, smiling broadly. “I guess it does call for an early reveal of our surprise.”

Lois eyed them curiously, so distracted by their mysterious banter, that she’d only just now taken a moment to look at what Jonathan had been working on. She smiled at them and asked, “What’s going on?”

Martha held up a hand. “Hold that thought,” she said as she dashed off to the corner of the barn that housed her art studio. She came back a few seconds later holding...pillows? No, cushions...for the rocking chair in front of

Jonathan.

"It's not quite finished yet," Martha said, "but I think part of the reason you've been feeling left out is because we've been sneaking around to keep your present from you."

Lois felt a lump start to form in her throat. "My present?" she asked, her voice a little more shaky than she meant for it to be.

"We made this rocking chair for you, figuring you'd be needing one eventually," Jonathan started.

Martha finished, "But we decided to move up the time table because we'd noticed how uncomfortable those kitchen chairs are getting for you as your pregnancy progresses. So whaddya think?" She ended with an excited flourish as if she were presenting the almost-finished rocking chair on TV.

Lois let the tears fall freely. She'd gotten in the habit of sitting in the kitchen with Martha as she cooked sometimes, just chatting and learning more about each other. But those chairs *had* been getting increasingly uncomfortable.

"I don't know what to say." She sniffled and wiped at her face.

"You say 'thank you,' dear," Martha said, smiling and gathering her into a hug, and Jonathan joined her, putting his arms around his wife and Lois both.

Lois let out a tearful laugh and said, "Thank you. Thank you both so much." She was surrounded by so much love.

The next morning, the padded rocking chair had found its way into the kitchen.

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Lois felt the beginnings of tears form in her eyes at the memory. She really had gained a new family through Clark, especially in his absence. Her parents had been... well, she didn't like to think about them. They were so hard to get a hold of now anyway, since they'd started gallivanting around the world and back during their latest reconciliation attempt. Besides, it wasn't like she could have told them the whole story.

No, Martha and Jonathan were just as much parents to her now as her own, if not more. They could understand her situation better than literally anyone, and she really couldn't have survived without their love and support all these months.

So, now...having to share them again, to disrupt their comfortable routine and...make room for Clark.

She cringed and then sighed heavily at herself. What right did she have to be annoyed? He was home. That's all she'd wanted for the better part of a year. Cried herself to sleep over it. Made herself sick over it. Ached for it. And oh God, she was so beyond grateful that he'd come home

to her. Come home to them.

She stared down at Kallie and studied her features, somehow equal parts Clark and Lois. She had fallen asleep, so Lois took the edge of her shirt and dabbed at the trace of unfinished milk trailing down Kallie's cheek, then she pulled her shirt all the way back down.

It was just that nine months — almost ten — was a long time. She'd had to change, grow, learn, grieve...so many things on her own. And it wasn't that she'd exactly had her equilibrium back, but it'd been a comfortable routine, even if it'd been lacking the person they'd all wanted to return home. But she'd survived that. This should be a piece of cake in comparison to all she'd been through.

She just hoped that it would be the same for Clark. She glanced over to him, still floating above the couch. And suddenly something grabbed at her heart, and she ached with the need to go to him.

"Mom?" she asked.

"Yes, dear?" Martha responded, turning from just having put the biscuits in the oven.

Lois' brow furrowed a little. "Could you..." She lifted Kallie ever so slightly in her direction. "I...are you interruptible? I need..." Her voice broke a little as she trailed off, looking over at Clark again, her heart clenching in her chest.

Martha wiped her hands on her apron and immediately came to collect the baby from her. "We'll be fine." She nodded down to the still-sleeping Kallie now in her arms. "You go."

She smiled gratefully and went into the living room. Standing in front of him on the couch, she had a bizarre urge to run her hand under and over his body to check for wires or tricks, and her hands moved of their own volition, even though she knew quite well she'd find nothing.

She touched his chest, pushing down gently, testing, though she wasn't quite sure for what. His body moved slightly down, but then back up as soon as she removed her hand. She wondered if maybe...

She sat down at the end of the couch, just below his head. Once settled, she reached up and pulled him down carefully towards the couch. He came easily without waking, his head coming to rest on her lap, his legs stretched out to the opposite end of the couch. Her heart unclenched, and she breathed a sigh of relief now that she was able to touch him, hold him.

Maybe she was imagining it, but he seemed more peaceful now, as if he'd settled into a deeper, more restful sleep because of her touch. She hoped so.

Though...she'd expected to feel...something of their connection, the one she'd somehow also felt with the other Clark, though much more faintly.

It seemed...distant...or absent...and her heart ached at the thought that it might no longer be there.

He'd been off facing God knows what on a far-off planet with those...people who didn't quite value life and love the way she and Clark did. They thought Earth and its inhabitants to be sloppy and far too emotional. What if they'd taken it from him, killed his connection to her with their abhorrence and disdain for emotions?

She stared at the scar over his left eye. She brought her hand up to trace its curve lightly, from just above his eyebrow and down through it, ending near his cheekbone. It was a little lighter, smoother than it had been when he'd arrived.

She cupped his cheek and stroked her thumb over the stubble that had grown since he'd gotten home. What had happened? What horrors had he witnessed, attacks suffered? She could only imagine, and she selfishly didn't want to.

He'd had other scars, too. It'd been dark when they'd made love after his arrival, but there'd been just enough moonlight coming in through the window to see some of them. She'd traced them with her fingers, hoping to heal them, heal him with her touch somehow. It seemed like the sun might be taking care of that, though, the sun and his Kryptonian physiology.

She wondered...how was it that a body so different, a different species, technically, would be compatible enough with human biology to create a life? She'd read all about the conception process after she'd found out. Of course she'd known things vaguely — the timing of her cycle and sperm meets egg equals baby. But she'd had no clue just how delicate and complex the whole endeavor was.

Ovulation. Fertilization. Implantation. If just one little thing was off or didn't happen or the timing was off, then no baby. Honestly, the fact that she'd gotten pregnant at all was a bit miraculous, even to someone who didn't much believe in such divine things. When you added alien physiology and DNA — well, she was inclined to believe that miracles did exist after all.

She watched his face as he continued to sleep. Her man. Her Clark. All the way across the stars to a small farm in Kansas, then landing in Metropolis — of all the places he had been around the world — and then finding his way into her heart and soul? Yeah, miracles had to exist.

Chapter 3: Oh, These Twists and Turns of Fate

Late February 1997

9 Months, 14 Days Since Clark Left Home

"All of my regret; will wash away somehow

But I cannot forget; the way I feel right now

In these small hours, these little wonders..."

Little Wonders by Rob Thomas

Clark felt himself slowly rousing from sleep, for the first time in forever, without a trace of the nightmares that had been plaguing him. He shifted onto his side and tried to settle further into the pillow that wasn't quite as soft as he remembered. But then a hand stroked his head, and his senses filled with the familiar and comforting sound of Lois' heartbeat and the smell of a big country breakfast in a Kansas farmhouse.

Home.

He smiled and brought his free arm up to embrace his "pillow," not quite yet ready to get up or open his eyes. She continued to stroke his head, his shoulders, and brought her hand down to rub his back in a soothing gesture. He smiled again and let the peaceful, loving warmth blanket him, and if he lay still enough, he could even feel his heart start to heal just a touch.

"Hey," he heard her say softly. "You ready to get up?"

"Uhhn mhm," he moaned and shook his head. "I like this pillow too much." He hugged her legs closer to him.

She laughed softly, and he felt the slight vibration of it run through him. "Well, your pillow unfortunately can't stay like this forever."

He rolled onto his back and opened his eyes to look up at her, pouting and trying to put on a pitiful face.

She smiled down at him and caressed his heavily stubbled cheek. Her eyes danced with a hint of mischief. "You know," she started in a whisper, "this look is pretty sexy on you. Like a rugged mountain man or something."

He felt a slow warmth spread through him. "So, you're saying I shouldn't shave?"

She gave him a small, flirty shrug and smile. "It couldn't hurt to leave it for a day or two."

He stretched up to her face as she was leaning down. Their lips met in a slow kiss, a touch of passion simmering below the surface. "Okay," he said against her lips, increasing the pressure lightly on her lips as he pulled her towards him.

"Oops, you'd better get used to this, Kallie, now that your Daddy is home," he heard his mom say with a chuckle from somewhere behind him.

Clark pulled away from Lois and sat up, shaking his head gently to clear the slight fog of confusion and the last remnants of sleep. It was still a big thing to get used to: *He* was Daddy. Instant fatherhood...he was grateful and unsettled all at once. Beyond grateful, really. He urged his mouth to form a smile that he hoped looked warm, happy, and confident.

He held his arms out towards his daughter. "Can I hold her?" he asked tentatively.

His mom mirrored his smile, but hers looked far more convincing than he was sure his did. “Of course, honey.” She handed Kallie over, placing her gently in his arms. “Remember to support her head.” She stepped back and looked at him with some sort of awe and tenderness, and he thought he saw her eyes shining a bit with unshed tears.

He looked down at his daughter. His daughter. No matter how many times he’d run the phrase through his head the past few days, he still couldn’t quite believe it. But there she was, staring up at him with curiosity and a mild concern. Lois’ eyes. His nose. Her smile. It didn’t seem possible.

“Hey, little one,” he said, pitching his tone a little higher and his volume a little softer. “Remember me? I’m...I’m your daddy,” he told her as he ran one finger down her soft, tiny cheek.

She gurgled and kicked her legs out. And then she started crying. He tried not to act as panicked as he felt. Had he done something wrong?

His mom excused herself, saying something about getting the table set for breakfast.

Lois’ hand came to rest gently on his arm. “It’s okay, love. She’s just hungry,” she said softly. “Here, let me...” She reached for Kallie, and he handed her over.

He watched her little lips start moving before Lois even had her settled, and he marveled at how it all worked, this natural expression of need and fulfillment and innate trust. And he felt a sharp pang of jealousy along with the deep ache of love so profound, he wasn’t sure what to do with it.

As Kallie settled into suckling at Lois’ breast, Clark again felt like he was intruding on a private moment. He shifted his gaze away and cleared his throat as he gestured awkwardly in the direction of the kitchen. “I, uh...should see if my mom needs help setting the —”

Lois stopped him with a hand on his knee. “Stay, Clark.” She looked him in the eyes, and he could almost feel the love and reassurance she was trying to convey. “It’s okay. I promise.” She reached for his hand and intertwined her fingers with his, resting their joined hands back on his knee.

After a moment, when he’d settled back into the couch, still close enough to Lois that their hips were touching, she took their joined hands and brought them behind her neck and then pulled her hand away. He took the cue gratefully and leaned into her, putting his arm around her shoulders more fully and pulling her just that much closer.

She turned her head towards his and leaned in. He followed suit and captured her lips in another loving kiss, bringing his free hand up to cup the side of her face. He pulled back part way to look into her eyes, and he ran his thumb across her cheek, wishing he could freeze this

moment in time so it could last just a little bit longer. “I love you. It almost feels...different now. Better...deeper... I don’t know how to describe...” he trailed off, a lump forming in his throat. “But kind of overwhelming, too.”

“I know,” she said, leaning her cheek into his palm and turning ever so slightly to kiss it. Her eyes were shining with unshed tears. “I know,” she repeated softly. Then she looked down to Kallie, and his eyes followed hers. “Look, Clark. Look what we did. Can you imagine anything more perfect?”

He couldn’t. He really couldn’t. “No, I can’t,” he whispered. He let the tears that had been building fall down his cheeks. He dropped his hand from her cheek and reached tentatively to stroke Kallie’s cheek softly with his fingers. She opened her eyes at his touch, seeming to regard him before sleepily closing her eyes again, all the while not to be distracted from her feeding.

He could feel a swell in his heart, a warmth radiating outward and filling him with peace, if only for this moment. If he focused, he could feel the thrum of their love flowing through him — a little, fluttering susurration and a stronger, steady surge from Lois — and he was instantly grateful for this part of his Kryptonian physiology, this connection.

##*#*

Mid-May 1996

1 Day Since Clark Left Home

Clark was feeling inordinately distraught and tremendously...guilty, he supposed. He sat, examining his hands closely, on the marital bed in the bridal chamber in the nobles’ wing of the Royal Transport, which was essentially a huge floating palace. He couldn’t even fully comprehend what was going on, but he was pretty sure that he’d just ceremonially ratified his birth marriage to Zara. And they’d been led here, their wrists tied together with a ceremonial golden rope, to...consummate things. That much he’d understood. Bed. Wife. Closed doors. And of course the fact that Trey had cheerfully announced, in English, that the union was complete, its consummation sanctioned by law.

After the doors had hissed shut, Zara had sympathetically excused herself to the adjoining bathroom to give him a little space. He suspected she needed a little space of her own, too.

It’d been a never-ending bustle of activity and emotions for the greater part of the day. Since he’d left Earth — left Lois — not even a full day ago, he’d been shuttled about from place to place within the floating palace. He’d been paraded through ceremonial rites and customs he couldn’t quite understand — and was pretty sure he didn’t agree with — but he was having trouble keeping up with everything through the interpreter.

He'd never had to use one before, and, though he was quite adept at and knew several languages, hearing the foreign tones of Kryptonian spoken by everyone around him while the interpreter hurriedly fed him what seemed like only scraps of English...well, he was feeling more than disoriented. Out of his depth. Out of his element. Out of...his world.

And all the while, he knew with certainty that he needed to project an air of confidence and leadership. If he hadn't had years of practice as Superman, schooling his expression to match the tone of the event rather than what he was feeling on the inside, they would have surely kicked him off the ship by now. Though it shamed him to think it, he kind of wished they *had* seen fit to get rid of him. He was wholly unsure of...everything.

What exactly was his role to be? How on Earth was he supposed to be the answer to all their problems? How on... Krypton? New Krypton. Though currently they were still in the palace that was also a ship, heading towards the adopted planet of his people.

<<Kal-El?>> Zara's voice inside his head interrupted his thoughts.

"It's okay to come out," he said aloud, still not quite familiar with using his newfound skill of telepathy.

Yet another thing to get used to, but at least it wasn't half as awkward as the rest had been. He wondered if Zara expected...he suddenly panicked a bit.

He stood abruptly as she entered. He went to the small table near the foot of the bed to examine the ornate ceremonial wine chalice, running his fingers along the surface adorned with gems and images in relief. "Only one cup, eh?" he mused aloud, attempting and failing at a casual tone, desperate to delay the awkward conversation to come.

She came to stand opposite him, and she idly picked up a bottle of what Clark assumed was wine and examined it. She spoke plainly, "It is tradition for the bride and groom to share a ceremonial glass of wine to signify the union of houses." She put the wine down and fell silent for a moment.

"It's a huge glass. Do you think the whole bottle fits in there?" he couldn't help but ask. "I'm sorry. That was dumb. It's just...I'm not sure what to do here."

She looked up at him, her expression inscrutable, and recited, "*L'ete ve'me com emmeg. Ozemo ta'me com, l'ete. Leo ze'me com ozemo.*"

"I'm sorry?" He felt like he'd heard that phrase several times today, but he couldn't remember what the words meant. Was she trying to throw him off balance even more? He'd thought she was at least somewhat on his side, given her feelings for Lieutenant Ching.

She walked slowly over to the edge of the bed and sat

down, taking a moment to stare down at her fingers, her hands tented together. "It means: *The Code before the nation. Nation before family. Family before self.* It's our traditional toast," she said, sitting up straighter as though she'd forgotten she wasn't supposed to be so casual.

He chuffed lightly. "There's a lot of ceremony and tradition around here."

"You belittle and show disdain for your heritage, Kal-El," she admonished gently. "Your words belie your true thoughts, but it would be wise to keep such comments to yourself amongst larger company."

He hung his head and came to sit next to her at the foot of the bed. "I'm sorry."

"You know, Earth does have its own ceremony and tradition, far more sloppy and emotional than ours." She smiled slightly.

He smiled back. "Yeah," he said softly. "I suppose that's true."

"You profess you are unsure of what's to happen next." It wasn't a question, but she paused as if waiting for an answer.

"I mean...I...understand what's expected of us..." he trailed off, flustered. "I just...can't," he said, grimacing and bracing for what might come next. Surely, she didn't expect him to...

"Your heart isn't in this," she said, again a statement that was like a question.

"My heart? My heart is waiting for me on Earth," he paused, almost not wanting to say her name for fear it would hurt more. "Lois is my heart. I was an outsider there; incomplete, until I met her."

Zara watched him for a beat, smiling softly as she regarded his eyes.

He felt and saw a flash in his mind's eye. Lois' body beneath him, eager and ready. Lois' voice in his head, *Make love to me, Clark.* Felt himself —

"Sorry." Zara's voice shook him from the memory, so real and so vivid. He hadn't even closed his eyes, had he?

He looked over at her to find her ducking her head. "Apologies for the invasion, Kal-El. Your emotions bleed through."

"Oh," he breathed, unable to stop the blush from rising. "Is that what that was? Telepathy?"

She nodded, then said, "You saved yourself for her."

Another statement. Was she reading his mind even now? Is that why she didn't have to ask?

"Yeah," he said softly. "She was my first. My only."

She smiled broadly, the first like it he'd seen from her since they'd left Earth. "I've saved myself for Lieutenant Ching. It's very Kryptonian, actually."

"It is?" he asked, slightly dubious. Part of him wanted it to be true, meaningful in some way, so that he had more

of a connection to his heritage, but he wondered if it even mattered, wondered what Zara had expected when he knew his heart wasn't in this marriage. His heart was back on Earth.

"It is." She nodded. "So you see, my heart's not in this, either."

Relief flooded through him. No one would have to know the marriage would never be consummated. He felt a small twinge of guilt at the deception and the probable illegality of their situation, but he wouldn't let himself dwell on it.

"You feel her absence deeply," she said.

He reached up to the neckline of his suit and pulled gently on the chain until Lois' wedding band emerged. He held the band between his thumb and forefinger.

"Did you know, Clark, that Kryptonians mate for life? Paired bonding, we call it."

He furrowed his brow.

"You're right," she acknowledged the question in his mind, "that we don't have time or necessity for love, especially as you know it. It's a part of our physiology that helps encourage and support strong unions and pure bloodlines."

"Oh," he said, somewhat deflated that this trait wasn't as romantic as it had initially sounded.

"It still is romantic." She paused for a beat. "It's true that, among the nobles especially, marriages are arranged, but that doesn't mean we don't have deep connections."

Clark still wasn't sure of the concept. "Paired bonding...it sounds a bit like soulmates?"

"Yes," she agreed. "It is very similar to Earth's concept of soulmates. But the bonding, the deep connection can happen with or without love."

"But...how..." He wasn't quite sure how to ask the question.

"You're wondering how a society built on arranged marriages, that seemingly lacks sentiment and tells its people to disregard their own feelings, can have something akin to soulmates?"

"I was trying to find a more delicate way of putting it." He grinned awkwardly, hoping she didn't take offense. "But Lieutenant Ching did say that carving out a life on a hostile homeland left you little time for kindness or love."

"It's true," she said sadly. "Living, surviving on New Krypton has rendered it necessary to forgo such luxuries as love and romance, even sometimes kindness. Such sentiment can prove dangerous, even fatal on New Krypton. But society has out of necessity evolved. We traded idealistic thinking for pragmatic. Compassion and leniency gave way to expediency. Forgoing intuitive thinking for the analytical. Because we had to in order to survive. A Kryptonian must learn to disregard his own

feelings."

"The Code. The Nation. The Family. Right." Clark was frustrated and emotional and trying his best not to sound dismissive of the sacred heritage that was supposed to be his to inherit.

"What Lieutenant Ching and the others forget — or rather, they're not taught — is that Krypton's history is rich with stories of fated love and soulmates. The House of El has seen its share of soulmates, even."

Clark looked mildly hopeful. "My parents?"

She shook her head slightly. "No, much further back in history than that, but Kal-El the First, your namesake, he and his wife were said to be soulmates. Your parents had a birth marriage like ours, but I would dare say their bond was just as strong as yours is with Lois."

"I...saw them...on my globe, the holograms. It looked a lot like love. I'm not sure I understand how paired bonding happens without love."

"That's because you've been raised as a human, exposed to human ideals and constructs of love."

"But love is a feeling, not a construct."

"Can it not be a subjective term, Kal-El? Surely, Earth allows for more than one definition of love. What's to say that a deep physiological bond is not love? Or that it may not grow into what you'd consider love?"

"I don't know. You're right. Maybe it can. I just know that what Lois and I have...it's forever."

"Kal-El, a paired bonding is unbreakable. Even in death."

"Oh," was all he could think to say as he tried to wrap his head around that.

"The bonding process begins in childhood during...I guess they would be playdates on Earth, between betrothed nobles. It continues through adolescence, the bond solidifying its foundation and growing. The pair will feel a strong connection, a sharing and commingling of emotions with one another. It is made immutable through the Ceremony of Union and the consummation of the pairing."

Clark had another moment of panic. "I...we...please tell me we're not..."

She put a hand on his knee to regain his attention, and she shook her head when he finally looked at her. "No. The thoughts and emotions that we are experiencing with one another are not a paired bond, but rather a unique aspect of telepathy that not all Kryptonians have. It is, indeed, very similar to the paired bond in that it is usually only felt for those you hold in high esteem or those for whom you have deep feelings for — as you would call it — love, whether romantic or otherwise."

He nodded numbly but breathed a sigh of relief.

"It's unusual given that she is not Kryptonian, but you have found, nurtured, and consummated a bond with Lois.

I imagine that its exceptionalism is why your connection with her is so strong.”

He took a deep breath, but it ended in a hitched whimper that he couldn't hold back. “That's why this hurts so much,” he whispered.

He didn't need an answer, but she told him yes anyway.

“Does it...does that mean...will I be able to...” He couldn't finish the question. He was too afraid of the answer being the wrong one.

“Go home? I hope so, Kal-El. For you and Lois, I hope so.” She brought her head down a little to catch his gaze again. “I can feel what this does to you. The pain of love. I'm sorry.”

He supposed it didn't matter if he held back the tears or not since she could know his thoughts and emotions, so he let them fall.

“I know your sacrifice.” She looked down at her hands and back up at him. “I don't know if it's consolation or condemnation for me that I may have Ching by my side.”

“I'm sorry, Zara.”

She straightened again before standing and turning to face him. He watched as she blinked away any trace of tears that might have threatened. She squared her shoulders and cleared her throat, her face now a mask of seeming indifference. “That is why it is dangerous to permit feelings. They must be disregarded and concealed. Too many lives are at stake.”

She didn't expect nor wait for a response. “Why don't I show you to your personal chambers? You can rest.”

He took a deep breath. Then another, trying to steel himself for those he might encounter beyond the doors of the Bridal Chamber. He needn't have worried, though. He stood, and Zara led him to a single door on the far side of the room that he hadn't noticed before. There was an identical one on the opposite side, too.

She put a hand on his shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze. “Rest and be well, Kal-El. I'll have your dinner sent to your chambers and order you not to be disturbed for the night. We can talk in the morning as we begin to plan our strategy for arrival on New Krypton and talk about your training with Lieutenant Ching.”

##*#*

Clark looked back down at his family in his arms, Kallie having drifted off to sleep again after her latest meal. Lois was resting her head on his shoulder, her heartbeat and breathing a bit slower than normal. He gathered she might have nodded off for a moment. He wasn't entirely sure that he hadn't joined her. He gave Lois' shoulders a gentle squeeze and kissed the top of her head. “I love you,” he whispered.

“Mmmm. I love you, too,” she murmured. She put her

chin on her own shoulder and looked up and smiled at him from underneath her eyelashes. “Where'd you go, spaceman? You looked pretty lost in thought before I drifted off there.”

“My first day...away from you,” he said softly, still feeling echoes of the memory.

Her brow furrowed, and she frowned slightly. “Not my favorite day,” she admitted.

“Yeah.” He frowned back and sighed, then placed a kiss on her forehead. “But I did learn some pretty interesting things about my physiology. I guess I haven't really had much of a quiet moment to share.”

“I guess I've had my hands a little full since...well, since before you got home.” She looked down at Kallie and back up at him, a hint of humor in her eyes.

She'd been trying to lighten the mood, but he couldn't help but feel the guilt creep in. “Would you let...I'd like to help out more, if that's okay?” he asked tentatively.

She must have felt his guilt, or maybe seen a look on his face because she seemed to rush to reassure him. “Of course!” she said quietly but almost too eagerly. “Here, here. Why don't you hold her while she's sleeping?” she started, already moving to hand Kallie over to him. He held out his arms, and she gently deposited the baby, somehow without waking her. “That way I can get up and stretch and finally pee! Plus, I'm sure breakfast is ready by now, and I'd *love* to eat using both my hands. I'll be right back!”

Then she was gone, off down the hall. And he was left with...his daughter. That phrase again. Just two little words. One perfect little creature. He marveled at her features. Such soft wisps of hair for eyebrows, lighter than the dark hair on her small head. Cherubic cheeks, a perfect nose. Dark and long eyelashes. Her hand, curled in a tight fist, had such tiny fingers.

She was smaller than he might have imagined, and he wondered idly what her birth weight had been, not that he'd know what was considered normal or not. Normal... Had her birth been normal? Was *she* normal? Had Lois' pregnancy been normal? Who'd been with her? His parents, he assumed. Had she been scared? Had she missed him?

He never should have left. He should have been here. Lois had been pregnant with his child, an *alien* child. The guilt and the loss and the anger and the grief all surged together. The feelings were too much. Too overwhelming. He couldn't do this. He needed...

He closed his eyes. *Don't feel.*

He'd missed far too much here on Earth. So much that he had no hope of ever making it up to Lois. He needed to take care of his family, not have them worry about him. He desperately wanted to be there for Lois, for Kallie, and he

refused to burden her with all of the horrible things that had happened to him, the things that he'd done.

His breathing quickened and he felt the panic start to rise, but he quashed it quickly, firmly, as Ching had taught him. A Kryptonian must disregard his own feelings.

Family before self, he recited in his head as he heard his mom call quietly from the kitchen that breakfast was ready. *Leo ze'me com ozemo.*

Chapter 4: Just Give Me a Reason, Just a Little Bit's Enough

Late February 1997

9 Months, 15 Days Since Clark Left Home

"Just a second — we're not broken, just bent,

And we can learn to love again.

I've never stopped

You're still written in the scars on my heart."

Just Give Me a Reason by P!nk (feat. Nate Ruess)

Lois was reading the morning edition of the *Daily Planet* and enjoying her herbal tea. Still no coffee. Kallie had been such a good sleeper so far, Lois was afraid to jinx it by adding caffeine to things. Though part of her was a little curious to see if Kallie was unaffected by caffeine like Clark was...but it was definitely not worth the experiment right now. Sleep was so sporadic as it was.

She'd woken up with Kallie hours ago and hadn't felt like she'd be able to fall back asleep, so she'd just put the baby in the bassinet in her room — their room? — to sleep after she'd nursed. Clark had still been sleeping, too. She hesitated to wake him, figuring that if nothing had woken him yet, he must have really needed the sleep. Or at least she assumed that was the case. He wasn't floating today — that had to be a good sign, didn't it?

At the table with the paper, she'd heard Kallie start to fuss a few minutes ago, but she'd also heard Clark start talking to her in a soothing tone and so had decided to finish her tea. Her heart warmed at the sound of his voice, slightly higher and softer. She couldn't make out the words from here, but it was sweet and endearing all the same.

After getting up and setting her empty teacup on the counter, she headed over to her — their room. She leaned casually against the doorway, crossing her arms and resting her head against the frame as she took in the sight before her.

Ever since she'd found out she was pregnant, she'd dreamed about this moment. Well, something like it, anyway. She was pretty sure her dreams had not included a poopy diaper and a clueless Clark. She debated silently whether she should coach him or let him learn from experience.

Evidently, she'd decided on the latter because she couldn't bring herself to move. He glanced over at her

watching him and gave her a tight smile. This wasn't cruel, right? Getting poop on your hands as the baby wiggled wildly while you changed the diaper was a parental rite of passage, wasn't it? Though, technically he *had* gotten poop on his hands the other night, but that didn't count for diaper changing experience, anyway.

He'd stripped the soiled diaper and put it in the bin, and he remembered the wiping — front to back. So far so good; he'd avoided getting his hands dirty. She smiled, but felt a little guilty. Maybe she shouldn't be watching? He was probably self-conscious and might think she was judging his every move.

She was pretty sure he had the diaper upside down. She watched him search for the tabs as Kallie started to fuss. Should she go help? She waited a beat to see if he'd ask or not, and she was relieved when he glanced over and gave her a helpless look.

"It's upside down, love," she said gently.

He nodded and went back to business, turning the diaper right side up and focusing hard on using just the right tightness on the tabs. He remembered that part from last time. Once Kallie's onesie was snapped back up, he straightened, shoulders back, and crossed his arms in front of his chest, clearly proud of a job well done.

And she had to cough to cover the fact that she'd just about snorted trying to hold in the laughter. She could see the headline now: *Superman Successfully Changes a Poopy Diaper*. It was sweet as all could be, but she was sure that he wouldn't understand or appreciate her laughter.

He scooped Kallie up and cradled her in one arm. He spoke softly to her, cooing gently, "Hey, little bug. I think Mommy's laughing at us."

Or maybe he didn't mind. She smiled as she straightened and went over to them. "Nahhh. I just love watching you with her," she said. The sadness of his absence tugged at her heart just then for some reason, but she did her best to push it aside so she could keep this moment. She raised up on her tiptoes, her hands on his shoulder for balance, and kissed his cheek. She smiled when she was rewarded: he turned his head to kiss her lips gently.

"I think she's starting to get used to my voice," he said with such hope that his statement was almost a question.

"Yeah, I think she is," she agreed. "She definitely turns her head when she hears it." She bit back a frown at the thought that Kallie wouldn't have had to learn it if Clark had been here, that babies started to learn and respond to voices in utero.

"So..." Clark started. "What do you usually do next when you wake up?"

Lois pulled a face and said almost apologetically,

“You’re kinda looking at it. We live a pretty tame life around here. Eat, sleep, poop.”

He chuckled weakly. “That’s it, huh?”

“Pretty much,” she said. “It’s a far cry from dangling above the jaws of death, isn’t it?”

He wore a blank look, but she’d have sworn she’d seen his expression darken for a half a second before that. She felt a sadness and pain tug again at her heart and mind.

Hoping to reassure him, she patted his shoulder and said, “Don’t worry, Superman. I don’t do that nearly as often any more. I don’t have the time for it.” She winked and headed out of the room.

She caught her breath, only just realizing as she’d turned around and walked away that he’d...he’d flinched when she’d called him Superman, hadn’t he? She’d almost felt it.

Okay, that topic was off limits for now. Her mind reeled at the possible causes, the implications. But she couldn’t think about it right now, shouldn’t think about it.

Martha was in the kitchen getting set up to make breakfast, and though Lois felt guilty for needing it, she was suddenly grateful for the buffer. “Morning, Mom,” Lois said with more cheer than she was feeling.

Clark had followed her with Kallie still in the crook of his arm. “Morning, Mom,” he echoed as he found and settled in the rocking chair. He started rocking gently and gazing lovingly down at Kallie, looking for all the world like he belonged there.

She opened her mouth to speak, but shut it immediately. Her heart hitched a little, and she felt tears pricking at the back of her eyes. Hormones. Damn hormones. She stood awkwardly still for a moment and then sat herself in one of the chairs at the kitchen table chairs.

Martha had seen her and leaned her head, giving her a sympathetic look. *I’m sorry*, she mouthed.

It’s fine... I’m fine, Lois mouthed back. She shook her head gently to clear her thoughts. It was just a chair. Rocking chairs were meant for rocking babies. And that’s what he was doing. Rocking their baby. In her chair.

Suddenly, she couldn’t be in the same room. She got up to grab a bottle of breast milk from the fridge. She handed it to Martha, who took it automatically. “Could you warm this up?” And then she turned to Clark and said with all the light-heartedness she could muster, “She’ll be hungry soon, and I thought you might like to feed her?”

“Really?” he asked, his face lighting up. “I’d love to.” He smiled at her, his heart clearly full.

She smiled at him, not needing to force the warmth she felt at the moment.

“I could just...” He gestured towards Martha with the bottle. “If it needs warming, I could just give it a quick

zap,” he offered.

He was trying to be helpful. He was happy and wanted to be helpful and feed his daughter. Lois took a breath and said somewhat tightly, not irritated but trying to keep the tears at bay, “I...I’m not sure, um, if heat vision would be good for it? I know you’re not supposed to microwave it.”

“Oh.” He deflated a little, and she felt guilty again.

“Yeah, I guess that makes sense. Sorry.”

“You didn’t know.” She shrugged. She needed to be in the other room already. “So, um...enjoy,” she said with a smile that didn’t feel comfortable. “I’m just going to go...pump.” She hooked her thumb in the direction of the bedroom as she headed that way, not waiting for anyone’s response.

When she got to the room, she closed the door softly behind her and looked around as she took a couple steps in. She cursed silently. The pump wasn’t in here. Damn it. She couldn’t go back out there.

And then there was a soft knock at the door as it opened slowly. Martha gave her a smile and handed her the bag. “Sorry, I forgot to put this back in your room yesterday after cleaning things,” she said at a normal volume so Clark could hear. *I love you*, she mouthed.

Bless this woman. “Thank you!” she said as Martha winked at her and closed the door. Martha knew. She always knew. Lois didn’t feel like she would ever do enough to earn the abundance of this woman’s love and kindness she’d gotten.

She grabbed a pillow and arranged it just so on the armchair in the corner of the room. She sat and put the bag down on the side table and set to work getting everything going.

Was she a coward for running and hiding? Was she childish for being upset over a chair?

She could pretend that she was doing this for Clark’s benefit, so he could feed his daughter. That was true enough. But she hadn’t necessarily needed to leave the room. She could have pumped in the kitchen or living room like she’d done plenty of times before...when it had been just Martha and her.

Clark had only been home for a few days, and she was avoiding him.

She hadn’t known when — or if — Clark would come home. She hadn’t thought about *what* he would come home to, other than her fantasy that he’d be overjoyed to find a pregnant Lois or deliriously thrilled to find Lois holding their baby. He’d not been unmoved when he’d gotten home a few nights ago. He’d been loving and reassuring when they’d made slow but desperate love and when they’d talked afterwards.

But since then...he’d been, at times, distant with her. Not so much in deed or emotion, but in what she *couldn’t*

feel from him. The connection they'd shared...seemed to be...not really working. She'd been slightly relieved to feel some pulses of emotion, and a few times it had flowed freely, usually when he was full of love. But still, he seemed different, more guarded. Less emotional. Though that part at least made some sense, given where he'd spent the better part of the past year.

She could only imagine that he'd changed as much as if not more than she had in that time. How could he not have? It had to have been bad, right? For it to have taken so long? For him to be shutting down his emotions? Had they not prevented war after all? That's what the marriage, Clark's presence, had been supposed to prevent. What was it Jor-El had said? That his legacy, Clark's destiny, was to save the Kryptonians and lead them from chaos into peace?

That was what had settled it for Clark. Words from his birth father about his destiny. About it being his responsibility to bring peace. She wanted to hate Clark for it, but...that was part of what she loved about him. The values and morals that made Superman who he was...it wasn't just Clark. There was some part of the Kryptonian legacy, his heritage, an innate part of his being that was meant to fight for peace and justice. It all sounded logical, but part of her had trouble believing that the Jor-El she'd seen in the globe — so desperate and concerned for his infant son — had much to do with the cold and hyper-rational New Kryptonians.

He'd *had* to go. If it was only him who could save thousands, tens of thousands of people, he would never have been able to live with himself if he hadn't gone. So they'd decided — together — that he should go. He'd believed that saving New Krypton from war was worth turning his back on everything and everyone he loved.

But what had she and Clark thought that even meant, saving them from war?

It's not like he could have just arrived, and what... created a law for Zara to rule by herself? Execute this Lord Nor for...treason or something and be on his merry way home? Was his marriage to Zara merely a political solution? They'd mentioned an alliance ruled by noble houses. But...if there was nobility, that usually meant royal bloodlines...

She hadn't ever let herself think this far before, to what she dearly hoped was not the inevitable conclusion of a royal marriage, not when Clark had still been up there. Not when she hadn't known whether he would ever come home. All of it had been far too painful and not worth the heartache. But she'd be lying if she said she hadn't thought of it at all, thought of what Clark being married to Zara meant.

She felt sick to her stomach at the mere idea of what it

might mean. What it probably meant? Oh, God. Is it even something she had a right to feel jealous about, considering she'd sent him off to war with his betrothed?

She had to swallow several times to keep from choking on the lump in her throat. And she closed her eyes and tried to steady her breathing. The important thing was that he'd come back. He'd come *home* to her.

There was a tentative knock at the door. "Lois?" Clark said softly. "Can I come in?"

"Yeah," she said, taking a deep breath and feeling both grateful and annoyed that he'd needed to ask.

He opened the door slowly and came in, closing the door behind him, and went to sit on the unmade bed, facing her in the chair.

"Where's Kallie?" she asked.

"She's with Mom. She mentioned going for a walk out by the pond, but I think they're both napping in the La-Z-Boy, to be honest," he said with a faint smile, one that reminded her of *her* Clark, the Clark he'd been before he'd left.

"I think I managed to take a picture of them doing that last week," Lois said, smiling. "Mom denies she fell asleep, so I can't wait to get the film developed to prove her wrong."

He chuckled softly, and her heart hitched at the sound. She'd missed that sound.

"Does that hurt?" he asked, gesturing awkwardly at the pump as she was detaching it from herself.

"Well, it's not comfortable," she admitted, putting the bottles and tubes and everything on the table. "But the alternative is waking up to do the all-too-frequent feedings myself and get no sleep," she smiled wryly at him. "So...it ends up being a good trade off. Plus...it means Mom and Dad — and you, now — get to bond with her, too."

He smiled gratefully at her. "Thank you," he said softly, his voice a bit thick with emotion. "I...it was... thank you." He looked down shyly and tented his fingers, his elbows resting on his knees.

She smiled warmly at him and nodded as she screwed the lids on the bottles and then put them back on the table.

"Are you okay, Lois?" he blurted. "It's just...you seemed kind of upset about something back there." He jerked his head slightly in the direction of the kitchen.

"I'm fine," she answered automatically. "I mean...no? Yes? Kinda?" She readjusted the hem of her shirt even though it had been fine. "Oh, Clark, why is this so hard?"

"...What, exactly?" he asked tentatively.

"This!" She gestured between them. "Talking with you." Her voice lost intensity and gained a slight tremor. "I don't want it to be hard."

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, as if steeling himself against something. Against her? "I don't either."

She sat there in the chair, wanting to go to him. Hug him. Kiss him. Make love to him. But she was held fast to the chair by...apprehension.

She wanted *him* to come to her. Want her. She wanted him to comfort her and tell her everything was going to be all right. Why wasn't he telling her everything was going to be all right?

After a deep breath to brace herself, she moved to sit next to him on the edge of the bed. He shifted so that he was facing her, and she watched as he tented his fingers again. Was he nervous? Was she making him nervous?

He was making her nervous. Unless their connection was working after all? Why were they nervous?

"Hey," he said, finally breaking the silence and giving her half a smile.

"Hey," she replied, hating that her voice still sounded weak and shaky. She found she couldn't look him in the eye. Instead, she focused on the hints of the scar near his left eye, almost imperceptible now.

He caught her staring and rubbed at his eyebrow, as if to make it go away, make it so she couldn't see what he'd been through.

She forged on before she lost her nerve. "I, um, told you a bit about what happened to me while you were... gone. Did you...I mean, maybe you don't want to, or maybe you weren't sure you could...but you can talk to me about...up there, what happened, if y-you want, if you need to."

She watched his face darken — from bad memories, she was sure. She wanted to reach out a hand, touch his shoulder or knee or face to comfort him, but she wasn't entirely sure he'd welcome it. He looked so far away.

It felt like such a long moment before he spoke again, his voice hoarse with emotion. "It's...hard to even think about."

She nodded, but he wasn't looking at her, clearly lost in the memories, so she spoke quietly. "I can only imagine. I'm sorry." She wanted to touch him, desperately, comfort him. Her hand reached out before she could stop it, but she yanked it back when he flinched. It had been almost imperceptible, but he'd still flinched all the same. "Sorry," she stammered. "I'm sorry." Her heart squeezed in her chest, and for a moment she couldn't breathe.

He shuddered slightly, out of whatever memory he'd been stuck in. "Oh, Lois! I'm sorry," he said, distress written all over his face. His voice was *her* Clark's again, at least.

"Sorry," she said again, almost reflexively. She didn't know what to do.

"No, I'm sorry." He ran a hand through his hair, just like her Clark did when he was flustered or frustrated. "I just...I'm not really used to...being touched anymore. You

just caught me by surprise. I'm sorry." His eyes, her Clark's eyes, were looking at her, begging for forgiveness.

He reached down for her hand and brought it up to cup his cheek as she'd been about to do, and he held his hand over hers. Her heart clenched again, then fluttered, and she felt a shiver run through her. She wasn't used to being touched anymore, either, at least not like this.

She felt the warmth of his face and ran a thumb along his cheek to feel the rasp of his stubble, so uncharacteristic, but still Clark underneath. She wanted to kiss him. Could she kiss him? Would he flinch again?

Before she could even second-guess herself, he was leaning in, cupping her cheek and pressing his lips against her. His kiss was urgent, almost frantic, and she fell into it with him, just as desperate. She wound her fingers through his hair to the back of his neck, pulling him closer because she couldn't get enough.

She was breathless, but she didn't care. She needed him, capturing his lips, his tongue, again and again. She felt him leaning them back towards the bed, so she lay back on her elbows and scooted herself up to the head of the bed, and he followed eagerly, his lips recapturing hers as soon as they were settled.

The feel of his body above hers, his weight on her was comforting and intoxicating all at once. Their love making was urgent and desperate, both of them needing connection after all the strong emotions. When it was over, Clark held her close in his arms, hugging her and nuzzling at her neck, murmuring I love you over and over again.

Lois wrapped her arms around him too, her breath taking longer to slow, her desire left unsated. She wasn't sure if she should say anything — they'd only made love a handful of times — *he'd* only made love a handful of times — he might not realize she had needed more from him.

She tried not to be saddened by the fact that they were lovers so inexperienced with one another. They should be more. They should be well versed in each other's pleasure by now. And she tried not to think anything more of the fact that he still had his shirt on. Their lovemaking had been hurried, urgent. It didn't have to mean anything. She settled into his arms and comforted herself with the reassuring feel of his solid presence, something she'd ached for for so long.

Chapter 5: Before I Come Undone

Late February 1997

9 Months, 15 Days Since Clark Left Home

"(Wake me up) Wake me up inside

(I can't wake up) Wake me up inside

(Save me) Call my name and save me from the dark

(Wake me up) Bid my blood to run

(I can't wake up) Before I come undone..."

Bring Me to Life by Evanescence

Clark lay, spent, Lois in his arms. He'd ached for this feeling for so long, so many long and lonely nights on New Krypton, falling asleep alone, sometimes after an empty release. No matter the fantasy, he'd always felt less than gratified.

The training he'd endured...it hadn't helped. Alone in his bedchamber at night, he was allowed to feel, allowed to unlock the vault of emotions that were imperative to ignore, to reject during the day. But he couldn't ignore them there. Wouldn't?

This, now, should be the best feeling in the world, here with Lois in his arms. He should feel their connection thrumming soundly between them, but he struggled to find and sustain it. It came in fits and starts, no matter how desperately he wanted it to be there, solid and reassuring.

Lois trembled a bit in his arms.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Yeah, yeah. I'm fine. Just a little cold."

"Here, I'll pull up the blankets," he offered, starting to reach down, but she stopped him.

"No, no, it's fine," she said softly, patting his chest and giving him a quick peck on the cheek. "I have to, uh...go clean up." She gestured to her lower half. "And I also need to put the breast milk in the fridge."

"Oh, okay," he said, unsure if this was actual awkwardness between them or if that's how it was between all couples with newborns. Or was it him, his fault?

She stood and looked around for something and then appeared to find it. She grabbed a few baby wipes and cleaned herself, and then she grabbed a clean set of clothes out of the dresser. He wondered briefly if she should be watching her. Was he allowed to? He looked away, unsure. He ought to get up too. He stood and grabbed his sleep pants and briefs from the floor where they'd landed earlier and put them on.

He saw the bottles of milk on the table and went over to them. "I'll just...grab these and put them in the fridge," he said, picking them up. "I...um...see you out there." He gestured lamely in the direction of the rest of the farmhouse.

"Mmmhmm. Okay," she said a bit absentmindedly. "Thank you."

Clark left the bedroom and closed the door quietly behind him. He opened the refrigerator and found two other bottles on the top shelf and set the two fresh bottles beside them. They all had different levels of fullness, and that struck him as odd. He'd have to ask about that later.

He wandered out to the living room, expecting to find his mom and Kallie still in the chair, but the room was

empty. He extended his hearing and found them somewhere outside the house, maybe the garden or the greenhouse. A small part of him panicked, trying to remember if he and Lois had been loud or not, but he didn't think they had.

Lois hadn't come out of the bedroom yet, and he hoped that didn't mean anything. She *had*...enjoyed herself too, right? He hated that he was so inexperienced that he didn't know any better. Maybe he should have asked her...

He felt awkward and wasn't sure what to do with himself. Usually, when he was home in Smallville, he was helping his dad with specific chores or visiting for a meal or holiday. He wasn't used to just having nothing to do, no plans or responsibilities.

And truth be told, after almost a year on New Krypton, he was even more at a loss, feeling a bit useless. One of the core Kryptonian virtues was industriousness, and it felt wrong to be doing nothing. Not that he'd been industrious or productive in the traditional agricultural sense, but he'd always had an agenda for the day, carefully planned and plotted by his personal council. Battles. Decisions. Troop deployments. Council meetings.

Training...

####*##*

Late June 1996

3 Weeks, 5 Days Since Clark Left Home

The world is blurry. Like petroleum jelly smeared over a lens. Memories assault him from every angle. Puzzle pieces that he struggles to make fit into a coherent whole. They continue to elude him.

He is in the training room. Ching is barking orders. Criticizing. Always criticizing.

He isn't getting it. Can't do it, can't suppress them. Can't block them. Can't block her. Won't block her.

Lois...

"No, try again. Repeat after me. *Kao-zha-aovem-u.*"

"*Kaow-zsa-ovem-u.*"

"Closer. Again. *Kao-zha-aovem-u.*"

Images swirl in front of him like butterflies overhead. He can see them, but he can't catch them: Ching irritated. Disappointed. He isn't good enough. Isn't strong enough. Cold enough.

The images slip through his hands like water.

The image shifts, and he can hear her. Calling for him from across the stars. Her pain radiates through him. It's enough to make the Man of Steel double over, and yet Ching will not let him. Won't let him hear her — won't let him feel. He needs to feel. He needs to get back to her. He needs...

Another shift and he's in a room. Dark and cold. He isn't used to being cold.

"It's called *Jahghah*, Restraint." Ching's face is a stone

mask but he can see the barest flicker of emotion that he tries to bury. He's scared. "All Kryptonian children must enter this room and reject unnecessary emotions. They must learn to compartmentalize and lock away their thoughts and fears. Must learn not to show weakness."

"And if they fail?" Something in Ching's eyes tells him he already knows the answer. He gives the smallest of nods.

"You should have gone through this ritual as a child, Kal-El. It's taking too long. It might have been easier then. Adolescents, after all, have much less to fear — less to lose."

Another shift and he's back in the training room. Is he doing this? Trying to avoid the truth of whatever is in that room?

He knows what's in the room. He feels it in his soul.

"*Kao-zha-aovem-u.*" He is trying so hard. It is never enough.

"Good. Again." He feels the irritation rise and fights to quell it.

"*Kao-zha-aovem-u.* Wouldn't it be easier if I did it in English? *Don't feel.*"

Ching glares at him. The room tugs at the corner of his mind, waiting...

"It is easier to connect with your Kryptonian roots in the language of tradition."

He's never hated tradition so much.

The floor slides out from under him and he's in the room.

He can feel the blood drain from his face. His heart drops out of his chest, and he fights to keep the panic from bubbling to the surface.

"Superman, help!"

Of course it's her. Who else would it be? Who else could reach into the deepest parts of his soul — the places even he didn't know about?

He launches himself into the air and, like a moth to a flame, flies towards the sound of her voice.

It calls to him from across the stars. It's so very broken. She's so broken.

<<Lois. Oh, God, Lois, I'm sorry.>>

A lurch. The training room swings back into view. Ching sees his face and frowns. He doesn't know. Can't know. He wasn't in the room.

"Try not to resist so much, Kal-El. Feelings are deadly here. You must master this skill to be a successful leader. If you do not, you risk broadcasting your insecurities and intent to everyone, including Lord Nor. Mastery is paramount."

<<Now, in your mind. Kao-zha-aovem-u. Hear me in your mind, and replicate it.>>

<<Kao-zha-aovem-u.>>

He wants to get this right. Needs to. He can't go back. Can't find himself back in...

"It shows you your fear. Makes you see the things that bring out the strongest emotional response. The only way out is to..."

The room. Not the room. Not again.

She's there. His heart lurches, and he fights to stuff the emotion down, lock it away in his mind as Ching taught him. He knows the rules. He will see it again and again until he gets it right. Until he can't feel.

But how can he not when he sees her like this? Curled up on the couch, shrinking into herself as her tears soak the pillow she clutches against her.

She sobs his name, and it cuts him in half.

<<Don't feel.>>

Ching's voice is in his head. Reminding him. Or warning him? He's done this, too, after all.

<<The images will go away when you can control it. Until then they will only get worse.>>

What could be worse than this? Worse than her pain? Worse than being the cause of her heartache? Pain is easy to bear for the Man of Steel, but he can't bear hers. It's too much.

The world turns on its axis, and he knows he's failed again because she's falling — hurtling towards the ground at unimaginable speed. He flies towards her, desperate to reach her — to save her — but he knows it's futile. He's done this before. He's always too late.

The scenario changes, but the result doesn't change. Falling, drowning, fire. He's never fast enough. Never strong enough.

"She is your weakness, Kal-El." Ching sounds calm, but underneath even his patience is crumbling. "You must purge her from your thoughts."

No, not a weakness. She's never been a weakness. She's a part of him. The best part of him.

"Maybe on Earth," Ching is speaking, and he realizes he must have spoken aloud. "But this is New Krypton. Here you cannot afford such emotions."

He feels adrift at this. He doesn't know any other way to be. His emotions are his strength. They are what makes him...

No, not human. But not Kryptonian, either. He floats between worlds among them but not a part of either.

Another shift, then another and another. Over and over he sees it. Sees her. Fails her.

It's too much. He wants just once to get there in time, to wipe away her tears. To come home to her.

And so he learns. Over and over. He learns. Not because he wants to. Because he has to. Because if he continues to lose her, to see her hurting, he will go mad.

It's better to live with a heart locked away in a vault

than with half of one. He doesn't know when he decides this, but Ching appears relieved when he does.

He doesn't know if it's because it took him so long to get there or because even Ching couldn't watch him suffer.

But he learns. He grows. He shoves his emotions down deep somewhere only he knows about. To protect him. To protect her.

He shuts down. He adapts.

He survives.

##*#*#*

Maybe he should go back in the bedroom? No...he'd said he'd meet her out here, so he should wait. She had wanted to talk. They'd gotten...distracted, but she'd still wanted to talk, he assumed. About...his time up there. But...they really did need to talk, and he'd rather talk in the room where his mom and dad would be less likely to overhear.

He went back to the door and knocked hesitantly. "Lois?"

"Yeah? I'll be out in a sec."

"Actually," he started, "I was thinking...Mom took the baby for a walk in the garden. Did...would it be okay to talk now?" Oh God. What was he saying? He didn't want to talk now. Why had he agreed to talk? *Had* he agreed to talk? He didn't want to talk about things at all. He wanted to retreat to the soulless comfort of his bedchamber.

"Sure," she said, answering the door with a shy smile.

He walked past her and hesitated, wondering where he should sit, and he opted for the chair in the corner. He noticed she'd made the bed. She came to sit down on the corner of the bed closest to the chair, sitting cross-legged with her hands in her lap. Maybe he should have sat on the bed? Why had he chosen to sit alone? Should he move?

What was he supposed to say? Where did he even start? He couldn't share this...especially anything that had happened up there, not with her. But...she was supposed to be his best friend. He'd been closer to her than he'd been with anyone else in his life, even his parents. Even now, with things so awkward. If he couldn't share with her, there was no one else.

"Hey," Lois murmured.

"Hey," he echoed. He couldn't look up at her just yet. He instead examined the seam of the upholstery and ran his finger along it. It was a bit like a scar, but much more precise and straight.

He felt the heaviness in his chest, the infinite weight of everything he'd been through, everything he'd done. His sense of self was...turbulent, marred with violence and inhumanity. And it wasn't fair. He'd gone to New Krypton, yes to prevent civil war and save lives, but...

He bit at his lower lip, and his brow furrowed. He felt utterly foolish. Had he really thought it'd be as simple as

having political fights and arduous legislative sessions, maybe addressing some protestors or violent rioters at worst? That he could have spent the rest of the time contentedly learning about his heritage and birth parents, the Kryptonian way of life, and maybe how Lois and he might be biologically compatible? Then he'd be on his merry way home to get married, have kids, win awards with Lois, and live happily ever after?

Had he been that naive? That hopeful? Superman's uncompromising optimism, his unrelenting belief in the good of other people...

It'd become painfully clear on New Krypton that Lois was a fundamental, indispensable part of who Superman was. There was no Superman without her. And New Krypton had taken what precious little had been left of Superman. Had taken *her* from him.

"Clark?" He heard her voice, tender and concerned. And closer. At some point, she'd moved off the bed and was on her knees, sitting back on her heels in front of him, a hand on his knee. He shook his head to rid it of the memory of courtiers and citizens bowing before him.

"It's okay, love," she said. "You don't have to share."

Of course, he felt the connection then. A pang of heartache deep in his chest, the pain of her knowing that he wouldn't open up, wouldn't be vulnerable with her.

"No," he rushed to say. *Forgive me. Kao-zhalish-odh khahp.* "I should. I need to," he said, unsure if he was trying to convince her or himself. Probably both. *Don't feel.* <<*Kao-zha-aovem-u.*>> It was the only way he'd get through this. "I'm just...I don't know what to say. What to share."

"I understand." Her hand rubbed his knee gently as she still knelt in front of him, and she looked at him with so much concern, so much love.

Would she still look at him the same if she knew? His heart clenched with the thought of how easily that look could change.

It had been so much easier to talk with Zara about this. He flinched inwardly at the stab of guilt. *Kao-zha-aovem-u.* Was telepathy even possible with Lois?

I'm sorry. <<*Kao-zhalish-odh khahp.*>>

No reaction.

"I..." she started but trailed off as though she was afraid to say the wrong thing. "You're home, so...I assume...things are...okay up there now?"

He nodded. "Yeah...they're...it's fine." His mind flashed to council meetings, delegations, representatives... "There's a...new governing structure."

Her face looked so tentatively hopeful. "Oh, that's good. Right?"

"They won't come back." He swallowed hard, not even sure why he'd said that.

Lois smiled at him and nodded, and she seemed to be searching his eyes for something else. He held his breath, suddenly certain his crimes were laid bare for her to see.

<<Kao-zha-aovem-u.>>

She looked away quickly, as though she'd been afraid of what she'd found. When she looked back up at him, she smiled somewhat awkwardly. "You'd said yesterday morning...that you'd learned some interesting things about your physiology, your biology?" she prompted, aiming for a safer topic, he guessed, as she moved to sit cross-legged on the floor.

He got up abruptly and sat down on the floor facing her. She put her hand back on his knee, but he wasn't sure if he wanted it there or not, and the conflict of it stretched his heart uncomfortably. She was trying, literally reaching out. And he couldn't.

Yesterday morning, the bonding, the connection...it'd seemed like a good thing, a happy thing to share. But now? Wouldn't that just hurt her, upset her, to tell her that this bond existed but that he'd somehow broken it?

"I obviously learned something about your biology. It's possible to get a human pregnant." She smiled a little, but it was awkward and unsure.

Everything was awkward. *Don't feel.* <<Kao-zha-aovem-u.>>

She continued, sounding a little hesitant, "You were... gone a long time. Nine and a half months."

Too long. He'd left her. He shouldn't have left her. Did she hate him for it as much as he hated himself? *Forgive me.*

<<Kao-zhalish-odh khahp.>>

"That's..." She hesitated. "That's enough time to... make and have a baby, you know, assuming the Kryptonian gestational period is the same as humans."

Kryptonian gestation. He knew that one. A safe, scientific answer. "Nine months, same as a human," he said.

He hadn't taken his eyes off her hand, so he'd seen it twitch slightly as he'd answered.

"Oh." Her voice was a little higher, and he couldn't guess at what her reaction meant. "Oh, okay." She took her hand back and then scratched the back of her neck.

The connection surged again. Hurt and...betrayal? It was too strong. He couldn't lose control. If she started crying, it'd be too much. When she cried, he wanted to die. He had to stay strong. *Leo ze'me com ozemo. Kao-zha-aovem-u.* His training was failing him.

<<Don't feel.>>

He took a deep breath. *Kao-zha-aovem-u. Don't feel.* He looked up at her, finally. Her eyes were glistening with threatening tears, and she was biting at her lower lip. "Are you okay, Lois?" he asked, willing concern and love into

his voice while he tried to lock away the pain. His pain. Her pain.

<<Kao-zha-aovem-u.>>

She tilted her head and looked at him strangely, seemingly searching his eyes again, his face for some sort of understanding. He didn't think she was finding it.

All of a sudden, she shoved both hands into his chest. "Clark!" she cried, her voice breaking. "Talk to me! *Feel* something. *Say* something. You were the one who was gone for nine months. But you won't talk to me about what you did while you were gone, which is fine. I get it. I know it couldn't have been easy. But it wasn't easy here, either. Not at all. It might not have been war, but it was damn hard." She scrambled to her feet and backed away from him. "You can't just...sit there and pretend you're not feeling *anything!*" She turned away from him and stood, leaning against the wall, and he saw her shoulders start to tremble.

Forgive me. Kao-zhalish-odh khahp. "I don't know what to say. I don't know what to feel, Lois. What do you want me to say?" he asked, his voice strained as he stood and talked to her back. His heart was pounding in his chest.

"*Anything!*" She spun around to face him, anguish in her face rather than the anger her words and tone suggested. "Or maybe you could tell me..." Her voice dropped to a ragged whisper. "Tell me you didn't sleep with her. That you weren't gone nine whole months so you could produce an heir. That you didn't leave me alone and pregnant to go have a baby on another planet with another woman."

Her face crumpled, and his walls fell, the full force of her feelings slamming into his chest and rending his heart. He was across the room in an instant, gathering her in his arms as she lost her fight against the tears.

He pulled her close and buried his head in her neck. "No...no no no no no. Oh, Lois!" he soothed. He'd made it. He'd finally caught her.

She let out a sob and sagged into him, bringing her arms around his waist and burying her head against his chest. But was it in time? He hadn't spared her the pain; he'd caused it.

"Never, Lois," he whispered. "I'm yours. Always."

She took a deep, shuddering breath and tightened her arms around him. She squeezed him fiercely, almost forcefully, as if she were trying to imprint herself on his soul even though she was already there, indelibly. She inhaled deeply and exhaled on a whisper he had to strain to hear. "Mine."

Another sound tugged at his senses, and Lois straightened, pushing away from him gently. He saw dark wet spots forming on her shirt.

She grabbed her breasts, covering the wet spots. “Kallie’s hungry. I’ve got to go,” she said, giving him an agonized, pleading look.

She swung the door open, and he watched in stunned silence as she collected the crying baby from his mom, who’d been headed to the kitchen, and walked out the front door.

He was still processing the moment. Everything had happened so fast, and all the feelings were swirling around and assaulting him from every angle. Like the room, the training room. But this time he was being forced *to* feel. Sadness. Grief. Anger. Relief. Love. Anguish. Guilt. Hunger. Love. Heartache. Trust. Fear. Grief. Regret. Sorrow. Love. Regret.

He didn’t know which feelings belonged to whom. Maybe they were all his, all his to bear. He closed and opened his eyes slowly and found his mom staring at him from the kitchen.

“She just needs some space,” she whispered.

He nodded slowly, and he thought he understood. There were too many feelings. It was too much. He wasn’t going to make it. He sank to the bed and wrapped his arms around his stomach to try and brace against the onslaught. He fell to his side as the sobs came, and somehow his mom was there, his head landing in her lap.

“It’s too much, Mom,” he said, his voice a gruff cry. “It’s too much.”

“I know, honey. I know.” She made soothing sounds as she rubbed his back.

Chapter 6: I’m All Right, It Only Hurts When I Breathe

Late February 1997

9 Months, 15 Days Since Clark Left Home

“And I can’t ask for things to be still again

No, I can’t ask if I could walk through the world in your eyes

Longing for home again

But home is a feeling I buried in you...”

Breathe by Melissa Etheridge

She could feel him now. Full throttle. She took straggling breaths as she paced the length of the front porch, the echo of his pain, her pain, their pain, keening and reverberating soundly in her chest.

Kallie was wailing, and Lois feared that she was feeling everything with them. She held her upright, chest to chest, and tried to slow her frantic steps. She held Kallie tightly and added a bounce to her hold to try and help soothe her. “I know, bug. I know. I’m so sorry. It’s okay. It’ll be okay. Shhhh.”

After a few minutes, Kallie quieted to a whimper, both their breathing slowed. Lois breathed a sigh of relief that

the intensity had waned, but Kallie was still hungry. She sat on the porch swing and lifted her damp shirt, and Kallie latched on ravenously.

Well, if she’d ever had any question that the connection with her Clark was wholly different, stronger and more intense than what she’d shared with the other Clark, she had her answer. She’d always felt a special connection with Clark, even before they’d started dating. It’d only grown stronger as they’d gotten closer, as partners turned into friends turned into a couple turned into lovers. And now parents.

She’d always thought this was just what falling in love and being in love felt like. But after having an echo of a connection with the other Clark, and a fierce and profound connection with her Clark...she wondered if it was a Kryptonian trait. Maybe that was what he’d intended to tell her yesterday, about his physiology?

She looked down at Kallie, finally calmed and her suckling slower and more rhythmic than frantic. Her big brown eyes seemed to search Lois’ face for a moment before focusing back on her task at hand. Did their little baby share the connection? Or had she just been feeling her mother’s upset? Her little hand was swatting against Lois’ breast. Lois put her finger against her palm, and her tiny fingers wrapped around it, grasping and holding tight. She felt love and warmth surge in her chest, soothing the pain from earlier.

“I didn’t know it was possible to love someone so much,” she told Kallie. Then she whispered, “I think I might even love you more than your daddy, but shhh, don’t tell him.”

“Hey,” a quiet voice said from behind the screen door. “I heard that.” He smiled as he opened the screen door and came out on the porch, letting it fall shut with a creak and a whump of wood against wood. He pointed up and behind him. “I guess I should oil that for Mom and Dad.”

Lois looked up at Clark, who was now freshly showered, shaven, and dressed. Her heart did a little flip. She hadn’t seen him like this in so long. *Her* Clark. A pair of worn blue jeans, a blue and gray plaid shirt tucked in, and no glasses. So handsome. And so...she furrowed her brow. She wasn’t sure what he was feeling. His face still held a tentative smile, but the connection was now only broadcasting static.

He toed one of his sneakers gently against the woodgrain in the porch. Well, nervous or unsure was definitely one of his feelings. “Is it...okay if I join you?” he asked, gesturing at the space beside her on the swing.

“Of course,” she said softly, giving him a smile.

He sat and started them swinging at a leisurely pace. Lois put her hand down on the cushion between them, palm up, and motioned for his hand. He threaded his

fingers through hers and smiled at her as though grateful for the gesture.

“You shaved,” she said idly, because she’d been distracted by the smoothness and the cut of his jaw and because she couldn’t find a better conversation starter.

His free hand came up to draw against his cheek and chin. “Sorry,” he said, grimacing.

“No, no, it’s okay! I was just noticing, that’s all. It’s good to see your face again, like normal.” She gave his hand a small squeeze.

He winced a little. “Yeah, normal.”

“Heh, yeah. I guess normal isn’t exactly our watchword,” she said, looking down at their hands. They were silent for a minute before she asked, “Are we going to be okay, Clark?”

“We have to be,” he said, his voice rough and strained. “I need us to be.”

“Me too,” she agreed and tightened her hand around his. “Should we...talk about...that?” she asked, indicating with a nod toward their bedroom and the torrential onslaught of emotions they’d shared.

“I...don’t know,” he said, sounding defeated and weak as he ran his free hand through his hair, something he always did when he was frustrated.

“We don’t have to...right now. I know that was...intense.” She paused, wondering if it was okay to ask about it, if it would upset him or not. She risked it. “I was hoping you could maybe answer one question, though?”

He looked over at her, his forehead creased with worry. “I’ll try,” he said, his voice a little ragged.

“Thanks.” She smiled at him. “I’m not even quite sure how to ask this...but, that...I don’t know what to call it, episode? Outburst? Was that...is that a Kryptonian thing? The feelings?”

She held fast to his hand and watched his face as she waited for an answer. A whole range of emotions played on his face, but it ended with the faintest of smiles.

“Yeah,” he said softly. “Yeah, it is.” He brought their joined hands over to his lap to rest on his thigh and looked down as though examining them. He ran his thumb over her forefinger gently. “I’m...I’m sorry it was so intense.”

“Hey,” she said, bringing their hands up a little to motion for him to look at her. When he did, she loosed her hand free and moved to stroke his smooth cheek. “We were both a little intense. This...us...” She sighed and shook her head, fumbling for the right words. “We have a lot of feelings to catch up on, if that makes any sense. It’s going to take some time.”

He nodded weakly and ducked his head back down, and she knew this was the wrong time to ask a follow-up question. There was probably a very good reason she couldn’t feel his emotions right now. But she couldn’t help

but wonder if this on/off switch that he seemed to have for them was a conscious choice, or if things only really worked between a Kryptonian and a human when emotions were running high.

Kallie started mewling, and Lois’ hand dropped from Clark’s face and came to pull her shirt back down. “I’m sorry, sweetie!” Lois shifted her upright and positioned her over her shoulder, supporting her head and neck with one hand and patting her back with the other. “Mommy forgot to burp you.”

She heard a...not exactly a burp and then the telltale warm wetness running down the back of her shoulder. She frowned and scrunched up her nose. Lois moved to cradle Kallie again and wiped her mouth with the hem of her now completely soiled and damp shirt.

Then she passed her off to a startled and slightly disturbed-looking Clark. He held out his arms and must have realized it was wise not to say anything. “Here, you can have your spit-up machine while I go take a shower.” She paused only to bend down and give him a quick kiss on the lips before she disappeared into the house.

Once in the bedroom, the door closed, Lois stripped off her shorts and underwear and took care in working the shirt over her head without getting any additional spit up on her. She tossed everything into the clothes hamper to worry about later.

She padded to the en suite bathroom, finding herself feeling grateful yet again that the Kents had remodeled Clark’s old room after he’d left for college and traveling. They had figured he’d want a more private setup when he was home visiting.

Now she eyed the bathtub longingly... It’d been *ages* since she’d had a proper bath, warned as she was by the doctor and the pregnancy books not to submerge herself in hot water.

She smiled and plugged the drain, then turned on the water full force and just shy of scalding. No more lukewarm baths for her! She took a moment to examine herself in the mirror, something she’d not been particularly eager to do, not that she was outright avoiding her reflection or anything. She just found it a bit disconcerting, not quite recognizing the woman staring back at her.

She pulled the elastic holding up her ponytail and let her hair fall down. It reached just past her collarbone now; the longest she’d ever had it since high school. She ran a hand through her hair and pulled away a fistful of it, frowning. It had been happening a lot lately. Usually it just came off in her brush or she had to fish it out of the shower drain. Though she’d read about hair loss after pregnancy, the reality of it was slightly jarring.

So much had changed. Her face and overall figure were

slightly fuller, and her stomach still had a pronounced pooch, though somewhat deflated, like a balloon that had lost only a little bit of air. Her hips still maintained that roundness from pregnancy, and the linea nigra — the dark line that bisected her stomach — remained.

This was not her body. Couldn't be her body. Couldn't be her face. The woman in the mirror was beyond tired with dark bags under her eyes to prove it. She wore no makeup and had been living in comfy clothes and nursing bras — or no bras — ever since Kallie was born.

Where was the woman who practically lived in well-made business suits? The woman who applied her makeup every single day and took so much pride in her appearance? Where was the woman who spent her days chasing down leads for stories at the *Daily Planet*? That woman seemed like she belonged to a different life — a life that had included Clark by her side every step of the way.

She couldn't even remember the last time she'd applied makeup, nor the last time she'd worn anything that didn't have easy access for Kallie to feed. And as for Clark? Well, he'd left and come back to a different Lois. A Lois who felt more uncertain and unsure of herself. A Lois who spent every waking moment attending to the needs of the tiny little person they'd created and who wasn't sure how to let go of some of the control in order to let him be a part of that.

A Lois who thought that taking a bath was a luxury. She sighed and shook her head, turning off the water as it finished filling the tub. She reached in and touched the water, pulling her hand back immediately. Too hot. She'd made it a little too hot. She'd need to wait a moment before she could get in. Immediately, she felt slightly anxious about taking too long in the bathroom. Kallie would be fine. She knew that and yet... Her thoughts drifted back to Clark and how lost he seemed to be.

She had him back. He was here. Their family was complete. There were times she thought she'd never see him again but somehow, miraculously, they had gotten a second chance. She might look different and feel different, but Clark was here. Things were hard right now...they were both feeling awkward and unsure, but she had to hold on to the fact that she knew he loved her.

That much she knew. That was what she held on to. Even as she watched him struggle with whatever he'd gone through on New Krypton, she told herself that eventually he'd open up. Eventually, he'd talk to her. Eventually, they would find their rhythm again — and it would feel as if he were truly home.

She tested the water again. It was still hot, but she was able to step into the tub now, allowing her body to sink down slowly into it. She let out a long satisfied breath as

she did so. She felt her body relax almost instantly. The water washed over her, and she closed her eyes, savoring the feeling of being enveloped by warmth.

Part of her wondered about how Clark felt about her body now that it'd changed. For some reason, he'd taken care to try to hide some of his more heated looks from her. She knew part of his hesitation was because of Kallie and part of it was because he was so unsure of his place now that he was back. Until this morning, she'd wondered if he also felt hesitant about pushing their physical relationship.

Her entire body had in some way, shape, and form been dedicated to the feeding and nurturing of Kallie. Clark hadn't been the only one feeling awkward. Lois hadn't realized that, until now, she hadn't given herself permission to feel desirable or sexy. Now, it was as if a curtain had suddenly lifted, and she saw the woman instead of the mother.

She hadn't realized it, but she'd been feeling as if she had to be one or the other — not both. But that was ridiculous. Lois Lane, Kerth Award-winning journalist, hadn't up and disappeared simply because she'd become a mother — any more than Clark had stopped wanting her for that same reason. She'd just hadn't given herself the time or understanding.

Lois realized now that she existed under so many different monikers — mother, partner of Clark Kent, fiancée, prize-winning journalist, but never just...Lois. But here in this bathroom, she allowed herself to let go of these titles and just...be.

She felt her body relax completely in the now-warm bath, tension she hadn't even known she had been holding onto had drained from her. And for the first time in a while she felt...whole.

Chapter 7: It's Hard to Admit How It Ends and Begins

Early March 1997

9 Months, 18 Days Since Clark Left Home

"On his face is a map of the world..."

From yesterday, it's coming

From yesterday, the fear

From yesterday, it calls him

But he doesn't want to read the message..."

From Yesterday by 30 Seconds to Mars

Almost all of the scars had disappeared already. Counting the three days he'd spent with Zara and Ching in the Earth's upper atmosphere reacclimating to the yellow sun, and the time he'd been back in Smallville...it'd only been ten days. Barely more than a week, and they'd disappeared. Like nothing had ever happened, like he hadn't suffered at all.

He stared at himself in the mirror wearing only a towel

after his morning shower, hoping Lois wouldn't come in before he'd gotten dressed. There was one scar left, and part of him wondered if it would ever fade like the others had. He ran his fingers over the right side of his abdomen, over the jagged line of gnarled flesh and unnaturally pink and rough scar tissue surrounding it — a stab wound from an assassin's dagger, dragged as it had exited his body. Not his first wound, but certainly the worst. The pain of it still scarred his memory; it'd felt like a dagger made of Kryptonite ripping through him.

He closed his eyes tight to stop the memory. He didn't need to remember, didn't need to feel. <<Kao-zha-aovem-u.>> He had hated the wounds, the resulting scars. On New Krypton, they'd only served to remind him...of so many things. Too many things. But mostly that he was different there, not himself. That he was not in any way invulnerable. And the constant reminders of his mortality had been terrifying.

Now? Back on Earth? It was almost as though the scars were some kind of proof of all he'd been through. They'd been his reminders that he'd suffered but survived everything that had tried to kill him. And having them just vanish, disappear...it made him angry. It was as if all of a sudden, the past year didn't exist.

He looked again at the remaining scar — the proof that he hadn't been as prepared as he'd thought, that he'd almost died up there and never made it back, that he'd spent weeks in a hospital bed fighting the poison ravaging his body. Proof that he'd...survived...

But had it all been worth it? Was the cost of what he missed at home and all the suffering he'd been through, was still going through, worth the lives saved on New Krypton, the lives lost, the changes made?

In truth, though, nothing had been worth it. Nothing.

He'd missed everything he'd ever dreamed of because he'd been fighting in a war, a war he'd been supposed to prevent. Killing people, with his decisions and his hands. All this while Lois had been...

His stomach clenched painfully, and he tried to push the feeling aside.

<<Kao-zha-aovem-u.>>

He should be grateful. He knew he should be. Especially for the lack of a deep scar above his right eyebrow. It wouldn't do for Clark Kent to have the same scar as Superman...assuming Superman even came back.

He studied his face in the mirror — and someone else's eyes stared back darkly at him, piercing, accusing. These were not Superman's eyes. Superman wouldn't have...

<<Kao-zha-aovem-u.>>

The yellow sun did nothing to heal his mind, erase what he'd seen, what he'd done. He had to find a way to live with that, shove that down in the mental vault he'd

had to hide his feelings in for so long. He couldn't burden Lois with any of it. If yesterday had shown him anything, it was that the feelings were too strong. Too painful. He couldn't do that to her. Wouldn't do that to her.

And...he needed — desperately — for her to still believe that his goodness, his kindness still existed. That her hero and the man she loved hadn't died up there on that cold, barren planetoid.

If he just focused on Lois and Kallie, on learning how to be a father, maybe he could somehow distract himself from everything he'd been through and make up for lost time. Time that he'd never, ever get back. Time that he'd given so freely — so foolishly — because...what? Because his birth father had said it was his destiny? That the people needed *him* to lead them?

Given how it'd all turned out...

Couldn't they have done it without him? Had his role been so pivotal, the New Kryptonians so entrenched in their dynastic alliances, that they couldn't have done it without him?

All he felt now was resentful. And angry.

##*#*

Mid-May 1996

2 Days Since Clark Left Home

"The Code before the nation. Nation before family. Family before self. It isn't just our traditional toast; it's an edict, a manifesto for New Krypton..." she trailed off and stared into the middle distance. "Our expedition — pioneered by your father, Jor-El — wasn't expecting to be orphaned by our home planet's demise. He'd thought we'd all have more time, that he'd be able to persuade the Council to take action."

Clark could sense how sad she was, a mere echo of how he'd felt thinking he was the lone survivor of his home planet all these years. The same planet, but her loss was more sharply felt.

"I'm sorry," he said. "That must have been hard."

"I was an infant at the time, like you. His last message to us was to tell us he had managed to save you." She looked up at him, the emotion she was trying to conceal becoming plain on her face. "He dreamt of a peaceful Krypton, a new planet and legacy to bring us from the darkness and chaos of a dying planet into the light of peace. We thank Rao that he was able to save you."

"But...why...send me to Earth? To be raised, and to live, and to love...only to be taken away later...well, now?"

"Well, partly because our expedition had only just left, and all we knew of our target destination was that it was a desolate, rocky planetoid. We weren't yet confident of our ability to colonize it. That, and..." She paused, like people did before they gave you bad news. "Well, it all gets a bit

technical and..."

"Please, Zara," he said as he felt a knot form in his stomach. "Continue. Jor-El...my father...never mentioned why I was sent alone."

"The route to what's now New Krypton was more direct, in a different galaxy but closer to Krypton." Zara tented her fingers again and watched as she splayed them apart, one of her nervous habits, he was starting to realize. "The course to Earth was a labyrinth of intricate trajectories through what we call hyperspace. Though the technology on Krypton at the time was advanced, they'd only managed to send unmanned probes through hyperspace before."

He sat silent for a moment, trying to take in the information.

"Your father," she continued, "was as brilliant a scientist as he was a champion of pacifism. The hyperlight drive he invented was able to take probes farther and faster than ever before, yet with the same reporting capabilities. Even still, he lacked sufficient time to convert it for piloting manned spacecraft."

"He mentioned something about that, but I didn't know what he meant," Clark said quietly. "All this is a little..." He gestured over his head and over to the vast sea of stars visible through the porthole window. "...over my head." He laughed humorlessly.

"It's a lot," Zara agreed, putting a hand on his shoulder, he assumed in an effort to reassure or comfort him. "Jor-El worked tirelessly, your mother by his side, trying to outfit a modified probe to safely carry...you. There wasn't time for anything else. Their last concern was to save you, so that you would live on even if they couldn't."

Clark felt his heart clench, hearing even further evidence of his birth parents' love for him. How Kryptonians had evolved into a seemingly uncaring society without room for love and kindness, he couldn't fathom.

"He saved you, Kal-El. And though he couldn't have known our expedition would be successful, that our race would prosper, he ultimately saved New Krypton, too."

What did that mean? How had he saved New Krypton?

As he was quickly learning was the case with Zara, he didn't always need to voice his questions out loud; sometimes his thoughts were broadcasting loud and clear without his control.

"The alliance held strong as Lord Zor-El of the House of El, your uncle, ruled our people and successfully colonized New Krypton, ensuring our survival as a race and advocating ardently for the continuation of your father's work."

"There's more. I can sense you're holding back."

Zara nodded slowly. "Six years ago...Zor-El died unexpectedly. He was old and a bit frail, but Kryptonians

aren't as fragile as humans, even on New Krypton."

"And...?"

"He had...he'd wanted change for New Krypton. A better way. He had been trying to reform the government, but he was met with resistance at every turn. Some say that he was assassinated, but given his somewhat declining health at the time, no investigations were conducted."

He wasn't sure what to say, but he didn't need to speak yet. There was still more.

"You were a last resort, Kal-El. He wanted to leave you to your life on Earth and what he hoped was your happiness. As our birth union dictated, you were the next in line for the throne. He didn't want that, thought it would only encourage the old ways too much. And he thought you deserved to live out your days on Earth as you had begun them.

"But he died too soon. The change he'd wanted to effect was still too much in its infancy. No one understood it; they fought against it, too unlike the old ways it was for them to believe it was good for anyone."

His mind was reeling a bit with all this new information, part of him wondering why he hadn't gotten the full story when he was on Earth, when they were trying to convince him to come along. Would he have? Would it have made his choice easier? Harder?

He thought he could tell where this might be headed. Or maybe he was finally starting to read her mind? Telepathy did, in fact, work both ways; he just wasn't sure how yet.

"Given my union to you, Kal-El, and the knowledge that you had been saved, the Council of Elders permitted my appointment to the throne. They gave us five years. Five years to complete your father's work on the hyperlight drive and find you, bring you home."

"But I..." How could they have wanted him, someone who knew nothing of Kryptonian ways. And Zara...he could read what was in her mind. "They didn't want a woman ruling."

"You must understand, Kal-El. Hundreds of thousands of years of tradition are not given up so easily." She paused and shook her head gently at him. "Do not feel sorry for me, Kal-El. This is the way. I'm proud to serve my people in the way that they choose, and I was supported by the Council."

"They couldn't have been happy..."

"The alliance was conciliated about my enthronement by the promise that Project Kal-El would only be permitted five years before they would allow the next in line to take my hand — Lord Nor." She paused again, briefly, when she noticed him cringe. "Yes, Project Kal-El was the initiative to convert your father's hyperlight drive for a manned spacecraft and find you. The alliance grew more

unstable as each year passed without hope of success.”

“But here you...we are,” Clark said, looking around at the seemingly non-spacecraft-like walls in wonder. “This runs on my father’s technology?” he asked, feeling... unexpectedly proud.

Zara nodded and smiled warmly. “Yes. The conversion was successful about a year ago, and the time since has been spent building this craft and deciding when the journey would take place and who would come.” She ducked her head again, taking a deep breath, and he sensed a bit of shame from her.

He stayed silent to let her continue, knowing what she would say next.

“And as you know, we spent some time on Earth observing you and testing you to ensure your aptitude for being Lord of New Krypton. You must understand that the Council, the citizens of New Krypton, had their misgivings and reluctance for placing someone on the throne who’d lived on another planet for effectively his whole life. A careful series of criteria were set that, without having met, you wouldn’t be here.” She pleaded with her eyes for forgiveness, though her station and her customs dictated she need not ask for it.

He nodded his understanding, if not his full forgiveness. They’d put innocent lives at risk to gauge his worthiness, his ability and willingness to adhere to Kryptonian traditions, laws, and societal mores. The resentment was too fresh a feeling still.

She continued. Maybe to fill the silence? Maybe to sate his curiosity? “With the uncertainty of Project Kal-El’s success, Lord Nor saw opportunity to sow discord and fear in an egomaniacal bid for power under the guise of keeping the old ways, tradition. The stability of the alliance is presently...how you’d say on Earth...holding on by a thread.”

He sat, still in silence, a feeling of grim acceptance and duty coming over him. He hadn’t realized the full magnitude of the situation. How could he have?

She turned to face him, urging him to look into her eyes, hear her thoughts...her gratitude. “You’ve seen how eager and hopeful the people were to see you assume your birthright; the sentiments at home on New Krypton are a hundredfold. You are saving us from civil war, Kal-El.” A beat. “Clark,” she said, using his real name as if to throw more weight behind her words.

He didn’t want her gratitude. Or the people’s adulation and obeisance, their genuflection. Their unquestioning acceptance and trust of his leadership now that he was officially Lord Kal-El of the Noble House of El.

It didn’t matter that he’d supposedly won the people just by assuming the throne, just by having the right name and the right gender. He knew he didn’t have the full trust

of the Council, and it was clear that the nobles of the other houses in the alliance remained hesitant, holding their collective breaths until they saw him in action. And that worried him greatly. He didn’t speak the language of the law or the land. Hell...he didn’t know the law, either.

“Clark,” Zara repeated his name, this time with different intent, to interrupt his spiraling. “Take some time to rest and process in your bedchamber. Have your emotions there, for you cannot show your weakness of sentiment and emotion in front of the people. Ching will begin training with you in a few hours.”

“Training?” He was almost afraid to ask.

“Yes. Lieutenant Ching is an accomplished Drei master and will teach you how to fight, to defend yourself, and to attack.” She sensed his protests. “You must. It’s in your best interests and that of your people.”

He nodded reluctantly.

“You’ll also train in *Jahghah*. Restraint,” she answered before he could ask. “A Kryptonian, especially a ruler, a leader, must show strength, discipline, and self-restraint. *Jahghah* will help you deny and control your emotions.”

He tried to block the emotions now, the onslaught of so much unfamiliarity and homesickness and heartache and fear and grief and wonder and uncertainty.

Zara closed her eyes and bowed her head. “Ching will show you.” She turned and walked away towards her own bedchambers. “Rest now, Kal-El,” she said before disappearing into her room, the doors hissing shut behind her.

He could see her out of the corner of his eye, watching him from the armchair as he changed Kallie’s diaper. “What?” he asked, irritated.

She opened her mouth and closed it again, shaking her head slightly and then pretending to read her book again.

Kallie had been fussing the entire time, and he’d noticed she had a bit of a rash. She had let it be known to the whole household that she had not liked the feel of the baby wipe against her sensitive, red skin. He was doing his best to calm her and hold her still while he grabbed the baby powder.

“Just say it, Lois. I don’t know if I’m doing something wrong if you don’t tell me.”

She looked up from her book, her lips twisted just shy of a scowl. “It’s just...the cream works a lot better for the rashes. The baby powder doesn’t really do much.”

He huffed a short breath and set the powder down and grabbed the cream. “Then why is the baby powder even here?” he asked tightly as he applied cream to Kallie’s rash, then fastened up her diaper followed by her onesie.

“I don’t know!” she said, exasperated. “The book said buy it, so I bought it. But it doesn’t work very well for the

rashes.”

She was standing now and heading toward him. He picked Kallie up and cradled her, her fussing at least quieted now that the diaper issue was resolved. Lois reached out for the baby. “Here, let me have her...”

“I can do it!” he ground out quietly, sounding slightly more curt than he’d meant to. “She’ll be fine. We’ll be fine.”

Lois grabbed her chest then let go and reached for Kallie again. “She’s hungry.”

“I can feed her,” he offered. She’d been the one so insistent on including him.

He watched her take a deep breath to try and calm herself. “I’m sorry,” she said, her voice softer now. “All the stuff for the pump isn’t washed right now. If I don’t do it, I will *hurt*.”

“Oh...right,” he said quietly, frowning. “Sorry.” Despite his irritation, the guilt and frustration of not knowing, not remembering all these little things, bled through. He handed Kallie over, and watched Lois deftly reseat herself and get the baby latched all in one movement.

He sat on the corner of the bed facing Lois. He’d been trying to focus on only letting in the good feelings, but the more he did that, the more *all* the feelings came through. It was becoming increasingly harder to hide the other feelings.

He hated bickering, being so irritable with her. He hated feeling resentful of all the things he’d missed and all the things he didn’t know. He hated the guilt that gnawed at him and the pain of knowing he’d hurt her, was still hurting her despite how much he tried not to feel it. He hated being home but feeling like he didn’t quite fit in in his own home, with his own family.

Where? Where else was he supposed to feel at home if not here? They’d taken everything from him, everything he’d ever wanted, dreamed of. And now that he was back, he couldn’t even feel...comfortable, normal, in the only place he’d ever felt truly accepted, the only place he’d ever truly belonged — with his parents and with Lois.

He had never, never felt more alienated.

And it was killing him. He watched, his heart painfully twisted and clenched, as Lois nursed Kallie in their not-so-comfortable silence. She didn’t look comfortable either, and he was sure he could feel her anguish in his chest, bleeding into his. *Forgive me*.

<<Kao-zhalish-odh khahp.>>

She looked at him, and his voice came out a strained whisper. “If I’d have known...” He gestured at their daughter, so innocent in all of this.

Lois’ smile was tight, and he was having trouble reading her emotions, if there was resentment mixed in

with the anguish. If he tried, *all* the emotions started flooding in, hers and his. She didn’t say anything.

“I never should have...” He felt a lump forming in his throat.

<<Kao-zha-aovem-u.>>

“What, Clark? Never should have what?” she said slowly, impatiently, almost daring him to say the wrong thing.

“I never should have left!” he blurted out.

“No. You shouldn’t have.” Her voice was low and serious, and he could see her slight trembling from the effort to keep her tears from spilling.

“But I had to.” He strained to get the words out, a hoarse plea that had no hope of making things right again.

“I know,” she whispered as the tears started slipping out. “I know.”

And then all the emotions bombarded him at once, his stomach knotting and his chest constricting painfully. His. Hers. New. Old. It was too much, and he needed to escape.

He stood abruptly and muttered some apology. “I need...need space.” And he left, not looking back because he couldn’t bear to see the look on her face.

He was out of the room and the house in seconds, the whack and creak of the screen door thumping shut behind him as he took off into the sky. And her voice, oh her voice, full of anguish, reached his ears despite her whispered cry, “Don’t leave me.” It ripped through him, sharper and more painful than any of the daggers had been.

<<Kao-zhalish-odh khahp.>>

It was only a few minutes before he came back down, for fear of anyone seeing a flying man in the Kansas afternoon skies. He caught sight of his treehouse and was drawn to it, craving the solitude the little fortress provided.

He flew inside, sat on the familiar but worn planks of wood that made up the floor. And then he buried his face in his hands and cried.

It was hours later when he finally came back to the house, and everyone was asleep already — he’d checked. He felt every bit a coward for it, too. Part of him wondered and almost hoped he’d catch flak from his mother for missing dinner, but she’d probably spare him the lecture, all things considered.

Kallie seemed to be in his parents’ room for the night, and Clark wondered if it was just their pre-determined schedule for night feedings or if Lois had arranged it in hopes of waiting up for him. As he slipped into their room and closed the door silently behind him, the guilt tugged at his heart. *Don’t leave me*, her plea echoed in his mind.

She moaned lightly in her sleep and rolled over beneath the covers. He longed to go to her. Needed to go to her. Part of him didn’t feel like he had any right to, especially

after how he'd taken off for hours with no explanation. It didn't help that they'd been bickering more lately. This wasn't at all how it was supposed to be.

The pain and yearning in his heart outweighed the guilt, though. The nights on New Krypton had always been the hardest, and the times he'd missed her the most...the times he'd been allowed to miss her. So, he silently changed into a t-shirt and sweatpants to sleep in, and he climbed slowly into bed.

He tried his best not to disturb her, but as he was almost settled under the covers, she made another light noise and shifted again. He laid his head down on the pillow gently and tried to stay still so as not to wake her. And then he watched, frozen in apprehension, as she moved toward him and nestled herself against his side with her head coming to rest in the crook of his shoulder. Her heart rate told him she was still sleeping, but she'd sought him out. He wrapped his arm around her more fully, and she snuggled in closer.

"I'm so glad you're home." Her voice was just a murmur, but its sound reverberated through his chest.

He placed an aching tender kiss on her forehead, wishing he could somehow convey everything he needed to say to her, how sorry he was, and how fiercely and endlessly he loved her.

Chapter 8: Do You Know How Much It Hurts?

Early March 1997

9 Months, 19 Days Since Clark Left Home

"No matter how many miles stand in between

In my heart is where you'll be

Holding on to all our dreams

With everything, everything but me..."

Everything But Me by Daughtry

It was late morning after everyone had had breakfast, and Lois was lying down in bed, nursing Kallie and dozing on and off, when she felt small, intermittent shocks of grief and sadness run through her. It took a few minutes to realize what was happening, and another few minutes to get a sense of which emotions they were.

She scooted carefully away from Kallie so as not to wake her, and she pulled her shirt down as she sat up. She ran a hand through her hair and hoped for the best that it wasn't sticking up in seven different directions.

He hadn't gotten home last night until after she'd been asleep, but at least she'd woken up in his arms. Breakfast had been a little strained, and no one had talked about the elephant in the room. She took a deep breath in and headed out of the bedroom to find Clark.

He was in the living room on the couch in a pair of dark gray sweats and a light gray t-shirt. He was barefoot

and sitting cross-legged on the cushions, certainly looking comfortable. But she could feel — at least sporadically — that his heart was heavy. When she recognized what he had in his lap, she instantly knew why.

Kallie's baby book. Well, to be more accurate, her pregnancy book and Kallie's baby book, something she'd put together so that if — when — Clark came back, he could see...everything he'd missed? It almost seemed cruel, in a way, to have an album that would cause him such pain, but...it was all she could think to do, and she knew he'd rather have this than nothing at all.

But that didn't take the hurt of it away.

She padded over to him, feeling a bit hesitant after yesterday, not wanting to overwhelm him. In addition to his emotional...onslaught and self-seclusion, they'd been...well, not exactly arguing, but short-tempered and irritable with one another the past week.

"Hey," she said softly as she approached.

He looked up at her, his eyes glassy but holding no actual tears. He said nothing, but he tilted his head slightly at the cushion next to him, a silent invitation.

"I'd forgotten about that." She kept her voice quiet as she spoke, sitting down near him. "I guess there are some newer pictures from the past few weeks that still need to be developed and added." She put a tentative hand on his knee. "And the ones since you came home. The best part of the story." She looked up at him, hoping to catch his eyes. He gave her a small smile and put his hand over hers. Her heart relaxed a little.

He cleared his throat before he spoke, his voice gruff with emotion. "Tell me the story?" A few tears slipped out and trailed down his cheeks.

"Of course, love." She reached up with her free hand to brush his tears away. She couldn't tell if her heart was breaking for both of them and what they'd lost or if the pain in her chest was his. It was harder to breathe this way, and she felt her own tears starting, but she was reassured by the fact that he was at least feeling *something* and that he wasn't shutting her out this time. She hoped desperately this wouldn't be too much for him to handle.

He turned back to the first page of the album so that she could start at the beginning with him. And she told him how she'd found out she was pregnant and the way she wished she could have told him. He looked through each photograph of her in profile at different stages in her pregnancy, and she was suddenly very grateful for Martha's insistence on taking those "belly pictures" she'd felt so ridiculous posing for. He ran his fingers almost reverently over the bump in each picture, and her heart broke a little more.

Then they came to the ultrasound pictures. "Kallie's first pictures," she said softly, as she reached over to run

her own fingers over the grainy, black and white trio of images. The larger one, the best one, was a 4 x 6 of Kallie in profile, a blobbish, vaguely baby-shaped thing surrounded by a black void and scratchy, curved white lines. She got half a smile out of him when she joked about how hard it was to actually make out anything resembling a baby. But then she pointed out the different parts the tech had shown her.

Lois told him all the things, every detail she could remember but hadn't written in the album. Cravings. Worries. Joys. Morning sickness. Doctor's appointments. Aching feet and swollen ankles. New, bigger clothes. Shopping for all the baby things. The messy and painful and blissful parts of labor and birth. The first night home and how she'd been one hundred percent unsure of everything and how Martha had supported her every step of the way. How she'd missed him and longed for him during every second of it.

##*#*

Mid-September 1996

4 Months, 2 Days Since Clark Left Home

Lois sat in her Jeep in front of the old farmhouse, just staring off into the distance. The engine made the occasional clicking sound as it cooled, and she was reminded once again just how quiet it was out here in the country. She'd only been here about a week, and while it was starting to feel a little more comfortable...it was just...

Everything was different. Everything.

And time was...moving interminably slow but altogether too fast. The days felt longer out here. Too long, sometimes.

And maybe that was because she was used to the fast-paced city, its excitement and hustle and bustle and noise, and her job, an exciting lead around every corner and the pride of exposing the crime and greed to make the world a better place. Or maybe because things were slower out here, and out here...was Clark. All Clark. Everything Clark except for Clark.

Everything was different, and the last thing she wanted to be doing was going to this next ultrasound appointment without Clark. Somehow, she was twenty weeks along already. Clark hadn't even been gone twenty weeks. She cursed the person who had come up with such a ridiculous calculation method, no doubt a man.

So, here she was, eighteen weeks without Clark and twenty weeks pregnant. Time didn't make sense anymore. And nothing made sense without Clark.

She was stalling. She should be at least thinking about trying to come up with the right words to ask Martha, but she couldn't even give herself that excuse. She realized that her hands were still gripping the steering wheel.

Releasing and flexing her fingers, she shook her head to try and clear her thoughts. "Get it together, Lane."

After a deep breath, she got out of the car and made her way to the small corner of the barn that housed Martha's art studio. An old radio played a slightly staticky version of "My Girl" on the oldies station, and she could hear Martha happily singing along. Lois felt even more hesitant about interrupting her now.

Instead, she stood and watched for a minute. It was an odd sort of beautiful, watching her decide where this bit and that bob went. She couldn't say she understood or quite appreciated the woman's art, but Lois could see that it brought her joy to make it, and that was a beautiful art in and of itself.

Lois toed a sneaker at a few stray pebbles that had found their way to the open doorway. The song came to an end just then, so she cleared her throat to get Martha's attention.

She turned around and smiled. "Oh, Lois, dear! How did your appointment go?" she asked eagerly as she put down her screwdriver and the piece of scrap metal in her hands. "It was twenty weeks today, right? Halfway through now!" This woman had some secret sort of way of finding just the right tone to encourage the excitement Lois desperately needed to feel during this pregnancy while also allowing space for the complicated sadness that came with every milestone that Clark missed.

"Yeah, twenty weeks." A hand went to her belly and smoothed over it, coming to rest on the side where the baby liked to kick the most. She wasn't even sure how to ask. "I, uh...Dr. McNeil says I need an anatomy scan, and she referred me to the hospital in Wichita, and I was —"

"Oh my! Is there something wrong or...um, different... she's concerned about?" She glanced worriedly at Lois' belly and came towards her.

"Oh, sorry! No. No, nothing's wrong." Shoot. She was bungling this badly. "I mean, I assume nothing's wrong. Or that's what they'll check with the scan? But the doctor's not worry — it's routine. A routine thing. Well...a routine thing when you've got a routine pregnancy, and I...I mean, everything seems okay so far, but..." she trailed off, not wanting to finish the thought, though she wasn't even quite sure why.

Martha nodded quickly, and Lois knew she'd instantly understood. "You don't want to be alone. Of course not." Then the woman who would be her mother-in-law closed the distance between them and placed her hand over Lois'. "When are we going?"

A wave of relief ran through her, and a few tears slipped out. "Tomorrow at four?"

"Perfect. It's a date." She wrapped Lois in a brief hug and stood back, holding Lois by the shoulders as if to

appraise her...no, admire her before stepping back and dropping her arms.

"Thanks, Martha," Lois said shyly, still entirely unused to such focused attention, at least not when it came to her personal life, especially when it wasn't from Clark.

"You're welcome, dear," Martha said as she slowly turned back to her art bench, picking up the screwdriver and a different piece of scrap metal. "I'll see you for supper," she called over her shoulder.

As Lois made her way slowly back to the house, she wondered if she would ever get used to this, this gentle, easy affection and unconditional acceptance. It was familiar, of course, but it was a wholly different thing than loving and being loved by Clark — that had been hard won, not an easy road, but infinitely worth it. Was she easier to love now? More lovable? Had Clark done that, made her more lovable?

No, he'd made it easier for her to *accept* love.

Lois' gaze darted around the exam room. There were posters and tacky artwork scattered on the walls in what was clearly an attempt at being serene and maternal, but they'd failed miserably. There was one poster that reminded women about the importance of staying hydrated while pregnant. That seemed in especially poor taste. Didn't most women come here with uncomfortably full bladders, as she'd been directed to? Shouldn't they have express or priority service for pregnant people with full bladders?

She snuck a glance at Martha, who was sitting next to the exam table in one of the two chairs in the room, awkwardly holding both their purses. But then she must have realized the awkwardness because she set them down on the seat next to her.

She and Martha weren't best friends by any means, but they could usually hold a conversation without too much effort. Now, it seemed that neither of them could figure out what to say. And Martha seemed quieter and more distracted than her normal self.

Lois swung her sock-clad feet gently back and forth, trying to shed some of her nervous energy, as she finally dared to look at the giant piece of equipment to her right that would show her...she didn't even know what...the fetus? The baby? Her world? Her future?

The machine didn't look all that different than the machine in Metropolis had when she'd had her first scan. And maybe it was the same, just a different brand or model or something? She wished she'd thought to ask follow-up questions of Dr. McNeil, but she'd been too...worried? Panicked? There was many a journalist in Metropolis that would have loved to see the moment when Lois Lane had been too unnerved and emotional to ask a follow-up

question.

As it was now, she had no idea if this was a fancier, more technical scan or...just a longer one with more details? All she knew was that they were about to look to see if anything about her baby — her half-Kryptonian baby — was abnormal. Nervous was an understatement, and she was endlessly grateful that Martha was with her.

That said, she couldn't stop her mind from wandering...wondering how different this would be if Clark had been here. They would have asked *all* the follow-up questions and been fully prepared for this appointment. And she likely would have been the one comforting Clark, telling him there was nothing to worry about and that things would be just fine.

But she had no idea if things would be just fine. And Clark wasn't here. He was about as far away from *here* as he could be.

Her breath hitched, and she felt the tears prickling at the back of her eyes. She felt like she couldn't breathe. And then suddenly Martha was back to her normal self and by her side, holding her hand and rubbing her back while murmuring something. Lois couldn't make out words, but she could breathe again.

She was vaguely aware that the door had opened, and then there was a perky voice in a white lab coat. "All right, Ms. Lane, I'm Stephanie, and I'll be your tech today. Are you ready to see your baby?"

No. No, she wasn't ready at all. Was she allowed to say no? She just nodded shakily, and Martha squeezed her hand.

"Who do we have with us today?" Stephanie asked, and to her credit, had toned down the chipper in her voice, settling for a gentle and comforting tone. She thumbed the button to turn on the monitor as she waited patiently for Lois' answer.

"This is my...uh, my husband — my fiancé — " Her breath caught again, and she stuttered to a halt.

Martha's hand left Lois' back and crossed in front of her to shake the technician's hand. "I'm Martha Kent, Lois' mother-in-law. My son had to go out of town unexpectedly on business, and Lois was gracious enough to let me tag along instead."

"I'm glad you could make it," Stephanie said to Martha, then she turned to look at Lois, putting a gentle hand on her shoulder. "I'm sure he wishes he were here just as much as you do."

Lois just nodded and tried to smile a little, beyond thankful that the woman was so adept at reading the room.

"Don't worry," Stephanie said as she put on some gloves and adjusted the ultrasound machine so they could all have a good view of the screen. "We'll take some pictures for him, and I'm sure you and Grandma here can

fill him in on what he's missed, okay?"

"Thanks," Lois said softly as she wiped a few stray tears from her face.

Martha gave her hand another squeeze and side-stepped a bit towards the head of the exam table to be more out of the way.

Stephanie made a wry face, half a smile and one raised eyebrow. "Ready for the stirrups?" she asked as she pulled them out.

Lois lay back on the exam table, the white paper crinkling below her, and put her feet up in the stirrups. Stephanie had her tug her pants down to just below her hips, and then she tucked a pad into the waistband — to keep the gel off her pants, she said.

"Okay, this gel is going to feel funny, but I like to try and keep it at least a little warm so it's not a total shock to your system."

The gel definitely felt weird, but more uncomfortable was the pressure on her stomach and therefore her bladder as Stephanie moved the small wand around. Lois winced a little at the effort not to pee.

"So, did you have your AFP test done about a month ago?"

Lois bit her lip and hesitated a moment before answering. "Uh, no. We decided not to." She wished she sounded a little more confident.

"AFP?" Martha asked.

Lois turned her head towards Martha, trying to convey her worry, her choice more with her eyes than her words. "It's a...blood test that checks for abnormalities."

She was relieved to see Martha nod in both public and secret understanding. Lois shouldn't have worried. Martha had raised a full-blooded Kryptonian; she was well-practiced at avoiding medical suspicion.

"That's okay. Don't stress about it," Stephanie assured her. "Plenty of mommas — parents — choose not to do it. I just wanted to know if there was anything I ought to look out for that they didn't send over in the order."

Stephanie was quiet for a few minutes as she navigated the wand around on her belly, pressing buttons and turning dials with skill and efficiency. There were numbers and lines and large swathes of scratchy white lines amidst areas of solid black.

Lois couldn't really make out anything...maybe there was a vague, baby-shaped thing there. But did it look normal? Stephanie was — frustratingly — not giving away any details with her facial expressions or body language. Why wasn't she saying anything?

Lois gave Martha a worried glance and held tight to her hand even though she could feel her own hand starting to get sweaty. Everything was okay, wasn't it? It had to be okay.

Martha cleared her throat. "How's everything looking? We're trying to make heads or tails of things over here, and we're not having any luck," Martha prompted, her voice light with a touch of humor.

Lois wondered how much of that was forced. Was Martha just as worried?

Stephanie gave them both a warm and hopefully reassuring smile. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to leave you hanging. Normally, Dr. Xavier will read the scans and then let you know the results, but...you know what? It's the end of the day, and she's probably just finishing up for the day, so I'll bet I can snag her and bring her in to read things now for you. Just let me get a few more measurements, and I'll go get her."

Lois nodded gratefully.

After a few more minutes, Stephanie finished up and let Lois know she could clean up and finally use the restroom across the hall while she went to get the doctor.

When Lois got back to the exam room, she gave Martha an awkward smile that hardly deserved the label. She longed to talk with Martha now that they had the room to themselves for a few minutes, figured there would be a hundred and one things she wanted to say to her, but she couldn't think of a single one. But it didn't matter. Martha seemed to understand, and she held her hand and gave it a squeeze.

As much as Lois had anticipated the doctor's arrival and what she had to say, Lois had a hard time focusing on any of the words. Her mind was a jumble of thoughts and emotions, and all she heard was 'normal' and 'just fine' over and over while Martha held her hand and rubbed her back. And while most of her sagged inwardly with relief at the words, some small part of her resisted the very notion that her and Clark's child could be normal when all they would ever be was extraordinary.

##*#*

They'd long since set the photo album aside, but she continued to answer all his questions about pregnancy and birth, grateful for the opportunity she hadn't been sure she'd ever get. At some point, she'd shifted and was now lying across his lap with her head resting in the crook of his arm, his other arm draped loosely over her abdomen. Eventually, his questions ran out, and they just stayed there quietly for a few minutes and let the odd melange of emotions pass over and through and between them, Lois grateful for this moment of respite from the tension and uncertainty, wistful and brief as it may be.

Her fingertips loosely traced the contours of his hand on her stomach, and her mind wandered back to a simpler time, back when trying to figure out how to deal with having a new boyfriend who wasn't so normal or ordinary after all was her biggest problem. They'd talked then only

briefly about marriage and kids, and only vaguely, really. Clark had been so desperate to show her how terrifically ordinary he could be.

But there on that island, and plenty of moments since then, she'd seen glimpses of something he wanted more desperately than being ordinary. As much as she hated what fate had done to them, all the struggles they'd faced and how much pain they'd been through — were *still* going through — she couldn't be anything but thankful for the one good thing they'd gotten.

Chapter 9: Don't Know What You're Expecting of Me

Early March 1997

9 Months, 22 Days Since Clark Left Home

"I've become so tired; so much more aware

I'm becoming this; all I want to do

Is be more like me, and be less like you..."

Numb by Linkin Park

The groan of the hitch and ball grinding against each other grated on Clark's ears as he turned the old truck and flat deck trailer onto the two-lane highway. He wished he'd remembered to grease it before they'd left. He shook his head slightly to try and rid his mind of the sound of metal against metal, but the silence inside the cab of the truck was more uncomfortable.

Clark glanced over again at his dad in the passenger seat — from all outward appearances, it seemed like he was just peacefully watching the miles and miles of flat farmland go by. New Krypton's terrain had been anything but flat — it was rough, rocky, and unforgiving. It was lucky, Clark mused, that their advanced technology included all manner of hovercraft. Then again, had it not, they might not have colonized the planet in the first place.

Clark sighed heavily. He didn't want to be thinking about New Krypton. He didn't want to be driving out to the Tractor Supply in Emporia. He didn't want to feel any kind of resentful toward his dad for needing help with getting fence replacement supplies or for dragging him out of the house at an early hour.

He wanted to be home with Lois and Kallie. He needed to be. Everything had been hard and stressful lately, and he felt like he'd been doing nothing but upsetting and irritating everyone around him. The guilt tore at him, having to spend time away from Lois, away from Kallie, when what he needed to be doing was making up for all that he'd missed.

But on the same side of that token...there'd been plenty he'd missed with his dad, too. Weekly dinners, for one. Their talks. More importantly, though, he'd missed almost a whole year of helping his dad on the farm, all the maintenance and upkeep he usually helped out with. He

wasn't sure he'd ever be able to make up for all the time he'd been gone.

He hated that he was even having these thoughts on this drive, this so-familiar drive from Smallville to Emporia, now sullied by guilt and resentment. He'd always loved driving to the supply store with his dad, ever since he was a kid, most of it on this long stretch of two-lane highway. It had been a time when he'd get his dad's undivided attention, when they didn't have to be focused on the manual labor of farm work and could have actual conversations.

"Sorry I wasn't around to help you get the fence repaired sooner, Dad. I know it's been on your list for a while now."

"Nothing that couldn't have waited, else I'd have hired a hand by now," his dad said simply as he took his glasses off to clean them with his handkerchief.

Clark's hand came up to his face to check that his glasses were in place. This was the first time he'd worn them since...since before he'd left for New Krypton. He hated that they felt unfamiliar and that Lois had had to gently suggest and remind him to wear them in the first place. They were getting more comfortable as the morning went on, which only made sense, since he'd worn them for decades of his life, but still...he hated that there was any unfamiliarity at all. Too many reminders of New Krypton and how different he'd been on that hostile rock they'd called a planet.

A small part of him even wondered if he need bother with the glasses any more at all. He had trouble seeing how he had any business putting on the suit again when he'd managed to compromise every single one of Superman's morals. *No! <<Zha!>>* he told himself violently. He didn't want to think about that. Didn't want to feel.

<<Kao-zha-aovem-u.>>

He heard an impossibly soft creaking and realized he needed to relax his grip on the steering wheel before he made permanent indentations. He flexed his hands a bit, stretching and splaying out his fingers, before grabbing the wheel again.

The miles kept stretching on, and Clark wished this awkward, uneasy silence would disappear. He didn't even know what to talk to his dad about. While his dad wasn't typically a chatterbox, there was usually an easy ebb and flow to the conversation during their time together. It made Clark wonder if his dad didn't know what to talk about either, or if his dad had gotten direction from his mom on 'waiting until he was ready to talk.'

Something in the distance caught his eye, up ahead on the opposite side of the two-lane highway. Maybe a few miles away but getting closer quickly, given their speed.

He reached up to tip his glasses down ever so slightly to take a look, and his heart lurched at the sight and started racing. For long seconds, he was frozen, his mind refusing to process the image in front of him. Then he shoved his glasses back up quickly, and he could feel himself get a bit restless in the driver's seat.

It was fine. It looked like everyone was fine. Everything was fine. A dull ache started somewhere in the back of his throat, his chest squeezed painfully, and he could feel his palms getting a bit sweaty against the steering wheel as the overturned box truck came more clearly into view. Every foot closer confirmed more details about what he'd seen with his enhanced vision. The truck's contents were strewn across the side of the highway, the detritus spanning at least 100 yards' distance. Supplies. Medical supplies.

"Oh!" his dad said. "Oh no, looks like an accident up ahead!"

"Yeah," Clark replied stiffly, images of a different vehicle on a different road invading his mind — a flash of an explosion and scattered, burning supplies.

The mid-sized delivery truck was on its side, the roll-up door was most of the way open, and Clark could see that it was more than half empty. He was staring for half a second before he realized he'd slowed a little, his foot having eased up on the gas pedal. His hearing picked up the crackle of a radio dispatch, telling the driver assistance was on the way but it would be hours, then more heated words exchanged.

Clark shook his head to clear his thoughts and the rest of the transmission, and he punched down on the gas pedal again, speeding past just as they were coming alongside the wreckage.

<<Kao-zha-aovem-u.>>

He heard his dad clear his throat. "Clark, don't you think we should stop? See if he needs help?"

"Everything's fine. He looks fine," he said, trying to block the images and feelings that were threatening to overwhelm him. "It's not like it's a job for Superman."

##*#*

Early-September 1996

3 Months, 23 Days Since Clark Left Home

"Who am I, Jen Mai?" Clark ground out, feeling his anger simmering just under the surface. "I am your commander."

Jen Mai flinched ever so slightly, and Clark couldn't help but feel smug about it. His most trusted advisors were...not always people he could trust. At least not to think like him, anticipate his needs, or strategize in a way that made sense to him. No one here thought like him, it seemed. No one.

Trey cleared his throat. "If I may, Lord Kal-El, as your

advisor, I have to agree with Jen Mai in strongly endorsing a lethal strike by our forces here. They are blatantly violating the ban on transporting supplies into Kir-Tahn. Termination with extreme prejudice is the only way to enforce the ban."

"Medical supplies are non-negotiable," Clark said through clenched teeth. "I will not order a strike on a resource that is dwindling as we speak." Clark had already felt uncomfortable with the ban itself; it was bad enough when the deaths were merely theoretical...only eventual. Because maybe he could have resolved this conflict before the Kir-Tahnians died of starvation.

He was trying, trying so hard to make things work. Bury his feelings. Make things make sense. Not endanger any lives. Their cruel disregard for the sanctity of life was infuriating. He felt nauseated.

"Look at the map, both of you," Clark said, a sharp edge to his tone. "Tell me what you see."

Trey answered, "Troop deployments, alliance territory divisions, terrain designations..."

Clark swiped at the digital map and zoomed in on the area in question, and he glared as he indicated they should look again.

"Sector 4B, sir," said Jen Mai.

Clark bit back a growl. "Kir-Tahn. Population 342. Women, children, men. Families."

"My Lord," Jen Mai said. "It's an insignificant percentage of the population."

A quiet fury raged inside, seeping into his voice. "Since when are lives — Kryptonian lives — insignificant?"

Ching's mind tugged at his consciousness from the back of the room. <<Restraint. Jahghah.>>

<<But I'm trying to save lives. You brought me here to prevent war, and we're AT war. What do you want me to do?>>

<<Every war harms the innocent. Do the most good. Jahghah. Now. Or you risk losing the support you do have. You've been slipping too much lately.>>

Clark felt his jaw tic as he tried to push down his outrage and swallow back the bile threatening at the back of his throat.

Trey was talking now, and Kal-El brought his focus back.

"...the vehicle is a means to an end. Hopefully Lord Nor's end. If we strike now, it is but a few lives to advance our position in the war, secure our command. For the good of the people, Lord Kal-El. It's the most expeditious option. *L'ete ve'me com emmeg. The Code before the nation.*"

Kao-zha-aovem-u. The fury fell back down to a simmering anger.

Jen Mai muttered, his disdain palpable. “He shouldn’t need reminding of The Code.”

Trey gave him a sharp warning. “Jen Mai. We are here to advise. You should do well to remember our place.”

He saw Jen Mai’s glare at Trey before he started in again. “My Lord,” Jen Mai was back at it again. “These are headed for Lord Nor’s camp, where they’re essentially lost to us anyway. It’s a strategic strike that could finally put Nor at a great disadvantage. Kir-Tahn is committing treason by providing safe harbor.”

“We don’t know that it was treason! Nor is very capable of invading and capturing an entire village, especially one of this size,” Clark insisted.

“Lord Kal-El,” Trey said in a tone more serious than before. “Lor Nor is *from* Kir-Tahn. We have every belief that his presence is not only welcomed, but celebrated. We cannot allow anyone to violate the supply ban.”

He could practically feel Jen Mai’s contempt, Trey’s disappointment. That he should have remembered. Should have known.

Kao-zha-aovem-u.

Kal-El swallowed and closed his eyes, but the image of the map still showed clearly in his mind. The number of lives he was holding in hands...starving them, forsaking them. He’d already made the hard decision — the ban, a final siege to force Nor’s surrender. Was sacrificing the contents of a supply truck and murdering the few lives within worse than a siege?

He swallowed thickly, hoping it wasn’t outwardly evident — his indecision, his hesitation, his utter revulsion at the idea of killing anyone. But what if the Kir-Tahnians were aiding and abetting Nor and his army? What then? Were their lives a worthy sacrifice to stop the madness and Nor’s threat to Kal-El’s rule?

An attendant entered the war room and handed Kal-El a scroll. He nodded a curt thanks and unrolled it as the attendant left again. His blood ran cold when he read the scouting report. There were medical personnel aboard the transporter vehicle. Doctors and nurses.

Kao-zha-aovem-u.

The room was silent, waiting for his command as though they knew there was only one choice to be made. He couldn’t afford to show any more weakness. Ching was warning him daily of his inadequate performance and how much of a threat it was to his position; the people’s fealty to the House of El was faltering.

Zara and Ching had both shown him more than enough evidence that Nor’s reign would only bring about pain and suffering and the eventual ruin of New Krypton, that he would enslave all who opposed him. There wasn’t another option. He was powerless.

He steeled himself. *Kao-zha-aovem-u.* Do the most

good. Half a dozen to save thousands. Tens of thousands. There wasn’t another option. *Forgive me. Kao-zhalish-odh khahp.*

“Terminate the vehicle,” said Kal-El, his voice cold and hardened even to his own ears.

Kao-zha-aovem-u. Kao-zha-aovem-u.

“As it is so ordered,” said Jen Mai with a curt nod as he manipulated the map in front of them. He zoomed into the satellite visual, close in on the vehicle, and made a series of keystrokes to engage the drone strike.

Kal-El’s entire stomach felt like lead. *Kao-zha-aovem-u. Kao-zha-aovem-u.* He didn’t let himself close his eyes. He couldn’t show that weakness. And he deserved to watch what he was responsible for. This was the only option.

He swallowed again. *Kao-zha-aovem-u.* The vehicle exploded before their eyes, the debris and shrapnel — the supplies and people — scattered for miles. They’d gotten so close to the village. Too close. His hesitation might have cost more lives.

He vaguely heard Trey’s voice as he announced a successful destruction of the target and congratulated him, assuring him that the other lords of the alliance would be pleased to hear it.

Kal-El nodded stiffly. “I’ll be in my quarters. Not to be disturbed for anything less than Level 2 alerts.” He didn’t wait for a response before he walked out of the room. He just made it to the toilet before he heaved the contents of his stomach and then collapsed to the floor. *Kao-zha-aovem-u.*

Kao-zhalish-odh khahp.

*#####

Clark could swear he still tasted the bile in the back of his throat. His eyes slowly swam back into focus, the Kansas highway stretching out before him. He could feel sweat on his brow, and he knew in the back of his mind it shouldn’t be there, not with his powers back.

His eyes flicked up to the rearview mirror. The wreckage was miles behind them, and his dad was quiet beside him. He’d be horrified if he knew. Disappointed. Disgusted.

The mild tension in the cab of the truck had only increased, and Clark found himself needing to loosen the grip on the steering wheel again. He’d probably left indentations.

“Everyone was fine. No one was hurt,” he told Jonathan, though maybe he was trying to convince himself. Absolve himself somehow.

“I’m sure you’re right. It looked like it was all handled,” Jonathan said.

“And it’s not like I could have righted the truck... I mean, I have my powers, but...”

"I know, son. I know," his dad said quietly, putting a hand briefly on Clark's shoulder.

Chapter 10: Remind Me Once Again Just Who I Am

Mid-March 1997

9 Months, 25 Days Since Clark Left Home

"Remind me once again just who I am because I need to know

You say I am loved when I can't feel a thing

You say I am strong when I think I am weak

You say I am held when I am falling short

And when I don't belong, oh you say I am yours..."

You Say by Lauren Daigle

Lois grunted on her way to the living room, laden with a fully stocked diaper bag over one shoulder and, on the opposite side, a car seat carrier with a sleeping Kallie tucked safely inside. "Ready to go, Mom?"

She watched Martha take in the sight that was Lois and Kallie, ready for their first ever adventure outside of the house... Well, if you didn't count the quick visits to the town doctor for Kallie's first visits and a follow-up visit for Lois. That hardly counted as leaving the house, the appointments so brief and so close to home. They hadn't even ventured a trip to Maisie's for pie. Oh, how Lois was craving some of her pecan pie, especially since first trying it after Thanksgiving and again near Christmastime.

None of Ms. Maisie's pie today, though. Today was the trip to a distant, far-off land called Wichita and a place called Target while Clark and Jonathan were out repairing the fence on one part of the property or another.

Martha looked as though she was going to say something but then had apparently thought better of it. Still, she couldn't hold back a little smile when she asked, "Got everything you need?"

Lois patted the diaper bag, making a hearty thump sound against the side, but then she made a face. "Wait... do we need the pump? I should probably bring the pump." She started looking around the living room. Where had she left it?

"Honey," Martha said. "If you have the baby, you don't need the pump." She winked and smiled at her, clearly trying to take some of her anxiousness away.

"Right. Okay," she said. "You're sure, though? We could be gone, like, four, maybe five hours, longer if we stop for lunch, which makes sense because we're going to be hungry before we start heading back home. Especially me with the breastfeeding! I can't believe the massive amount of food I've been consuming; I'm ravenous lately. Maybe I should bring snacks? I should bring snacks." She turned to head to the kitchen.

"Lois," Martha said, touching her arm to get her

attention and bringing her back to face her. And then she was taking the carrier, Kallie still tucked inside and sleeping, off her arm and setting it gently on the floor. "Here, let's set these down while we figure things out." She took the diaper bag from her too and set it next to the carrier. "Your arms must be killing you."

Lois was biting her lip now in an effort to hold back the tears. Stupid tears. Why was this even making her cry? They were just going to the store. "Why am I making such a big deal out of this, Mom?"

Martha came and put her hands on Lois' shoulders. "Hormones for one thing, love. And also, leaving the house with a new baby for the first time like this — it's a big deal. It's bound to make you a bit nervous. And...I know things are a bit tense lately. You had a hard day yesterday?"

Lois nodded, wiping the tears from her face and sniffing. "And the day before. Well, this whole week." She tried to swallow back the surge of mixed emotions. She wished Clark was coming on this first trip, too. But getting the fence repaired was more important than her can't-get-it-in-Smallville-or-Emporia shopping list. Plus, she had to remind herself, she wasn't the only family member he'd left behind; his parents wanted to spend time with him, too. "I guess I just wish Clark was coming with us."

"I know, honey. I know," Martha soothed, and then she did her best to rally their enthusiasm. "They'll be out working all day, so our little day trip will help keep your mind occupied. And I'll bet they'll be about finished up by the time we get back."

Lois took a deep breath to try and calm herself, swiping at her face to catch the tears that had spilled since she'd last wiped her cheeks. She pulled Martha in for a hug. "Thanks, Mom."

"Any time." Martha smiled warmly at her and gave her shoulders a small squeeze before letting go. "Now let's get some snacks for the road, and we'll bring the pump just in case. How's that?"

Lois smiled and nodded, remembering for the millionth time how lucky she was to have someone like Martha be a mother to her.

Together they packed her now oft-neglected Jeep, buckled Kallie securely in the back seat, and buckled themselves in. Lois glanced over at Martha in the passenger seat and asked, "Ready?"

Martha nodded.

Lois took a look in the rearview mirror, adjusting it more than a few times in an attempt to get a full view of the driveway behind her and Kallie's car seat. It was hopeless and impossible to see Kallie's face, since the car seat was facing to the rear, but she tried once more

anyway.

“Do you want me to sit back there with her?” Martha offered.

Lois shook her head. “No. No, it’s fine. She’s fine. I’ll be fine. She’s sleeping anyway. I don’t know why I’m even worried about it.”

Martha reached over to put a hand on her knee. “That’s what moms do.”

“It’s exhausting!” Lois exclaimed. “I haven’t even started the car yet. No wonder new moms don’t leave the house! Everything is already there, and it’s comfortable and familiar and...” Lois grimaced and tugged at the band of her bra. “And you don’t have to wear a bra.”

Martha laughed. “I guess one of the things we’re buying is a bigger nursing bra?”

Lois made a face and nodded emphatically. She took a deep breath and started the ignition. “Okay. Here we go.”

As she circled around to head up the long dirt drive down to the main road, Lois mused. They hadn’t been to Wichita since...well, since Lois’ last visit to the obstetrician in late December, driving through the cold and snow. She’d heard women complain about being pregnant in the heat of summer, but she was convinced they clearly hadn’t had to deal with layers of winter wear and having to pee so frequently.

Thank God that part was over. Not to mention...she’d heard and read horror stories from other women still healing down below. Even the doctor had been a little surprised Lois had healed so quickly. Lois had no way of asking or knowing if Kallie’s half-Kryptonian blood and DNA might have had anything to do with it, but she wondered if it might well have.

In any case, she didn’t have to worry about frequent pit stops now or winter clothing. Just a light jacket, and only a stop to feed or change the baby if needed. Yep, she could just concentrate on the drive and the company.

Right now, they were sitting in companionable silence, definitely absolutely not uncomfortable at all, the only sound the tires rushing over the pavement and the cool spring air cutting around the Jeep as they reached 55 mph. It was a longer drive, almost two hours, so they had plenty of time to discuss...things.

There were so many things on her mind lately...the extra stress and tension of Clark’s mood since coming home. Maybe there was a better way to offer him support, but she didn’t know. Then there was the...intimacy issue. Part of her almost felt selfish and foolish for even thinking of it as an issue. It’s just...she was a little hurt and a little confused at the lack of intimacy between her and Clark. But even that felt stupid thinking about. Of course, he wasn’t thinking about sex after all he’d been through... whatever it was he’d been through. It was just...she’d built

it up so much in her head, his homecoming, that it was hard not to feel...neglected. In any case, she could wait. There was no rush to talk to one’s mother-in-law (no matter how close one was) about private bedroom matters with her son.

Lois sighed audibly. But she had no one else to talk to. Especially about some of the more nuanced aspects of her relationship. The scarce few girlfriends she’d had when she’d left Metropolis...well, they’d tried to stay in touch over the phone and through emails, but it was hard. They didn’t quite understand why she’d up and left Metropolis so mysteriously or why she’d supposedly cheated on Clark with Superman — or so everyone thought. But more to the point, they were still working young professionals; talk of pregnancy and the like just wasn’t interesting to them.

So they’d all kind of drifted apart, leaving Lois even more lonely for her best friend and even more grateful for the love, acceptance, and understanding from his parents. She couldn’t hold back another sigh, both sad and tired over what she’d lost.

Lois snuck a quick glance over at Martha. She was idly flipping through a magazine. Lois hadn’t meant to sigh so loudly, but she was a little surprised that Martha hadn’t said anything.

“You’re not going to ask what’s wrong?” Lois said finally, breaking the silence.

“I figured you’d start when you’re ready. No sense rushing you,” she said noncommittally, but Lois noticed that she was putting the magazine back in her bag.

Lois caught one of Martha’s warm smiles when she glanced over again. “I’m not sure what I did to deserve this family, to deserve you.” She felt a lump form in her throat, the tears already starting to fall, and she took one hand off the wheel to swipe at them.

“Oh, honey!” Martha soothed as she put a hand on Lois’ shoulder. “You never have to do anything to *deserve* love, especially from me. You should know that by now.”

Lois choked on a sob. “Yeah, I guess I do. It’s just... been...hard lately. Really hard.” She took a deep, shuddering breath, trying to steady herself. She took another deep breath, focusing on the road intently for a minute, and then she saw a sign for a rest area just ahead. She motioned at the sign with her hand and said with a shaky voice, “I’m just going to...probably safer not to drive...” She gestured vaguely at her face and the mess that was her current emotional state. “...like this. Plus Kallie will probably be hungry any minute now, anyway.”

“Good idea, love,” Martha said, giving her shoulder a light squeeze before dropping her hand back to her lap.

The rest area was practically empty, Lois noticed as she pulled into the space closest to the building marked for the women’s restroom. And, good, it was one of the

slightly more modern ones, so it should be a bit more well-maintained.

Martha undid her seatbelt and said, “Why don’t you go ahead and use the restroom while I get Kallie and check her diaper?”

She nodded and said softly, “Okay. Thanks.” She left her purse in the car with Martha and headed to the bathrooms. She relieved herself and washed her hands, catching a glimpse at her reflection in the mirror and suddenly wishing this was one of the older rest areas that didn’t have such fancy luxuries like mirrors and non-graffitied walls.

Who was this woman in the mirror, even? The woman sort of resembled Lois Lane. A week ago, she thought she’d figured it out, but it seemed to be a continuous journey. She took in the features one at a time. The longer hair that mostly resided in a ponytail these days so that Kallie wouldn’t get a wayward fistful and yank with her jerky, excited movements. She’d read in the baby books that their grasp was supposed to be super strong at this age, but Lois couldn’t help but wonder if it was *super* strong. Because, surely, a grown adult such as herself should be able to extract her hair or her shirt from an infant.

She smiled faintly and shook her head at herself. The mirror revealed a somewhat sleep-deprived, very slightly rounder face than she was used to. Fuller curves, too. Lois reminded herself that Clark hadn’t minded that first night. In fact, he said he’d liked her even more now. The emotional aspect of making love that first night back had been...overwhelming and just what she’d needed all at once.

The physical...well, she’d been a little surprised how tight and uncomfortable things had felt. She’d expected maybe some pain or soreness from giving birth, but it was just wholly different than how she’d thought it would be. And, yeah, a big part of that was probably because all her fantasies of Clark’s homecoming had been...fantasies in every way.

And ever since those first few days — he’d hardly touched her. He’d held her a few times, but...he used to touch her all the time — his hand on the small of her back, his palm cupping her face, his lips on hers...

She knew deep down that Clark didn’t care what her body looked like, but it was still nice to feel wanted, especially since she wasn’t quite sure how to feel about this new body of hers. It’d done something amazing and spectacular — grown a baby, a half-Kryptonian baby, at that! She looked at her much fuller breasts and tugged again at the bra band that was digging into her sides. How amazing was it that she could feed her baby herself? She’d read about but hadn’t realized until she’d done it successfully for the first time how intimate and profound it

would feel to breastfeed.

Even still, with all that, she didn’t know who this woman was, exactly. She’d gotten fairly well-acquainted with pregnant Lois. But new mom, lactating Lois? And just-got-her-fiance-back-from-the-emotionally-challenged-alien-race-whose-civil-war-he-was-fighting Lois? She didn’t know them very well at all. And she was frustrated that Clark didn’t seem inclined to get to know the person she’d become, nor want to share whom *he* had become.

She took a final look at the woman in the mirror and then headed out of the restroom. Her heart leapt at the sight that greeted her as she walked back to the car: Martha swaying and twirling in the parking lot with Kallie in her arms. On her next twirl, Martha caught sight of her, and Lois could hear as she approached, “Look, Mommy’s back! Now you can have Second Breakfast.”

“*The Hobbit?*” she asked Martha, raising her eyebrow with a smile playing at her own lips.

“Of course,” she said to Lois, but continued to Kallie, “I read that to your daddy when he was little. I’ll read it to you, too, when you’re older.”

Lois laughed lightly. “Unless Clark beats you to it,” she teased.

“He’d better not! There are plenty of other books to choose from.”

“Well, I do have it on good authority that you read him countless books when he was young. You created a real addict there for yourself.” Lois couldn’t help but grin. “He said he was reading chapter books by the time he was five?”

“Exactly. Now he’s smart and cultured and worldly and a fantastic writer to boot,” she said, beaming, then leveled a wry grin of her own at Lois. “You’re welcome.”

They both laughed heartily. They’d shared these kinds of moments before, bonding over little memories of Clark, but this was the first time they’d done it since he’d been home. And, oh what a relief and comfort it was now; now he was just home, and they could just laugh without the underlying current of grief and uncertainty of whether or not he’d be back. Martha gave her a knowing look and smiled at her as their laughter died down.

Martha gestured with a nod of her head towards the back seat. “Why don’t you get settled back there, and I’ll hand off our future bookworm? She’s already changed and ready.”

“Thanks, Mom,” she said as she scooted into the back of the Jeep and then took Kallie into her arms.

Martha shut the door gently and walked around to the other side of the car. As Lois was getting Kallie settled and latched, Martha got into the front passenger seat but turned around to settle so that she was facing Lois.

“Are you doing okay?” she asked softly.

“Yeah,” Lois answered. “I suppose so. I mean... He’s home now. This is supposed to be happily ever after, isn’t it?” She felt the heat and the pricking at the back of her eyes. So many tears, so many feelings. She was supposed to be happy, dammit. Instead, she was just...she felt guilty for even having the thoughts...

“What is it?” Martha was concerned now.

Lois shook her head. “It’s nothing. It’s fine.” She did her best to try and tamp down feelings that were building in her chest, the pressure and the quiet simmering.

“Lois.” Her gentle but serious tone said it all — but the look on Martha’s face was Lois’ undoing.

“I’m angry!” Lois cried, startling Kallie, who fussed for a second and then settled again. “I’m just so angry and so hurt,” she said more quietly, her voice rough.

Martha nodded, giving her space to say more.

“I’m angry at him for leaving. I’m angry that he was gone so long. I’m angry that he missed *everything*,” she seethed through a sob, “all the things we were supposed to share together. I’m angry that he’s so different and that he’s shutting me out. But I shouldn’t be angry. I feel terrible being angry when I should just be grateful that he’s home.”

“Oh, honey. It’s okay. It’s okay to be angry,” Martha said, her voice soothing and sure in that way only Martha could accomplish. “There is so much — for all of us — that we need to grieve. Anger is a big part of that. You have to let it out. My God, I screamed into my pillow and cried at Jonathan for nearly an hour, night before last, praying Clark wasn’t listening too carefully.”

“Really?” Lois asked tearfully.

“Really,” she reassured her, and then Martha let the silence stretch on. Because she knew there was more, more that Lois needed to say.

She looked down at Kallie in her arms; she’d managed to fall asleep despite the emotions raging in the enclosed space. How enviably simple was her little world? Lois sighed and closed up her nursing bra and pulled her shirt back down. She scooted a little towards the car seat and placed Kallie carefully inside, and she did her best to buckle her in without waking her.

Lois sat for a moment longer in the silence, but she knew Martha wouldn’t let her get away with not sharing the rest of what was bothering her.

As if she was reading Lois’ mind, she said, “You can have a five-second reprieve while you come and get resettled up front. My neck is starting to get stiff.”

“Oh, I’m sorry! I didn’t even think about that.”

Martha waved off her apology.

Lois moved slowly back to the front seat, careful to open and shut the doors with minimal noise even though Kallie seemed so far to be a deep sleeper. Once back up

front, Lois pivoted her body so that she was facing Martha as much as possible. “So...”

“So...” Martha echoed her.

Lois took a deep breath. “Mom, he won’t talk to me, won’t let me in. And it hurts. It hurts so much. And...and he won’t...we haven’t...made love since shortly after he came home. And oh God, it sounds horrible and selfish to be thinking about sex after all he’s been through. But I guess that’s part of the point — I don’t even *know* what he’s been through because he won’t let me in. He was gone for so long, and he just feels so...distant, and we haven’t really had much of a chance to reconnect...”

“It’s just...everything is so messed up. This isn’t at all what life was supposed to look like. Even after Clark and I got engaged and my idea of my future — our future — changed, I never dreamed we’d have a baby before we’d even won our first Kerth on a shared byline. And I certainly didn’t expect this...being separated for almost a year, me having a baby without him, and him fighting a civil war on a distant planet. Those are huge things, things that change people...” Lois tried to keep her voice from quivering even more. “Mom, what if we’re...what if we’re too different, what if...it just isn’t meant to be after all?”

“Those *are* big things, huge. And it makes sense that you’re feeling pretty uncertain and scared. And angry and hurt. We can talk about all those things, but I wanted to make something clear first, perfectly clear.” Martha took her hand and squeezed it, waiting until Lois looked up into her eyes. “If for some *unfathomable* reason you two aren’t meant to be after all — which I don’t believe for a second, by the way — then you’re still family, Lois. *You* are still my daughter.”

Stuck for words, Lois nodded gratefully at Martha, fresh tears rolling down her cheeks. This woman, somehow, always seemed to know. Even Lois herself hadn’t quite put her finger on that one underlying worry: if she somehow lost Clark, would she lose her new family, too?

“You two will find your way; I know you will,” Martha said as she squeezed her hand again before letting it go.

“I spent every day since he left, just holding onto the hope that one day he’d be home. The longer time went on, the more that hope just grew, almost in desperation, into... I don’t even know. I thought his homecoming would be different...happier.”

“Hope’s a funny thing,” Martha started, a wistful look in her eye. “From the time I was young, all I ever wanted to do was fall in love, get married, and have babies. And that was a conscious choice, mind you.” She raised an eyebrow at Lois. “Women didn’t always get a choice back then; it was expected that you’d marry and become a wife and mother. In Smallville, that usually meant farmer’s

wife. Yes, I loved art and philosophy and just learning in general — still do — but I never had any aspirations to go to college or have a career. I wanted to be a wife and a mother.”

Lois nodded but stayed silent, letting her continue.

“During those years of trying to get pregnant...those awful months of waiting each month to see if I’d be pregnant or get my period...the hope was like a turbulent roller coaster. The first few times, it was a bit thrilling to wait and see, but every month that nothing happened...well, the disappointment eventually started transforming into despair. It felt like a failure — *I felt like a failure* — and the hope for the next month was harder to win back.”

“Oh, Mom,” Lois said. “That sounds so hard.”

She nodded. “It was. It was really hard. For me, I had to learn to let go of that dream, that hope to be a mother. The problem wasn’t that I had the hope, but it was the fact that I held it above all else for a time. And you can’t have just one hope to hang everything on. Jonathan helped me see that, made me see that when I got a little obsessive and focused on things. He reminded me that being a mother isn’t the only part of me. That he fell in love with an artist, and a cook, and a smart, feisty woman who wasn’t afraid to march in the streets for civil rights because she saw things that weren’t right. And that if I couldn’t be a mother, then he would still love me just the same. It was a hard dream to let go of, a lot of grieving to be done. I still have moments of grief to this day. I’ll never have that experience, being pregnant, giving birth...” Martha trailed off and nodded her head in Kallie’s direction. “Breastfeeding.”

Lois ducked her head in some sort of apology. “I’m sorry. It must have been hard to learn that I’d gotten pregnant without even trying... I mean, it was our first time, for heaven’s sake!” She clapped her hand over her mouth, suddenly realizing she hadn’t exactly meant to share that much.

Martha chuckled and grinned at her. “It’s okay, honey.” She laughed lightly again, and Lois was grateful that their heavier emotions seemed to have dissipated. “I admit it would have been pretty crushing news back then when I was younger, but when you told me? Oh, it was one of the best days of my life. Being a grandma was another dream of mine. A dream come true.”

Martha continued, “Hope is strong and powerful and necessary, but it’s also something that needs to grow and evolve over time. It’s like love in that way. You don’t love Clark the same now as you did back when you first fell for him, right?”

“Yeah...sometimes I can’t even comprehend how much I love him, how it’s possible to still learn more about him and love him more. Before...it was new and exciting

and a little scary. Now, it feels a little more...secure and safe. Or at least, it did before he left. It feels more complicated now, but I see your point.”

Martha smiled at her and nodded. “That hope you had to hang on to for so long? Day after day, it grew stronger...and hope like that, that’s unfulfilled for so long...it can turn into a fantasy of sorts, even somewhat unrealistic, because...when you think about it, no one can really guess what their future will be like. So, even if you manage to guess right, your fantasy still isn’t going to match reality. I mean, think about it...who would have guessed that I’d have a baby fall from the sky one day, just after I’d given up on the dream of being a mother?”

Lois laughed with tears in her eyes. “Yeah, and who would have guessed that hard-bitten journalist Lois Lane would fall in love and have a baby with a sexy spaceman from another world?”

Martha barked with laughter. “Yes, who’d have guessed.” She let the laughter fade out and wiped the tears from her eyes.

“Oh, Mom,” Lois said. “Thank you for sharing something so vulnerable with me, and for helping me get things off my chest. I can only hope that I’ll be even half the mother that you are. I wanna be like you when I grow up,” she quipped, feeling a little unsure.

“You’re a lot more like me than you think, Lois. You may not show your skill in the kitchen or with art, but you are smart and feisty. You worked every day to uncover injustices and expose the wrongdoers in Metropolis; you fight to make the world a better place.” She paused, making sure she had Lois’ full attention. “And you already *are* a great mother.”

“So much for getting the tears to stop,” Lois said with a sobbing laugh as she swiped at her cheeks. She felt inordinately better, but the uncertainty of everything still tugged painfully at her heart.

Chapter 11: What Good Could Come From Embracing the Dark?

Mid-March 1997

9 Months, 25 Days Since Clark Left Home

“Not on your life

I’m not abandoning

I have survived

Somehow still standing through death and through time

I need your love like a drug keeping me alive...”

Part of Me by Evanescence

His mom and Lois still weren’t back from their trip to Wichita yet, but they should be soon. His dad was watching TV in the living room, relaxing after their day of hard work. Part of Clark wanted to go back out and work

more on the fence at his own speed, but he knew that would upset his dad. Besides, the dishes still needed doing, and staying meant he could get a start on dinner to help out his mom.

So Clark started washing the dishes — at normal speed because his mother always took him to task about ruining the pattern on her plates when he used super speed. At least she had a good reason for making him go slowly. His dad, on the other hand, had no excuse.

For three days now, they'd been working on repairing the fence for the north property line, and his father kept insisting that they do everything at normal speed. The fencing would take weeks at this rate, almost a month, and he was beyond frustrated that he couldn't just do it himself at super speed. He wanted to save his dad the grueling labor and the risk of injuring himself on the barbed wire, and Clark knew there were other jobs that needed to be done around the farm. Why couldn't his dad let him help out? Clark could get so much more done, help him so much more if he could use his powers. Using his strength to pull out the old posts and drive in the new ones hardly counted.

When he'd pressed his dad about it, he'd told him, "It takes as long as it takes." And that had only served to make Clark think of Lois and the very first time she'd been to Smallville — a time she'd told him last year was one of the moments that helped her realize she cared about him, maybe even loved him if she would have let herself.

Lois in Smallville was supposed to be a happy thing. A fly in for Sunday dinner thing. A celebrate holidays thing. A cherish the memories and make new ones thing.

Happy. Not painful. Not a reminder of all the things he'd missed and all the ways he'd let down everyone who mattered most to him in his life.

Sure, country living was supposed to be slow. But it was also supposed to be simpler.

He couldn't handle the slow right now, not with all its pain and complications. He needed to be moving. Fixing things. Taking a day to install the fence on his own instead of weeks. He knew his dad could use the rest.

Instead, his dad insisted on working alongside him, and his dad had spent their time talking about all the things he had to do coming up, prepping the fields, getting the soil composition just right. And when he wasn't talking about that, he was silent. For long stretches. And now, unlike during the uncomfortably quiet ride to Emporia the other day, Clark was certain his mother was responsible for the silence.

Well, as much as Clark yearned for his dad to ask him what was wrong, Clark couldn't share anyway. So nor had Jonathan's strategic silence yielded any results. It wasn't like the time his dad had wheedled out of him the

unfortunate consequences of raging teenage hormones and yet-to-be-mastered x-ray vision. That had been mortifying, yet had resulted in a heart-to-heart with his dad about life and giving yourself some grace and patience, plus a few choice strategies on how to hide said consequences.

No, if only his problems now were that simple. He didn't want to see the horrified look on his father's face if he ever learned about the unspeakable things he'd done, things that went against all the morals and beliefs his parents had worked so hard to instill in him.

As Clark put the last dish in the drying rack, he heard the creak of the screen door and two familiar female voices talking and laughing. Lois mentioned something about going to put Kallie down in their room and putting away the things she'd bought. His mom greeted his father with a quick kiss on the cheek from behind him on the couch and then joined Clark in the kitchen.

He tried not to dwell on the fact that Lois had only thrown a quick greeting over her shoulder on her way through the kitchen and into their bedroom. He was starting to wonder if she disliked who he'd become, if he was too different now. He certainly felt different.

"How was your day, honey?" his mom asked as she opened the fridge and poked her head in.

"Fine," he said. Quiet and long thanks to her, he wanted to say, but he had a hard time begrudging his mother for anything. "I was thinking about stir fry for dinner." He motioned to the vegetable drawer.

"Perfect! That's what I was thinking too," she said, a bit too cheerfully as she started gathering all the different vegetables and handing them to him. "Here, you start washing, then we'll chop together."

"Mom, I was going to make it. You should sit and rest."

"Nonsense." She waved him off. "I've been sitting in the car half the day."

"It's just faster if I cut all the vegetables. I'll be done in two minutes."

<<Kao-zha-aovem-u.>> There was no reason to get mad. Not at his mother.

"We don't need to do it fast, Clark." She took the carrots from him after he'd washed them and grabbed a knife from the block.

His jaw ticked as he finished washing the rest of the vegetables and set them on the counter. He said nothing.

"Besides, don't you want to cook with your mother like old times?" she said in a slightly teasing tone.

Clark swallowed and reached past the sink for the second cutting board. He took a deep breath and grabbed another knife from the block. "Of course, Mom. Let's cook together," he said, his voice softening a touch at his mom's insistence. This shouldn't be hard. Why was this hard? He

used to love cooking with his mom.

They settled into a rhythm, the cabbage making a quiet crunching sound as his knife sliced through and the carrots snapping just half a second before the whack of the knife hitting the wooden cutting board. For a moment, Clark could even pretend that everything was normal.

Lois came back in the room then, and he felt a small measure of relief when she came up behind him for a quick hug, standing up on her toes to give him a peck on the cheek. She seemed to hesitate before pulling away again and settling herself at the table to peruse the paper. A burning regret flashed through his chest; he hated that things were hard and uncomfortable here, in the place that had always been his safe haven.

His mom finished with the carrots and grabbed the zucchini next. He gathered the mushrooms on his cutting board and set to work slicing. He tried to focus on the sounds of chopping again, but then he heard Lois' stomach growl.

And sure enough, she asked, "Is dinner going to be ready soon?"

"Twenty minutes, dear," Martha said.

"That long?!" Lois said, her voice teasing. "You guys are starving me!"

Clark startled, his arm jerking and his knife glancing off his thumb before clattering to the floor. His heart was racing, and all he could hear was Lois' voice replaying in his head — telling him he was starving her — until his mind caught up to reality and he realized his mom had yelped.

His head jerked over, and he saw her clutching her finger, blood flowing and dripping down on the blade of her knife. His breath caught and his chest tightened. Blood. Knife. He snatched at the wrist, grabbing it as his breath started coming in fast pants.

<<Kao-zha-aovem-u.>>

"Look at me. Look at us," a younger female voice said.

He needed to keep it together. He would keep it together. They were all watching.

<<Kao-zha-aovem-u.>> It wasn't working. Why wasn't it working?

"He's just standing there, not moving," another voice said.

##*#*

Early September 1996

3 Months, 24 Days Since Clark Left Home

He didn't want to do this. He didn't want to be here. He didn't want to...but deep down he knew he had to. Though it had been Ching's idea to visit the mobile field hospital outside Kir-Tahn, Clark knew he couldn't say no. Not after he'd ordered the strike on the medical supply truck less than twenty-four hours ago. Not after he'd found

himself personally responsible for the deaths of eleven people.

Eleven New Kryptonians. The number swam before him, whenever he closed his eyes.

How could numbers cause so much pain? So many nightmares? Jen Mai and Trey threw out numbers like this all the time during their war council meetings. He'd been listening to them, signing off on them, until it had almost become routine. Almost. His heart still hurt every time he saw a casualty report, but he'd always managed to convince himself that it was the cost of war and he wasn't responsible for what happened during the battle.

But meeting the enemy in battle was different from a targeted strike. A targeted strike Clark had ordered right on the outskirts of a tiny village whose only crime was that Nor had decided to make it the base of his operations. He was having second thoughts today, having a hard time believing a whole village could be complicit in committing what amounted to treason, despite what Jen Mai and Trey had told him about Nor being from Kir-Tahn.

Eleven people. Four enemy soldiers. Three doctors. The driver of the truck. Three innocent villagers. As well as some who were injured by the debris from the truck when it exploded. He didn't know the exact number of injuries, but they had to have been extensive enough to warrant a mobile field hospital — a hospital Jen Mai had argued vehemently against, claiming that the injured were all residents of the enemy village, and they should be given no quarter.

That was a bridge too far, and Clark had insisted a heavily guarded field hospital be deployed and set up just outside the village. But Ching had been the one to suggest Clark visit it personally — a suggestion that had drawn great opposition from Trey and Jen Mai, who insisted that it was far too dangerous.

Eventually, a compromise was reached, and so Clark found himself standing at the entrance to the field hospital under heavy guard, wondering just how he was going to be able to look any of the villagers in the eye.

"Are you planning to go in, or just stand there?" Ching asked him, appearing by his side as if Clark had summoned him in his mind through sheer force of will.

"I don't see the purpose," Clark replied, setting his jaw tightly and hardening his voice. "What possible good can I do here? My presence will only serve as a distraction for the people who are working to heal the injured."

They were feeble excuses — attempts to buy himself some time. A cold sort of terror had gripped him, and he struggled to move his feet — to propel himself forward.

"You know why you're here," Ching said quietly, and Clark felt a surge of anger shoot through him. "Your people need to see you. They need to know that you are

both unyielding and merciful. We will need them to know that if we are ever to unite our people under the House of El when this is over.”

“That’s not the only reason you want me here,” Clark replied, his voice soft but as hard as steel. “You want to see what I’ll do. How I’ll behave. *Kao-zha-aovem-u*. You want to see if I can control it.”

“Yes,” Ching admitted. “This is the best opportunity to test your training. After all, you ordered the strike. These are the things a leader must do...the choices one must make. Are you ready?”

<<*Kao-zha-aovem-u*.>> “Yes,” Clark said, his stomach lurching as his foot took a step forward. “Let’s get this over with.”

Despite his resolution to do what needed to be done — to pass Ching’s test — Clark was not at all prepared for the sight that awaited him inside the medical tent. Beds were set up on the grounds, and bodies not only rested on the beds but also lined the sides of the tent being triaged. People. Not bodies. People. <<*Kao-zha-aovem-u*.>> The people waiting along the sides of the tent mostly had minor injuries — cuts, scrapes, and flesh wounds that bled a lot — and were being tended to by spare medics roaming the field hospital site.

The bodies on the beds, however, were far worse. Blood stained the ground next to the beds, and Clark watched as the doctors worked to clean and re-dress the gaping wounds inflicted by the shrapnel. How had this happened? He’d thought he was just attacking a supply vehicle...and if he hadn’t waited so long, it might only have been the vehicle.

But he had waited. He’d second guessed himself and argued with Jen Mai and Trey until it had been too late. The strike had taken out the truck and everyone in it on the outskirts of the village, the explosion of the gravity repulsors instantly killing three more people and injuring anyone within the massive blast radius.

Not wanting to disturb the doctors while they worked on the most critically injured, he found himself visiting those who had suffered milder injuries and fighting the urge to be sick every time one of the villagers looked up at him with eyes so piercing they went right through to his soul. He wanted to get down on his knees and beg their forgiveness, but he knew it would never be enough.

It wasn’t just the strike. Weeks ago, he’d banned any and all supplies from entering the village in the first place. Many of the injured looked tired and malnourished. Some had sought out help in the medical tent, hoping to be fed or find some water.

Some were children.

<<*Kao-zha-aovem-u*.>>

He wouldn’t be sick, couldn’t be sick. He would keep

it together. Ching was watching. They were all watching.

“Lord Kal-El?” a quiet but composed voice spoke from behind. He turned to see a young woman who couldn’t have been older than Jimmy standing behind him. Behind her were four other villagers of similar age. Clark got the feeling that they had chosen this woman to speak for them. She did so again, having not been given a response the first time. “You are Lord Kal-El, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” he said, his voice rusty and raw. “I am Lord Kal-El.” <<*Kao-zha-aovem-u*.>>

“My name is Dene-Ra. I am the head of the village council of Kir-Tahn. I...I’ve been asked to speak for the village...to plead our case.”

She looked around furtively, and Clark suddenly wondered if they were in danger, having escaped the borders of the village. If that were true, then it meant further confirmation that these people were in just as much danger from Nor’s tyranny if not more. They weren’t loyal supporters or on Nor’s side. And he’d not only ordered a strike against a truck carrying medical supplies, he’d also been in the process of trying to starve them by not allowing any supplies in. To do what? Force out Lord Nor? As if they were able to do what Clark’s forces could not.

<<*Kao-zha-aovem-u*.>>

He cleared his throat and tried to look somewhere, anywhere, but directly into the two piercing green eyes that bore into him.

“A little young to be head of the village council, are you not?” he asked. He was changing the subject and he knew it. He couldn’t bear to have this conversation go where he knew it was going — a plea for food and his inevitable denial.

“A recent appointment after my predecessor’s death. But my age is not relevant,” she said coolly, and Clark felt his heart constrict painfully. “I don’t have much time. Any moment now, Nor will realize I’m gone. He’s not stupid enough to send his people out after me, but once I return, he will find a way to hurt me, so I need to make this fast.”

“I know what you want,” Clark said heavily, feeling more weary than he’d ever felt in his entire life. “And I can’t give it to you. While Nor is in there, he is fortified...protected. We need to force him out, and cutting off the food supply is the only way.”

“Is that what you think?” Dene shot back, her eyes blazing with anger. “That you’ve cut off Nor’s food supply? Are you really that naive?”

“I...” He looked at her, feeling suddenly very intimidated by her strength and force of will. She reminded him of Lois — a painful reminder that seemed to stab deep down into his soul. <<*Kao-zha-aovem-u*.>>

“You have cut off nothing. Lord Nor eats just fine,” she spat. “He takes the meager crops we’ve grown and the

food from our homes. He and his men will be well-fed for weeks more. Long after we have all died of starvation, courtesy of your orders.”

Clark tried to speak, but no words came out. He could see the truth of it in her eyes, and he knew that if things went the way she predicted, those deaths would be on his conscience as well.

“Look at me. At us,” she said, this time softer now.

He did and had to swallow back tears. She, along with the four villagers showed all the signs of malnourishment. Their clothing was tattered and their faces streaked with grime. He knew that this hell was of his making.

<<Kao-zha-aovem-u.>>

“I don’t know what to say,” he finally admitted. “There is nothing I can do.”

She sighed, her shoulders slumped with sadness, but not surprise. She had expected him to be a coward, and somehow that hurt him all the more.

“I expected as much,” she said. Then, she turned and nodded to the others behind her. “We must get back before we are discovered missing.”

They had begun to turn away when Clark called out to them.

“Wait! Stay here,” he urged. “We can pass you off as wounded. Get you help. Take you with us. You don’t have to go back there.”

“My family is in that village, Kal-El,” Dene told him gently, as if explaining something to a small child. “Do you have a family?”

“I…” Clark swallowed tightly, thinking of Lois.

<<Kao-zha-aovem-u.>>

“I thought so,” she replied, giving him one last searching look. “I can’t leave them.”

She said no more and turned to go, disappearing from the tent and no doubt back into the village via whichever means she and the others had come. Suddenly, Clark wanted nothing more than to order an attack — raid the village and find Lord Nor so he could finish it for good and get back to Lois. But he knew that doing so would cause more death and injury, and right now his heart was sick with it.

He didn’t know what to do, but he couldn’t stay where he was. He couldn’t bear to look at the faces of the injured for one more second. He looked around and saw that his guard was distracted for the moment by Trey and decided to use this opportunity to get some air.

He escaped the tent through a side flap and stumbled towards the edge of a small cliff. The village was located in a rocky and mountainous area that offered ideal opportunities to Lord Nor for concealment and fortified defenses. There was only one main road that led into the village, and the rest of the area around it was wild country.

He found himself making his way down the small cliff towards a tiny river, where he gently splashed some water on his face, enjoying the way the cool liquid felt against his skin. Like everything else in New Krypton, the water felt and tasted ever so slightly different. He sat down, taking slow, deep breaths and trying to banish the haunted, hungry look from the face of the young woman he’d just spoken to. Would she be one of his casualties? Was she dead and just didn’t know it yet?

<<Kao-zha-aovem-u.>>

A few more deep breaths and he was able to stuff the emotion down far enough to head back. If Jen Mai, Trey, or Ching noticed he was missing, there was sure to be a panic, and that could cause them to get sloppy. Lord Nor undoubtedly had spies watching the field hospital and was likely waiting for his chance to take out Clark’s forces.

He climbed his way up the cliff, trying not to think of Lois and how desperately he missed her. He had just reached the top, when something all of a sudden slammed into him — hard. He had just enough presence of mind to know it was another person who had launched themselves at him as they rolled around on the ground.

Whatever it was knocked the wind out of him, and before he knew it, he found himself rolling back down the rocky cliff, his skin scraping and body bruising with every rock and sharp outcropping he hit on the way down.

It took him a few seconds once he reached the bottom to stumble to his feet. His clothing was torn and he was bleeding in various different places. He groaned in pain and looked up just in time to see one of Lord Nor’s men — an assassin, no doubt — carefully reaching the bottom of the cliff Clark had just fallen down. He was unharmed and carried a sharp, gleaming dagger.

Clark’s heart was racing. He had no weapons, no powers, and no means of defending himself. The cliff was behind the assassin, and there was no way he could climb it faster than his foe.

“Who are you?”

“My name is of no concern to you,” the assassin said with a sneer. “Especially because you will be dead shortly. I thought this was going to be a lot harder. Thank you for making it so easy for me.”

“Believe me,” Clark said, feeling an overwhelming anger shoot through him, “I don’t plan to go down easily.”

The assassin smiled. “Good.”

He launched himself at Clark once more, but this time Clark was ready. He managed to sidestep the outstretched hand holding the dagger and grabbed onto the assassin’s arm, twisting it back in an attempt to disarm him. He didn’t get far, as the assassin managed to extricate himself from Clark’s grip and punched him in the solar plexus while lunging forward with the dagger once more.

Clark just barely managed to stumble out of the way, gasping for breath and cursing himself for his unpreparedness. What had the point of all those training and sparring sessions with Ching been if he couldn't use the skills he'd learned when the time came?

He let out a cry of anger as the man ran towards him once more, catching the assassin's wrist yet again and delivering a swift punch to his face while applying pressure to his wrist. A fury surged through him that he didn't even recognize. He had no idea who this man was, beyond the fact that he was loyal to Nor, and yet suddenly he represented everything that Clark had lost and everything that he had been forced to do.

He tried to block out the emotions — the ones telling him to kill this man rather than disarming him and bringing him to the field hospital. He tried to tell himself the man was more valuable to the cause alive than dead.

But his rage consumed him. It filled him. With a swift movement, he felt the man's wrist crack, and he knew he'd broken it. The man yelled out in surprise but before Clark could grab the dagger and bury it in his chest, the assassin grabbed it with his other hand and kicked Clark in the face, causing blood to spurt from his nose as his jaw snapped back and he reeled backwards.

<<Kao-zha-aovem-u.>>

The phrase floated in the back of his mind — there, but inaccessible, an imperfect solution. He'd resisted it for so long, fought it. But now he needed it.

Clark needed it to save him from himself.

"Lord Nor said you'd be an easy kill, Kal-El," the assassin said through gritted teeth. "He said Earth had made you soft."

"He was wrong," Clark growled. He was filled with a desire for violence he'd never felt before — the need to take all his anger and pain out on this man was overwhelming.

<<Kao-zha-aovem-u.>>

It wasn't working. Why wasn't it working?

"Are you ready to kill me then, Kal-El?" the assassin taunted. "Have you ever killed a man with your bare hands? Ever watched the light in their eyes fade and the life drain out of them? Have you ever enjoyed it?"

They were circling each other now, panting, like two animals waiting for their prey to make a mistake. Clark felt lost — a prisoner to the white-hot violence that simmered within him. He knew what he should be doing. Knew he should be reaching for his training, for Lois, for anything that would bring him back to himself. But he couldn't. Or wouldn't? He couldn't be sure which.

"Try me and find out," Clark said through gritted teeth as the man swiped at him with his good hand. Clark ducked, and they kept circling.

"I've lost count of how many men I've killed, Kal-El," he said with a gleam in his eye that told Clark he wasn't lying. He was trying to intimidate him, and yet with every word he spoke, it only made Clark's desire to finish him that much stronger. The world was better off without a man like this in it — be it New Krypton or Earth. Because of men like this, he'd lost everything. He'd lost himself. He could feel Clark Kent dying and the man Ching wanted him to be taking over. Cold. Methodical. Calculating.

He was a murderer in every way but the deed itself. What did it matter at this point?

<<Kao-zha-aovem-u.>>

The assassin was more cautious with his movements, which gave Clark time to assess his weaknesses. He was a superior fighter, but now he was wounded. His greatest flaw had been assuming Clark would be an easy kill. The man would not underestimate him anymore, though, and Clark was unarmed. He had to do something. It was kill or be killed. Clark Kent was not a murderer. And Superman was gone. All that was left was Kal-El of New Krypton.

And Kal-El was ready to kill.

He lunged at the assassin in front of him and swiped his leg out from under him. The man fell to the ground, and Kal seized the advantage, kicking the man in the face as hard as he could. He felt the man's nose crack and watched the blood gush. It should have sickened him, but instead it spurred him on. He lifted his foot and kicked the man again. And again. And again. He was like a man possessed.

<<Kao-zha-aovem-u.>>

He knew what that meant now. He knew how to access it. He knew it meant leaving behind everything he knew — all the hope he'd had that he would be able to return to Lois and resume the life he knew was gone. His parents were gone. The farm in Smallville was gone. The Daily Planet. Perry. Jimmy. Lois. All that was left was the man he was born to be.

Kal-El.

He aimed another kick, but the assassin managed to roll out of his way just in time, leaping to his feet and swiping the dagger so close to his cheek that Kal jumped backwards.

The assassin laughed, and the blood pouring down his face made him look less than human. Kal didn't mind. It only made it easier. A calmness descended on him as the man lunged again. Kal stepped backwards, intending to grab the man's hand, bend it back, and take the dagger. But instead, he stumbled on a rock behind him and fell backwards.

His arms flailed, and he felt his body scrape against the rocky terrain as the assassin pounced on him, seizing the advantage.

A hand was around his neck before he could make a sound. The assassin squeezed, and Kal could see spots start to form in front of him. As Kal fought to breathe and stay conscious, the assassin lifted his arm and plunged the dagger down, slicing into Kal's abdomen. He pushed desperately against it, causing the blade to slice a ragged red line across. The wound was shallow, but the blood gushed forward anyway.

The blade somehow felt hot and ice-cold all at once. It burned as it cut through his abdomen, and he felt warm blood bubble outward, covering his side. His blood. His body slumped from the pain and pressure of the hand on his neck. It must have been enough to convince the assassin he'd been killed, because a few seconds later, he lessened his grip just enough for Kal to grab his arm and shove it upwards, straight into his still-bleeding nose.

Kal lurched to his feet and threw himself at the assassin. They rolled around on the rocks as Kal felt his life's blood leave him. He fought desperately, feverishly, with nothing else on his mind but staying alive.

He was fighting for everything and nothing at all. He was fighting to take his next breath. To keep going. A lifetime ago he fought for her. But she was gone and he was here.

He managed to gain the upper hand and found himself pinning the assassin down. He felt dizzy, and the image of the man swam in front of him. Kal didn't know if it was because he'd lost so much blood or if the blade had been poisoned. All he knew was that he was growing weaker.

<<Kao-zha-aovem-u.>>

He would keep going. He would finish the job. One fewer man of Lord Nor's. Whatever happened to him, he would accomplish that. The man struggled and fought against him, but both were weak from the fight, and the other man's broken wrist was unable to hold onto Kal's arm, now slippery with his own blood. Even his blood looked different on New Krypton.

With one last burst of strength, he punched the assassin in the face hard enough for him to loosen his grip on the dagger. Kal gripped it with both hands and with a deep breath, shoved it down into the man's chest as hard as he could.

The man's body jerked and convulsed. Blood gurgled up through his mouth and out of his chest, and then he was still, his wide eyes staring upwards at nothing at all. Kal went limp and fell down beside the assassin.

He could feel his body growing colder, his arms numb and his body leaden and heavy. His breathing was ragged and shallow, and he knew he didn't have long.

This is how I die, he thought.

And in that moment, he allowed himself to think of her. To hope that somewhere, wherever she was, she knew

that he had loved her as best as he knew how. That he had tried. He allowed himself to say goodbye to her, and though she wasn't telepathic and the distance too great, it felt good to try.

A strange sort of peace descended upon him, and he knew he was ready. So much so that he was barely able to decipher the voices that sounded like they were right above him and yet thousands of miles away.

"I found him! He's down there!" a voice yelled just as Kal closed his eyes and everything went black.

##*#*

The voices sounded like they were right next to him and yet thousands of miles away. "Clark, honey, you're okay. You're safe." It sounded like his mother's voice, but that was impossible. Gentle fingers touched the back of his hand. He was clutching something. He looked down and startled, dropping her wrist hotly, his eyes fixating on the blood and the knife on the counter below. He could feel his mouth hanging open, but the words weren't coming. Only the quick breathing, racing in time with his heart.

Oh God, he'd hurt his mother! Immediately, he scanned her wrist and somehow found no injury. But he'd grabbed her. There was blood and a knife.

"You didn't hurt me, Clark," she said as if she'd read his mind. "I'm fine. Just a little cut, already stopped bleeding. See?" She held up her finger, taking away the red-splotched paper towel she'd been holding against it.

He couldn't quite look her in the eye. This was not okay. He was not okay. He was dangerous. He needed to get out of here. In a second, he was in the treehouse, trying to catch his breath and stop the stabbing pain in his gut and painful twisting anguish in his heart.

Chapter 12: Take Me Into Your Darkest Hour, And I'll Never Desert You

Mid-March 1997

10 Months, 1 Day Since Clark Left Home

"When the night falls on you

You don't know what to do

Nothing you confess

Could make me love you less

I'll stand by you, won't let nobody hurt you..."

I'll Stand By You by The Pretenders

It'd been a week since Clark's...incident in the kitchen. A week of awkward...tension. She wasn't even sure how to describe what it felt like to be around him because he was pretending like it hadn't happened at all. So it was awkward. And tense. But it wasn't exactly silence, because he was talking. But everything seemed...a touch too cheerful. Forced, sort of in that obvious way, like when he'd been acting cheerful enough at work but then entirely petulant otherwise after she'd said "not yet" to his

proposal. No, this was more...

She sighed heavily. It just felt wrong. Really wrong.

It felt wrong that no one was talking about the elephant in the room. He diverted any attempt at conversation that even hinted at his feelings or the incident in the kitchen. Trying to talk to Martha and Jonathan was a challenge because they were all a bit afraid that Clark would overhear them.

And it was breaking her heart to watch him like this. Frustrating her too, because any time the cracks in his facade started to show, his temper was quick to follow. She'd spent the days vacillating between wanting to strangle him and wanting to just hug him so hard and so long that he *had* to feel something.

Their connection was...offline. Except for...

It had been two weeks since Clark had escaped to his treehouse for the first time. Away from emotions that were too much, too hard...

Away from her.

Since then, he seemed so far away, even when he was in the same room. And he'd been back to the treehouse again and again in that time.

She hadn't had the heart to tell him yet that the treehouse provided no protection...no forcefield to guard her from his feelings as he was ostensibly counting on from the four old walls made painstakingly and lovingly from collected planks of scrap wood. She could feel his emotions, and she knew he was in pain, knew he was agonizing over everything that had happened.

And the night of the incident, after he'd fled to the treehouse, the pain had ripped through her like a dagger. She'd had to explain — while the raging torment stormed inside her — to Martha and Jonathan what was happening, and they'd taken Kallie to their room for the night.

He hadn't come back to bed that night. He had subsequent nights...but never to hold her. It was as though he was afraid to touch anyone anymore, like he didn't trust himself.

Every day, he'd gone to work on the fence with Jonathan, and Martha had made it a point to have dinner ready or almost ready by the time they came in for the day. If Lois had to guess, she was sure Martha and Jonathan had coordinated that.

When Clark wasn't in the treehouse, he was distancing, closing off their connection somehow as if she wasn't allowed to know anything. Given his history, it was likely some self-sacrificial effort to protect her, protect his family from any of the horrors he must have experienced on New Krypton.

There was static now — where their connection had been — where before there had been warmth and love mixed with a heavy sadness. But when he was in the

treehouse, she could feel it across the distance. It was comforting and agonizing all at once. The feelings came without context or anchors — tremendous surges, painful onslaughts of everything he'd gone through, what she'd gone through...their shared trauma clashing and combining like angry waves against the breakers.

Right now, Clark was out working with Jonathan on the fence again — a project Jonathan had mentioned could take up to a month to complete. And Lois was doing the dishes with Martha in awkward silence.

She knew Martha was giving her time to find the right words. Usually, Martha hummed happily when they worked — unless she was waiting for Lois to talk. Martha always seemed to know. Of course, this time it wasn't hard to guess, given the incident in the kitchen last week and what Martha and Jonathan had witnessed — Lois feeling the agonizing effects of Clark's emotions reverberating through her.

She was grateful for Martha; she always let Lois start on her own terms. This time, Lois waited until the last dish was washed and dried and put away. This conversation was going to take time and emotional effort, effort she wasn't sure she had.

Kallie was still asleep in the bedroom, so she and Martha made their way to the living room. Lois sat on the couch, folding her legs up cross-legged on the cushions, and Martha sat next to her, close enough to be ready to offer a comforting hand but not so close as to crowd her.

Lois grabbed the throw pillow beside her and hugged it lightly against her belly. She closed her eyes and swallowed, then let out a shaky sigh. "He's shutting me out, Mom," she said, looking up to find Martha's kind eyes. "This connection of ours — the one I can feel when he's in the treehouse? When he's not there...it's like he's turned it off or something, shutting down a part of himself. I'm afraid...I'm worried if he keeps it up..." She paused, trying to find the right words. "Things up there had to have been bad. Unspeakably bad. And it's like he's trying to shut down his feelings and be okay. He's done it before. It's not unlike him."

"No, it's not," Martha agreed.

"But this isn't like any other times before. It's worse. And it scares me."

"Me too." Martha nodded, tears in her eyes, and she seemed for a long moment to be struggling with a memory or decision. Finally, she spoke, "Clark was about ten or eleven when we first started noticing he was really different. He'd always been such a healthy boy, but he also never seemed to get so much as a scrape, even with all the daredevilting he did."

Despite the gravity of their conversation, Lois couldn't help but chuckle lightly at the thought of a little Clark

running reckless around the farm.

"I'm honestly not sure how my poor heart survived," Martha said, her hand over her heart and a bit of a wistful twinkle in her eye. "But the powers...I guess they appeared gradually. First it was the health, of course, and then strength and speed...all of it just a little more...super than normal, but nothing our minds didn't try best to explain away by him just being gifted."

Lois nodded, trying to imagine what it must have been like, how strange and frightening, and for a moment, she wondered if Kallie would experience the same.

Martha hung her head and closed her eyes briefly before looking up again, clearly pained at what she was trying to share. "Jonathan and I...we didn't know, couldn't have known that he was developing super hearing. I feel so guilty all the same, sometimes to this day. Had I known our poor boy could hear us...all our whispered worries, secret fears...not *of* him, but *for* him..." She stressed the difference as though she was trying to erase the anxiety and grief they'd caused him.

"Oh, Mom," Lois said softly, grabbing Martha's hand and giving it a squeeze.

"We were worried that if anyone discovered him, that he was different, they'd take him away from us, and we were terrified to lose him. And more...we still had never quite given up on the theory that he was some sort of Russian experiment, abandoned and left to die."

Lois nodded and gave her hand another squeeze, letting her know that she remembered this part of the story but giving her the space to say the hard words.

"But when Jonathan and I talked about our fears in the early morning hours, when we thought he was asleep...we worried about everything. We were scared of where he might have actually come from and what these developing powers could mean. Were there more of these powers? Would any of them manifest outwardly, be something to hide?"

"Most of all, we worried about him being taken away. And it wasn't just the thought of losing him, as gut wrenching as that idea was, we were terrified for *him*, what people might do to him to figure out what made him so different, that they'd put him in a laboratory, perform all sorts of tests on him and..."

"Dissect him like a frog..." Lois finished for her, and then brought her other hand up to cover her mouth. "Oh, poor Clark."

Martha winced. "I won't lie. I've never been a fan of that warning Jonathan used, but it managed to serve its purpose over the years, I suppose. But the point was that we didn't know Clark was holding so much in. We didn't know he'd heard us or that he might have guessed wrongly that we were scared *of* him. He'd always been such a

happy, well-adjusted boy. We never knew...never realized how much he'd been suffering in silence until..."

Martha was silent for a moment, then she took a steadying breath and adjusted her glasses. "His grades never changed, nor his behavior at school, from all reports. And at home, he was...almost too normal, too happy..."

Lois nodded, knowing she was alluding to how he was acting now, too.

"And then one day, Jonathan found him curled up in the corner of the barn, crying and rocking, a pair of small holes singed into the wood near him and an empty bucket and wet floor beneath it."

Lois gasped. "His heat vision?" She and Clark had talked a little of his past and how his powers had emerged, but he'd only spoken in broad strokes. At the time, she hadn't pushed further, assuming he'd share what he was holding back when he was ready. But she hadn't considered... Her heart ached for the younger Clark.

"I'm still not sure to this day how Jonathan's bellow managed to reach all the way to the house, or if maybe I'd had some sense that my boy was hurting right before that, but I'd never rushed to the barn so fast."

Lois bit her lip and held her breath for a moment, anxious almost as if she was there with Martha on that day.

"Jonathan and I approached him slowly, and I sat on the floor next to him, and Jonathan next to me. When I reached out to gently touch his shoulder, he crawled into my lap and melted against me, sobbing. My heart was breaking for him.

"When he finally cried himself out, he looked up at me and Jonathan. And, Lois?" Martha said, looking at her and then taking a shuddering breath. "I can still hear his little voice today, the whimper and the way it trembled as if he was trying to keep more tears at bay. He said, 'I'm so sorry. I'm trying to be normal. I'm trying so hard. Don't be mad. Don't be scared.'"

"Oh, Clark," Lois gasped quietly, and her heart twisted painfully.

"It all came out then, finally," Martha continued, her voice shaky. "That his eyes could make fire, that he could see through things sometimes. That he was faster, stronger than even we'd known. And then he told us he could hear things really well, too. Oh, he was absolutely overcome with fear and grief, thinking we were scared of him, that he'd be taken away if he couldn't pretend to be normal."

"Oh, my heart. Oh, Clark." Lois swiped at a few tears that had slipped down her cheeks. "I knew, or I guess I knew that it was hard, that it was emotional, but I had no idea..."

Martha nodded. "It's not something he likes to talk about. For one thing...until you, there was no one but Jonathan and me he *could* talk to about it."

She looked at her adoptive mother, this woman who had so much love and compassion in her heart, and wondered how she did it. How she managed to hold all this pain inside and still have room for so much love. Lois pulled her in for a long hug and felt her sag a little and shudder as she took some deep breaths.

When she pulled back, Lois asked, “So what did you do?”

Martha smiled at her with damp eyes. “We had our very first family meeting.”

Lois let out half a laugh. “Of course you did.”

They spoke for at least an hour longer, Martha telling her how they’d talked about *everything* with Clark then. His powers. How they’d found him. How it was important not to let anyone find out about his powers, but that he could *always* talk to them about *anything*. How much they loved him for exactly who he was and how it made no difference to them what powers he had or would get. How they would never stop loving him no matter what.

And Lois had cried, at once grateful that the Kents had been the ones to find Clark and saddened that her own family wasn’t as loving or accepting. If she could even come close to being half the mother Martha was, Lois would be happy.

It was clear now that giving Clark space and time wasn’t working. Something had to give, and it was entirely possible that he would need professional help at some point. But first, they had to get him to stop shutting them out.

Lois sat in the rocking chair nursing Kallie while she watched Clark — barefoot in the kitchen, she noted wryly — making dinner. He’d beat Martha to it tonight, and she didn’t argue, nor did she dare offer to work with him. So Martha had gone to watch TV with Jonathan instead.

Lois stared at his back, watching his shoulder blades move against the fabric of his t-shirt as he tossed the vegetables in the sauté pan with enviable finesse. The aroma of sauteed onions and mushrooms filled the air, and a popular game show was playing at a low volume in the living room. Even still, she could hear Clark muttering quietly to himself as he worked on preparing dinner. It didn’t even sound like English, and she wondered if he’d been using that, muttering in Kryptonian to further alienate himself from her.

She was feeling hurt. It hurt being shut out continually. It hurt that he wouldn’t open up to her and share, trust her with what he was going through. On some level, she understood it was hard, that it must feel impossible to share whatever he’d been through.

She longed to turn her hurt into anger, to ignite her old fire to focus and find a solution, but she couldn’t quite

bring herself to do it. What if she triggered another incident like last week and made things worse? What if her anger made him shut down further instead of snapping him out of it?

Lois wished she knew what the right answer was, the right way to get to him. She let the debate rage on in her head while she watched Clark finish dinner and get it plated. Jonathan and Martha came in from the living room, and Lois adjusted herself and the baby, readying herself to get up and put Kallie down for a nap when Clark startled her by whisking over and offering silently to take the baby.

She gave him a hesitant nod, trying desperately to find any real feelings on his face and failing miserably. His own nod to her was reticent, but then she got to see it — he gazed down at their sleeping daughter in his arms. And there he was, out of nowhere — *her* Clark, his expression so tender and so full of love, her heart squeezed and yearned for more. Then he was gone, into the bedroom to put her down, and by the time he returned, his impassive demeanor was firmly back in place.

Lois wasn’t sure what had changed. Maybe enough time had passed that he felt safe touching them again, or at least Kallie. Getting only a glimpse of him was so painful, for a moment she struggled to breathe.

But she didn’t really have time to dwell on the fact as they all settled in their regular seats at the table. There was a strong undercurrent of tension that had been ever-present since the incident last week. Conversations were a struggle, but the silence was worse. Lois, Martha, and Jonathan usually had plenty to talk about, but lately it was hard to find a topic of discussion that wouldn’t irritate Clark.

Martha took the first attempt tonight. “Glad it’s warming back up a little after that cold snap we had. I had to cover up the garden the last few nights so I didn’t lose the peas.”

“I’m looking forward to when it’s no longer sweater-weather,” Lois added.

No other takers on the weather conversation, so Martha tried again. “So how’s your progress on the fence coming along?”

There was silence as Jonathan waited, Lois knew, to see if Clark would offer up his participation, but he merely raised his eyebrows and gestured vaguely at Jonathan with his hand for him to speak.

Lois watched Jonathan bite back a sigh and give a brief rundown. Martha asked a follow-up question or two, but then the conversation fizzled out again, and it was silent but for the sound of cutlery against plates and the background noise of the television in the other room.

This was getting to be torture, night after night of this. And Lois was sick of it. Under normal circumstances,

she'd have lost her appetite and maybe even left the table in a huff. But she didn't want to do that to Martha and Jonathan, and these days, she *always* had an appetite. A huge one thanks to the breastfeeding, so she had to stay and eat, else she'd be ravenous soon.

And moreover, she sensed that would be the exact wrong approach with Clark right now. So she stayed and ate, and she made her own attempt at innocuous conversation. "So, Martha, I noticed Kallie's poop was a little more solid than usual lately. Do you think I should call Dr. McNeil?"

Martha was about to answer when Clark interjected. "Can we not talk about poop while we're eating?" He smiled tightly.

A small rush of impatience surged to the surface, but Lois did her best to shove it down. "It's life with a baby. Every conversation involves poop," she said, laughing tentatively and hoping it might diffuse some of the tension.

His eyes snapped back to his plate. "Well, you would know better than I would, wouldn't you?" he said tersely.

"Clark!" Martha exclaimed. "That was..." Uncalled for was what she was going to say, Lois knew, but she stopped herself. "We can change the subject. It's fine. But to answer your question, Lois, I think it's fine to wait and see. Just keep an eye on it."

Jonathan cleared his throat and spoke next, the forced cheerfulness evident in his voice. "I hear now's your last chance until Christmastime to get some of Maisie's pecan pie. She had a surplus of pecans this season, but now she's running out."

"Ooh, I'd love to have at least one more!" Lois said.

Clark nodded curtly, and Lois wished she had any hint of an idea of what was going through his mind. But before she could think of anything else to say, Clark's head snapped up and to the side.

She hadn't seen that look in almost a year, but it only took a second longer for her heart to drop to her stomach. Oh no. God, no. He's not ready.

Clark didn't look at any of them, but he spoke, his voice low and strained. "Who left the TV on?"

Lois saw him breathing fast, and she could feel bursts of panic coming through. And then he was gone, a whoosh of wind and the screen door slamming shut in his wake.

The onslaught was intense, panic and anguish in her chest and in her gut, and she barely registered that Jonathan and Martha had gotten up to go check the television. But she turned to them and watched as they stared, as though they could will Clark to show up on the other side of the world.

"He went to the treehouse again," Lois said quietly, her voice thick with emotion as she fought against the confusion in her head and the pain in her chest. They

turned back to her, and she could see in their faces the shreds of hope fraying that much more.

They both nodded, knowing that it'd been irrationally hopeful to think otherwise.

"Family meeting time?" Martha asked Lois.

She swallowed hard against the lump in her throat, the emotions stabbing at her across the distance so fiercely that she could almost hear Clark's voice in her head. "No, I'll go. I need to go. He needs me."

Chapter 13: Could You Still Love Me, Pick Up the Pieces of Me?

Mid-March 1997

10 Months, 1 Day Since Clark Left Home

*"Even if you see my scars, even if I break your heart
If we're a million miles apart, do you think you'd walk
away?"*

If I get lost in all the noise, even if I lose my voice...

*...Could you? Could you? Could you love me
anyway?"*

Love Me Anyway by P!nk (feat. Chris Stapleton)

No more. <<Zha lizrhom.>> He couldn't take any more. He squeezed his eyes shut tight and covered his ears, even as his traitorous hearing instinctively reached out to listen to the television report of the earthquake in South America.

It'd be fine. Fine. Emergency crews had been handling things fine without him for almost a year. *Don't feel. <<Kao-zha-aovem-u.>>* But had they? Been handling things? How many lives could he have saved if he'd been here? *<<Kao-zha-aovem-u.>>* More than he'd saved by being on New Krypton? *<<Zha. Zha. Zha lizrhom.>>* No. No. He couldn't think of that. Kryptonian lives for human lives. *<<Kao-zha-aovem-u.>>* It wasn't even a trade he could make.

He just had to stop listening. *<<Kao-zha-aovem-u.>>* Imagine her heartbeat. He pulled the ring out from under his t-shirt. *Forgive me, Lois. <<Kao-zhalish-odh khahp.>>* He could hear it. Stronger than usual. Right. Right! He was home. He could hear her heartbeat. She was here.

<<Kao-zhalish-odh khahp.>>

But the sound was getting closer. She was coming. No. She couldn't see him like this. It wasn't fair to her. He had to conceal it. He had to be strong. *Family before self. <<Leo ze'me com ozemo.>>*

He knew she was coming. Of course she was. He'd removed the ladder — a clear sign his Fortress of Solitude was off limits. But he knew it didn't matter. *Go away. Please. <<Rroshodh khahp kuhs. Enaiodh rrip.>>*

He watched her walking towards the treehouse, huffing with the effort of hefting the ladder with her. *<<Enaiodh rrip, zha.>>* The back half of it dragged on the ground

behind her, scraping against the earth. His chest was tight and filled with a thousand pricking thorns, and his head was swimming. He couldn't stop it. He couldn't stop her.

<<Rroshodh khahp kuhs. Enaiodh rrip.>>

He closed his eyes, and for a horrific moment, he was back in the training room, images sliding by of Lois...NO. <<ZHA.>> He opened his eyes again and was relieved to find the crude walls of the treehouse, but he felt nauseated.

The ladder she'd brought was already leaning against the platform, and he could feel the slight movements with every rung she ascended. *I love you.* <<Zhao-odh khahp rrip.>> He was having trouble holding the feelings back. <<Kao-zha-aovem-u.>> She was too close. Too close. *I love you. Please. Go away.*

<<Zhao-odh khahp rrip. Enaiodh rrip. Rroshodh khahp kuhs.>>

She was coming through the door now, head ducked low to get through the small doorway, and then she kneeled in front of him. She'd been crying — was still crying. <<Kao-zha-aovem-u.>> The pain was too much, knotted and leaden in his stomach, her pain mixing with his. He had to protect her from it. Protect his family.

<<Leo ze'me com ozemo. Kao-zha-aovem-u.>>

"No more, Clark," she said, her voice quiet and strained.

<<Zha lizrhom.>>

"I'm begging you," she pleaded.

<<Enaiodh rrip.>>

"Clark!" she said, louder.

But he couldn't. Couldn't look at her. Couldn't respond. He loved her. Had to protect her. Had to save her.

<<Leo ze'me com ozemo. Kao-zha-aovem-u.>>

"Please talk to me." Another plea. "I love you."

<<Zhao-odh khahp rrip.>>

Her shove caught him off guard, and he bobbed backward. "No more Kryptonian! No more Kal-El, not right now!" she yelled, the sound of it somehow echoing within the four walls of the treehouse.

His breath caught and his throat was tight and he couldn't quite understand...and then he heard her.

<<I love you. I love you. I love you.>> Her voice was quiet and desperate and her heart was crying out.

Clark's head snapped up to find her eyes, but they were closed tightly, as if she was concentrating.

<<I love you. Please let me in.>>

She was...it was...his heart flooded with some kind of relief and love and desperation, and she anchored him, somehow. He reached his hand up to cup her face, his thumb slowly, reverently stroking her cheek, hesitant to do anything to break the connection but needing desperately to touch her. "I heard you," he whispered.

<<I love you,>> he tried.

Her eyes opened, and she looked straight at him and nodded, more tears rolling down her cheeks and over his thumb. <<I love you, too.>>

For long moments, they sat like that. He ran the pad of his thumb over her cheek as he got lost in her eyes. The sound of their breathing filled the small space, heavy at first from the intensity of...everything, but slowing with every breath. Somehow, somehow, with every exhalation, the tension lessened and the knots loosened.

It wouldn't last, he knew — the anxiety and the pain and the guilt weren't gone — but he refused to let them destroy the joy of this discovery, this moment.

<<I love you,>> he tried again.

And she smiled at him, gently pressing her cheek into his palm. He hadn't seen that smile in too long. His heart surged with warmth. <<Are you going to kiss me?>> she asked, and his heart cried with relief and pain in equal measure as she rose to her knees and then moved to settle herself in his lap.

He smiled broadly, nodding and closing his eyes for a moment, temporarily overwhelmed by the feeling of her body against his, not realizing how starved for her mere touch he'd been. Why...why had he gone so long without touching her? When he opened his eyes, she was waiting patiently, looking up at him with some kind of tenderness he hadn't seen before.

He cupped her cheek once more and lowered his mouth to hers, his lips gentle and loving against hers, intent on making sure she knew just how much he loved her, how much he'd missed her, and how much he desperately needed her. He felt his chest flush with a rush of warmth and desire and longing, a mingled grief along with them. As his lips and tongue danced with hers, he felt fierce sparks of love and hope and trust explode throughout his body, and he wondered, hoped with a desperate yearning that this is what it was supposed to be like. His chest flooded and surged with all their emotions as he kissed her, and it felt like love and connection and...home. It felt like coming home.

As much as he didn't want to part from her lips, he was finding himself with an increasing need for air. Finally, slowly, he pulled away. Warmth was radiating from where her hand was splayed on his chest.

"Can you feel that?" she asked, just as breathless as he was. "Is that how it's supposed to be?"

"I-I think so." He nodded as he trailed the back of his fingers along her face. His voice was strained with the emotion of it all, a heavy knot still in his throat. "It's for life, unbreakable. And it's only for you."

She closed her eyes briefly before looking at him again and smiling softly. He felt a surge of love and affection from her, and he wondered why he'd ever tried to close

himself off from this — her love, especially felt in this way, was a balm to his heart.

And then, slowly, the torment and hurt seeped in, reminding him it'd all been too much.

"If..." she started but trailed off. "How...did you, um..." <<...shut me out?>>

He winced and so did she as soon as she realized he'd heard her.

"I'm sorry," she rushed to say, touching his cheek with her fingertips. "I don't know how this works." She meant the telepathy at this moment, he knew, but the bigger, more painful question still loomed.

Lois moved hesitantly from his lap to sit facing him, and the loss of warmth and closeness was pronounced. She must have felt his pang of sadness and disappointment, because she rushed to grab his hand and give him what felt like a reassuring kiss.

"I don't know exactly how the telepathy works, either," he said, feeling discouraged. "It seems to be a part of, yet sometimes separate from, this connection, this bond."

She smiled briefly, and then her focus was on their joined hands. He watched as she traced an aimless pattern over the back of his hand. He wasn't sure if she was waiting for him to speak or if she was thinking, but the silence wasn't altogether uncomfortable, so he stayed quiet for a moment longer.

Her eyes came up to meet his again. "I don't know how this bond works, either," she said, holding her other hand to her heart, "this connection. But I know you have to let me in..."

Her voice was quiet and sure, but her heart was twisting painfully and it mirrored itself in his chest.

"What happened up there?" she asked, this time her voice rough as though she was talking around a lump in her throat.

He shook his head. He couldn't do this to her, burden her with any of the horrific things he'd witnessed...the unforgivable things he'd done. "It's too strong, too hard to talk about."

She waited silently, patiently for him to continue... assumed he would continue. Who was he to have made her wait for him? He'd been far away for far too long. But she was here and holding his hand. And underneath the aching and anxiety and shame churning within himself, he felt a strong undercurrent of love from her.

"I've already hurt you so much," he said hoarsely, quietly, staring at their hands and bringing his free hand up to trace along her fingers with his own. "I just...want to forget it all. Just focus on things back here. I've missed so much..."

She didn't say anything, but another twinge of sadness cut through him, and then the guilt of his leaving came

after, sinking quickly and settling itself at the knot in his stomach.

He looked up at her and found her eyes damp with unshed tears, but still patiently waiting. "I need to be here for you," he pleaded. "And Kallie. And there's so much around the farm to catch up on... Dad needs help. Mom, too, I'm sure. She's been meaning to reorganize her studio in the barn forever, but she can't reach the higher shelves, and —"

"Clark," she prompted gently, squeezing his hand. "You have to. If you don't let it out, it's going to destroy you."

"I'm afraid it already has," he whispered, not entirely sure if it'd been loud enough for her to hear, if he'd wanted her to hear. His heart tore silently, pleading with her not to ask again.

"No it hasn't," she said quietly but firmly. "I still see you. I know you're still there."

He wasn't so sure he believed her. But he wanted so desperately to believe her. Even still, the Kryptonian decree was imprinted in his mind: *Family before self*. He hated it as much as he agreed with it. His family was all that was important right now. He was back, and he needed to be there for them. He shook his head determinedly. It was too painful to think about what happened up there, and he couldn't focus on Lois, on his family, if he let that in. He had to block it out. He had to. "It's not fair to burden you with it. I've already cost you so much. Missed so much. You had to do so much." And he didn't want to tell her. Not all of it. He couldn't.

Lois closed her eyes, her brows knitting together, and he could feel an unyielding current of love come across, underscored by the hurt he was causing her.

"You're right," she said, then opened her eyes again to look at him. "It's not fair. But it wasn't exactly fair for you, either. And you haven't cost me anything. You've given me *everything*. And I wasn't alone — I know you were thinking it — you left me with the best family a person could ask for. I wasn't alone."

He nodded uncertainly, and now his mind was back to darker thoughts, scarier thoughts. He knew his hesitation in sharing wasn't all about protecting Lois; he needed to protect himself, too. Just as he'd been doing for the better part of a week. Being home, where he had all the freedom in the world to feel his feelings and have his thoughts, was terrifying after the severity and constraints of New Krypton. The floodgates were too wide. <<*Kao-zha-aovem-u.*>>

Her face fell slightly, and he realized she'd heard. "Kow za aovem. What's that?" she asked quietly, a sadness to her voice that pulled painfully at his heart.

"Kao-zha-aovem-u. It essentially translates to 'don't

feel.' It's..." His eyes cast about slowly, regarding the floor, the walls, anything but looking into her eyes right now. "I'm afraid to feel. I'm so used to blocking them, I'm afraid they'll all come in at once and it'll be too much. Like the...outburst last week? I don't want to hurt you too."

"Oh, Clark," she gasped and reached out with her hands to cup his face. "Look at me."

He hesitated for a moment before he found her eyes once more.

"Remember what you told me last year?" She paused, her thumb stroking his cheek once. "Look at me," she said, gentle but firm. "You said that being together — us together — is stronger than you alone?"

He managed a nod, and his breath hitched.

"I don't think that's ever been more true. This connection, however it works, we're sharing our emotions. If they're too much for you to handle, let's handle them together. Let me help you. What a gift it is, that I can actually help you carry these feelings. Let me love you."

Could he? The power of all the emotions was overwhelming, his...hers...theirs...his chest was surging, and it was harder to breathe. He wasn't even sure...he couldn't quite process what she was saying. They were his words from so long ago — a lifetime ago — but...

He leaned his forehead towards hers, closing the distance until they were touching, and he closed his eyes and took several deep breaths. "I'm not sure what I did to deserve you," he whispered in the space between them.

He could feel her smile, and she pulled away, her hands sliding down to his shoulders, so he opened his eyes to look at her again. "You know, a wise woman recently told me, 'you never have to do anything to *deserve* love, especially from me.'"

A short laugh puffed his chest briefly, and he took a deep breath. "Mom?"

She nodded and smiled, sitting back a little to take off her shoes and set them on the bit of ledge that overhung the front of the treehouse, just outside the door. Clearly, she was intent on staying a while. She looked back at him and reached to take his hand again. "Now, do you think you feel up to talking about this...kowzah — the 'don't feel'? It's more than just a phrase. What is it? How does it work?"

Her voice, her posture, everything was calm, open... loving, yet still...

She was only asking about training, but it hurt to even think about the room, and...he couldn't tell her about training, about what happened in that room...or the monster he'd become because of it. But she was waiting for an answer. "It's, uh...they — he...Ching — there was training to...teach me how to control my emotions, to turn

them off." The knot in his stomach clenched back up.

She was watching him carefully, and he wondered if she was feeling the knot too. "Training...for your emotions?" she asked. "To control them? *Turn them off?!*" There was a sharp edge to her tone, though he could tell it wasn't directed at him, and he could feel her outrage. "That's..." She paused to take a breath as though she was convincing herself not to get angry. "That's really what they think of emotions? I mean, I knew they were cold and unfeeling but..."

The feelings in her chest shifted, and she was quiet for a moment, her face cast in amber hues from what was left of the sunset. "Sorry, I'm sorry, Clark. That must have been hell."

"You have no idea," he said quietly, wishing it were different...all of it. His people, his culture, the things he'd done that he couldn't take back...the last year of his life. There was no easy way back.

She took another breath, and a curious but worried look crossed her face. "How...how exactly do they train you to control your emotions?"

Flashes of images from training assaulted him, impossibly short, but it didn't matter. He'd seen them all thousands of times. The tension in his chest increased a hundredfold, and the knot twisted painfully.

"Clark, it's okay. I'm here," she said, squeezing his hand, saying the exact right words even though she couldn't possibly know, couldn't possibly have seen...

He could just share the idea of it, nothing more. The details...she didn't need the explicit details to help him. He took a deep breath and then spoke slowly, "They put me in a simulation and thought of the worst thing they could, the most painful thing, and then...I saw it over and over again until I didn't show any emotion."

"That's horrible!" she gasped. She was silent for a moment, but then she asked, "What's the worst thing?" Of course, she asked.

And he froze for half a second, reaching mentally to block them out, but he couldn't. Their connection wouldn't let him. She wouldn't let him. And so he sat there, not breathing, his chest clenched tightly, trying to hold them back, but they flooded his mind like ice water and molten lava and sharp daggers, the scenes and images and thoughts of Lois dying over and over and over again because he was always too late to save her.

It was too late to save her now, too, from all his pain and suffering — he could see it in her eyes, the instant she felt them, heard them.

"Oh, God," she cried, and before he could even breathe, somehow her arms were around him, holding him fiercely. "I'm here. I'm here. I'm here. I'm here," she breathed, and her hands were touching him, soothing. "I'm

here. I'm okay. I'm here."

His breath came out in a whoosh, and a second later, her lips were on his, kissing him as if her life depended on it, as if his life depended on it. She was alive and whole, right here in his arms. The tension bled from his chest for now, leaving only powerful surges of love and need and desperation as they kissed, and he wasn't certain anymore who was reassuring whom.

Finally, she pulled back slightly, her breath coming in gentle pants against his mouth. Her hands came up to frame his face, and he could see it in her eyes and feel it in his chest, her love and compassion for him. "I'm here," she whispered as she regarded his face, her eyes and fingertips traveling over his brow and nose and cheeks and eyes and lips as though she was checking to make sure he was all there and that there were no traces of pain.

And there weren't, not right in this second, this moment, and he never wanted this moment to end, so he kissed her again. Slowly at first, but no less passionately, letting all the light and love spill over from her chest into his and back again. One hand threaded through her hair, and the other splayed at the side of her neck, caressing her soft skin with the pads of his fingers.

Their kisses quickly became more hungry and desperate, the quiet moans and whimpers from the back of her throat igniting his desire, a primal need he had to reassure himself that she really was here. Her hand at the back of his neck pulled him closer somehow. Then she let out a muffled gasp, and he realized their position was a precarious one, but he managed to put a hand out to catch them before they hit the floor. Then he lowered her carefully the rest of the way down, propping himself up on his forearms on either side of her head. As he stretched his legs out, he was vaguely aware of the sound of small things crashing to the floor and possibly the splintering of wood behind him, but he didn't care, couldn't care. The only thing he cared about was that her hand was still at the back of his neck, and now she was pulling him down to recapture her mouth.

Her body was reassuringly solid beneath him, and her lips, moving almost feverishly against his, told him everything he needed to know right now. Her hands were roaming, caressing his shoulders and over and down his back. When she reached the hem of his t-shirt, he hesitated. *Conceal.* <<*Throniv.*>>

Lois pulled away gently and looked at him curiously, her lips enticingly flushed and swollen. "What's that?"

No. His chest heaved. She'd heard him. Wanted to know. He didn't want to deal with this right now. He wanted to stay here in this moment, feel her body under his, his length wonderfully pressed between them. He wanted to touch her, kiss her, make love to her like she

deserved to be loved, to join with her and feel how alive and perfect she was. And he could pretend he was still worthy of her, worthy of her love.

Her right hand reached up to touch his cheek. "Clark," she said softly, making him look at her.

He moved off of her and sat up, running his hand through his hair and blowing out a heavy breath, his chest constricting painfully. "Conceal. It means conceal," he said, his voice quiet.

She sat up as well, moving close to him and bringing her hand back to where it'd been on his cheek. "What are you trying to conceal, love?" she asked, somehow without any trace of anger or frustration.

"I..." he hesitated. His hands went to the bottom of his t-shirt, his fingers playing nervously at the hem. "I have a scar." He didn't want to tell her. He didn't want to hide from her. But how could he even begin to explain...

<<*Kao-zha-aovem-u.*>> He thought it before he could stop it, but he rushed to tell her, "I'm sorry. Sorry. I'm trying not to. I'm sorry."

She nodded, he assumed in silent acceptance of his apology, and her fingers moved to trace over his eyebrow where one of his scars had been. "I thought they'd all faded away."

They had. All the others had faded. But this one...this one had remained. As if he'd needed some sick and twisted reminder of what he'd had to do — what he'd chosen to do — how far he'd fallen.

"This one's...still there. It's bad. Ugly." He winced, hoping against hope that...she'd... "I...you probably don't want to see it."

He was deluding himself. This was Lois Lane. And she'd get to the bottom of this no matter what he did. It might scare her, worry her...but there wasn't any way he would be able to hide it from her.

He wasn't entirely sure he *wanted* to hide it. But just as desperately, he wanted for it not to exist at all, for him to never have to tell her the story of how he'd gotten it.

"I do," she said, letting her hand slide from his cheek, down along his neck and shoulder and arm to take hold of his hand. "I do want to see it. It's part of you."

He didn't *want* it to be part of him. He didn't want her to see this part of him...the unspeakable horror that was inextricably linked to his wound, burned into his memory as it was into his flesh.

He moved his other hand to cover the scar even though his shirt still concealed it, and he could feel the rough lines of it beneath the thin cotton. "I...I'm not sure I..." He didn't want to see her horror, her pity. And he didn't want to tell her...

"If you're not ready, that's okay," she said, the pain evident in her voice, though he couldn't be sure if it was

her upset at the apparent lack of trust or if she was sensing his feelings, that this was something bigger, something... not okay.

But some part deep inside of him didn't want to hide from her anymore. She'd reminded him of their strength, pleaded gently for him to let her in, let her love him.

He missed her, needed her. He couldn't live without her, and it broke his heart that he'd spent almost a year trying to. *No more*, he decided. <<*Zha lizrhom.*>>

He could feel her heart sink, and he hadn't meant to, he'd forgotten again that she could hear him, so he explained. "No more, it means. I don't want to hide from you anymore." Her heart surged, buoying his with it.

And he was terrified.

She wouldn't love him anymore if she knew, if she knew what atrocities he'd committed in the name of progress and freedom on New Krypton. He didn't understand it himself. How could she possibly understand? He would never forgive himself. How could she possibly...

But she was watching him, with bated breath and a heart full of hope that he could feel echoing in his chest, and he couldn't deny her. The light of the sun was all but gone now, her face cast in slowly growing shadows yet somehow also his light in the darkness.

As beautiful as she was just like this and as much as he wanted to stay hiding in the dark, he couldn't. Not anymore. He took a deep breath and reached over to switch on the small battery-powered lantern along the side wall. The initial brightness of it made them both flinch slightly, but their eyes adjusted quickly.

Another deep breath, the needles of anxiety coursing through him. "Help me?" he asked.

And thankfully she knew, she knew exactly what he meant, because he wasn't sure he would have been able to articulate it. She let go of his hand and reached toward him slowly and took gentle hold of the hem of his shirt. He hoped it would be enough. He hoped she wouldn't ask more about it.

Her eyes didn't leave his as she lifted his shirt and pulled it up over his head after he'd raised his arms, her ring on the chain slinking back down to hang on his chest. The soft whisper of the t-shirt landing on the wooden planks of the treehouse floor sounded far louder to his ears than it should have. Her eyes still hadn't left his, and he realized that she was waiting for him to be ready, waiting for him to tell her it was okay.

He wasn't sure it would ever be okay, but the overwhelming onslaught of love in his chest made him want to try. Clark took her hand again and slowly brought it close to his scar. "Okay," he told her, his voice hoarse and his breath catching in his throat. He fought to keep his

eyes open and not hide from her reaction, as if that would win him some sort of validation or absolution.

She gasped sharply, but quietly, her free hand coming up to cover her mouth. "Oh, Clark," she whispered as she let her fingertips explore the gnarled tissue.

He slowly let out the breath he'd been holding. There was no pity or horror — for which he was grateful — but she still didn't know the cost of it, what had become of the man who had injured him so.

The feel of her touch against the scar tissue was different, less pleasant, but it tingled as her fingers mapped the size and shape of it. He could sense that she wanted to ask but was hesitant, afraid to push him.

He knew his face was anguished and that she could likely feel it in her chest almost as keenly as he did. He looked up at her with an agonizing expression. How could he ever hope to be close to her again if he didn't share?

Yet...if she ever found out...how could he ever expect her to love him?

Chapter 14: You Don't Have to Be Superman

Mid-March 1997

10 Months, 1 Day Since Clark Left Home

*"If I could break away half of all your pain
I'd take the worst of it and carry you like you carry me.
...We're strong enough for this and I need you.
It's okay that you need me too..."*

Superman by Rachel Platten

There were so many feelings waging war inside her, both Clark's and hers, and to have their connection so open and free-flowing was...incredibly painful and wonderful all at once. Her heart ached when she looked at his scar again, her fingers still wandering over this new part of him. And as much as he'd shared, she knew he was holding back. But...she had no idea how far to push him. *If* she should push him.

She could sense he needed a little space, a little time. And honestly, so did she — her chest was tight and full of apprehension, fear. She hesitated, fumbling frantically for something to ask that wasn't so outwardly blunt. "Does it still hurt?" she asked. It looked painful.

He shook his head, and she was relieved to know it didn't hurt, but she could still feel tension in his chest. "Not really, no. I guess maybe that's my invulnerability? It itches sometimes, though."

He seemed to be relieved by the more mundane question. "Yeah, that happens with scars." She wanted to say more, that scars fade, that they become a part of who you are, your story and where you've been, what you've survived...

But there was so much she didn't know, and she could

tell there was so much more he was reluctant to share. Her stomach was sick from imagining what unspeakable horror had caused such a scar. Why hadn't it faded?

And why had being wounded, attacked...why was he so deathly afraid of sharing what had scarred him so deeply?

She reached up to stroke his face, tracing each part of it as if she needed to memorize it again. In truth, she was wondering how it was possible that anyone in this or any universe would want to try and kill him, this man who was nothing but selfless and loving. She knew, she knew all too well — all manner of criminal elements on Earth wanted him dead — but she still couldn't understand it.

Had it been the same on New Krypton? Surely, it had been — people wanting him dethroned if not dead...a sovereign lord from another planet who didn't know their culture or their customs. She hadn't let herself dwell on the possible repercussions of dealing with a populace who had been raised so vastly different than Clark had, how they would likely resent a leader installed so abruptly and...ceremoniously.

Did it matter that he was fair, caring, magnanimous, altruistic? Had they had a chance to see that?

The grief and anguish and fear coming off him in waves told a different story, one that portrayed him as something other than a noble and unselfish ruler. But she couldn't fathom a reason why that would be. And her heart broke at the thought that he'd obviously experienced something horrific.

Her fingers lingered on his abdomen, but she felt awkward and unsure touching him. It ached to feel that way when all she'd ever felt was excitement, arousal, and love when she touched him. What had changed?

She looked up to catch his eyes again in the light of the small lantern, and they told of unspeakable violence, trauma, and something that refused to be named. His eyebrows knitted together more tightly than they had right to, and she could feel the lurch and stabbing of the pain in his heart.

She closed her eyes and let out a sharp breath and then inhaled deeply. He wouldn't say anything, but his heart was broadcasting loudly.

"Clark," she said, her voice a strained whimper. "You have to let me in, my love."

She watched enough to see that he was shaking his head, and his chest was heaving with breaths he couldn't contain.

<<Let me in,>> she tried.

Lois felt, more than heard his sharp inhale of breath. She squeezed her eyes shut almost painfully and concentrated, pouring every single ounce of love and determination into her soul — into his soul — as she

could.

<<No matter what it is, I will still love you.>>

Silence stretched into the corners of the treehouse and beyond, even the crickets outside seeming to have fallen silent for the moment. When she opened her eyes again, she saw his features contort with anguish as he shook his head. She swore she could feel him swallow past a lump in his throat. <<You can't...I can't.>>

"You can. I can," she said gently. Her hands came up to either side of his face, making sure he would look at her, see her, feel her. "I love you." She paused, making sure he was really seeing her. "Nothing. *Nothing* could make me stop loving you."

She could tell he'd heard her...by the clench in his chest and hitch in his breath...the tears threatening in his eyes. He hadn't let his gaze wander this time, but she saw so much pain in his eyes, so much pain that it hurt within her own chest, and she fought back her own tears, desperate to stay strong for him.

And then his eyes closed and his pain ripped at her, tearing at her chest and in her heart. He thought himself unforgivable.

Her breath caught in her throat, and she closed her eyes too, her hands never leaving his face. She took a deep breath to steady herself.

<<I forgive you,>> she told him.

His eyes flew open, and she could feel his heart clench. His brow was still furrowed so strongly, the anguish evident in his expression. "You don't know what I've done."

"Then tell me. Tell me, and I'll still forgive you," she urged. "Everything. I forgive you." She stroked his cheek with her thumbs, trying to convey through her touch as well that he was worth forgiving, worth loving, because something deep inside told her that he was doubting everything, even her love.

She held fast to the knowledge that he'd been through hell. It wasn't her love he was doubting. It was his worthiness.

And he needed to know he was worthy. He was forgiven. And above everything — he was loved. Always. Always.

She let her hands trail down his neck and over his bare chest. She added a little more pressure to the hand that now covered his heart, willing him to feel her, feel her love.

He shut his eyes, and she could feel him trying to hide, trying to hold tight to the truth that he seemed convinced would destroy him if he let it out. "I'm scared of who I've become," he said, his voice a strained whisper. <<Kao-zha-aovem-u.>>

Her heart clenched, but she waited, hoping he'd

explain again, that he just needed a moment. But even as she hoped, she could feel him slipping away, the static of their connection building, and she pressed harder against his chest. Something touched her thumb, and she saw it. Her ring.

As fast as she could, she moved her hand to cover the ring, feeling it press into her palm as she focused desperately to hold on to their connection.

His chest rose and fell beneath her hand as he took a deep breath. The static of their connection ebbed, and she felt a strange, steely calm replace it. It echoed through her hand, her arm, and into her chest. Dispassionate, severe, and impassive. Everything Clark never was, but for the wisps of resentment and pain slipping through. For the first time since she'd entered the treehouse, she felt the chill of the evening seeping through the door and the seams of the planks.

Lois searched Clark's face, desperate to find a trace of him, but his eyes remained closed and his brow absent any hint of the fear and anguish of moments ago. Had she lost him? What had he said? He was scared of who he'd become. She could only guess at what that meant...what it meant to be at war...what — rather, who — had given him the gruesome scar. She shivered slightly.

Then there were short bursts of thoughts, and — she gasped softly — images. His memories. She had to close her eyes, so odd was the sensation of seeing something in her mind that wasn't hers. And then the memories flowed freely, stripped of emotion and playing out like a grisly but silent movie in her mind. Clark in a black suit, his S in blue — the very same as the suit he'd left in. His eyes stony and unforgiving but his thoughts telling another story, not so indifferent or detached about the actions he was taking.

<<*Terminate the vehicle.*>>

Her heart staggered as thoughts and images of death and starvation and strategy and antiquated legislation scattered through her mind like the shrapnel and debris from the explosion. Then...

A rage that felt so foreign. A desperation she could hardly bear. A phantom pain, so agonizing, as a blade tore through her side. Then another blade — no, the same blade — and a different body, a sickening plunge and a slick warmth...

<<*This is how I die.*>>

And a blackness descended over her mind, the steely calm settling over her again.

Her breath caught for a long moment before she gasped, taking in a few halting breaths of the chilly evening air. Nothing and everything made sense...she almost couldn't comprehend the level of tragedy and trauma she'd just experienced — that *he'd* experienced —

nor the level of suffering...

She looked up to find him watching her with a detached and impassive expression that resembled nothing like *her* Clark.

At some point, her hand had fallen from his chest, and she started to fear she'd lost him for good. Had he turned his emotions off for the last time? Her eyes searched his face wildly, trying to find the traces of *her* Clark she knew were there behind the mask of indifference and the sea of trauma.

"Clark," she whispered, and her heart wrenched at the slight flinch she saw.

"I don't know who I am anymore," he said, his voice quiet, almost dispassionate. "Not Clark. Certainly not Superman. Everything that I am — that I *was* — is gone. I'm not the man you knew, the man you want. I'm a murderer."

All she could feel was his resigned sorrow. And it was devastating. All of it.

She wasn't sure how he hadn't been crushed by the weight of it all.

"Kao-zha-aovem-u," he said softly. "That's how."

Her eyes flew up to meet his again, surprised that he'd read her thoughts. But then the meaning of his words hit her, and she was overcome by a profound sadness at what those words meant. Things were more serious, more grave than she ever could have guessed, and her mind raced to find the right answer, how to help him. Flashes of his thoughts and emotions, his memories, charged through her mind, demanding to be reconciled with the man in front of her, the man she could feel fighting against the full torrent of emotions.

Lois closed her eyes and took a deep, steady breath, bracing herself for what she knew had to happen, gathering her strength for the oncoming flood. Clark had a history of bottling up his emotions, feeling like he always needed to be the strong one — and as Superman, he'd *had* to be. But this...this was...

Killing was a line that Superman never crossed. And now...

She took another breath before she opened her eyes again, and she found him staring down at his hands. "Clark," she said, her heart crying for him and for the flinch she still saw when she said his name. A gentle hand on his knee finally made him look up at her, his eyes glassy and tinged with red, and she reached to take his hand, grateful that he let her. "I know I promised you my forgiveness, and — " He started pulling his hand away, but she held it tight. "No, stay with me, *please*. You have it, my forgiveness, my absolution. Anything you need because I know — I *know* — that you tried everything in your power to avoid taking lives."

He stared at her, his tension still bleeding through, and she could tell that he didn't believe her, that he wasn't willing to allow himself her acceptance. It was silent for a long moment, and then he shook his head and gently pulled his hand back. "What does it matter, Lois? It won't change what I've done. I can't take it back. I can't take any of it back."

"You're right. You can't. And I know how much that hurts." She brought her right hand up to cup his face. "I know," she said, her voice breaking as she fought back her own tears. "But that doesn't mean you're beyond saving. I see you. I see all of you, all the parts of you I fell in love with — they're still there." She let her hand slide down to rest again against his chest. "In here."

"I'm not the same man anymore," he said, looking around the inside of the treehouse slowly, wistfully, as if in search of himself in the walls of his childhood hideout.

"No, you're not. And I'm not the same woman. It's been almost a year, Clark, and we've both been through... so much. So much. Neither of us wanted to do it alone. It was beyond painful not to have you here, but I at least had your parents. You were alone. You did what you could. You did what you *had* to do. But now you're back, and you have your family. We're here for you. Let us be here for you."

"But I..." His voice faltered a bit, and he shook his head again.

"I know you want to shut it all out in some sort of effort to make it up to us — to me — but you can't. You can't turn them off, Clark. Not anymore," she said, her voice soft but imploring him to listen. "We can't go backwards and fill in the gaps; we can only go forward, learn to live with how life happened."

"I'm not strong enough for this," he said, his voice a strained whisper and his eyes seeming to beg her for the answer, any answer.

"You don't have to be," she said softly, confident in her words but not sure what else to say. What *could* she say?

Lois' eyes drifted down to her ring on his chest, and she moved her hand to take hold of it, letting it play between her thumb and index finger a few times. "You kept your promise." She was quiet for a moment and looked up to find his eyes again. "You managed to keep your love for me safe throughout...everything, all this time. Even with..." She winced, not even wanting to think of it. "Even despite the training. During a war. On a planet and in a culture that...Ching said it himself — they didn't have time for love or kindness —"

<<*They did in the end...kindness, at least.*>>

She gasped. Her hand fell to land gently on his knee, and her voice trembled slightly when she asked him,

"They did?" It was almost too much to hope for, but... given everything...it was the least she should have expected.

His nod was almost imperceptible, and she was struggling to think of why this, of all the things that had happened up there, why this was hard to share.

<<*There was some kindness...not always amongst the ruling families, but the peoples' representatives.*>>

"Representatives?" she asked, working hard to keep the shock from her voice. She fought the urge to launch excitedly into a stream of questioning, a part of her so encouraged by this, seemingly the single positive thing to come of his whole New Krypton experience. But she knew she had to hold back — he couldn't even tell her out loud.

"I...I helped them... Their new governing structure has representatives. I guess...it's a bit similar to a constitutional monarchy? Like Britain?" he said, his voice still unsure. "And...well, I think...ruling alongside the people instead of over them...there's a lot more kindness."

She almost asked herself — asked him — why he wasn't happier about this, why finding a way to save New Krypton and leave it better off wasn't inspiring any joy or pride from him — that had been the goal, after all. But she knew the answer. It had cost him too much.

For Clark, celebrating that would mean celebrating what came before, the painful and tortuous path it took to get there. And she didn't have to ask him if he thought the end justified the means.

<<*I almost died.*>>

Lois' heart lurched and twisted painfully. Too many nights she'd stayed awake wondering...praying that he was still coming home, that he hadn't died.

He almost had. She'd almost lost him. Would she have ever known?

She tried, but she couldn't stop the sob from escaping or the tears that followed.

And then she was in his arms, he'd gathered her into his lap and was holding her close. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," he whispered against her hair.

She wanted nothing more than to just stay in his arms, to be certain she'd never be apart from him again, never have even a chance of losing him. But she had to pull back slightly to tell him, to make sure he knew, "Don't be sorry. You made it back to me." Her fingers came up to touch his face, reassuring herself with the warmth of his skin beneath her fingertips. "You kept your promise, and you made it back home to me," she said through the tears.

"I had to," he rasped, and his words hung in the space between them for a moment before he leaned in to capture her lips in a deep and desperate kiss.

Flashes of their moments, their kissing, their closeness over the years...what seemed like all of Clark's favorite

moments...played through her mind as his kiss grew more insistent, and he threaded his fingers through her hair to draw her closer still. At first, she wasn't sure what drove his urgency until newer, more painful memories of his insinuated themselves between the happy moments, bringing along with them piercing memories that were all too familiar to her.

A flight above the clouds, the moon bright and hopeful...morphing into white walls surrounding him on all sides and the sensation of lying in a hospital bed, not letting himself have the full allotment of medication because he felt he deserved the pain...

Holding hands and watching carolers together from her window — their first Christmas spent together — the time he'd 'missed' his flight to come to her dinner; and then their next Christmas — their first as a couple — when he'd nearly died, fallen into a coma...

Then another coma, just as dire...but maybe worse, his body stabbed and wracked with poison and his mind trapped in a tortuous void, assaulted with endless images of losing her...her frozen body, not reviving as she truly had after Mazik's threat...the stabbing pain of watching Bad Brain turn her to a pile of ash...the slow rending of his heart when she didn't even remember who he was...

But then...the thrill in his heart when she said yes to his date...the racing pulse and fireworks in his chest during their first kiss...the slight fear yet extraordinary relief when she'd discovered his secret...the spectacular warmth and feeling of wholeness when he'd accepted her proposal...and the indescribable flood of arousal and life and passion and belonging when they'd first made love.

The moment seemed like eternity but only seconds all at once, and she had no idea how much time had actually passed. As she tore her lips away from his to catch her breath, she tried to ground herself back in their surroundings. She was still in his lap, but at some point she had moved to straddle him, her legs around his waist. Her hands were at the nape of his neck, her forearms resting on his broad shoulders.

Faster to catch his breath and unable to contain this feeling of belonging and desperation and need that was radiating from him, Clark set his lips on a journey down her jawline and to her neck. His mouth was warm and wet against her skin, and everywhere he touched set her skin afire and tingling.

Traces of thoughts and emotions and memories — both his and hers — remained, but she was only vaguely aware of how they'd gotten to where they were now. All she knew was that she needed him and he needed her with a fierceness that rivaled anything she'd experienced before. A moan escaped her as she felt his lips and tongue dance against her skin, exploring her neck and part of her

collarbone.

"Clark..." she whispered.

He paused, and when his head came up, the look on his face stole her breath away all over again. His eyes, slightly clouded with passion and dark with need, held something so much more, something she couldn't name but didn't have to because she could feel it...she could feel...

Her love, their love...he'd used it to banish the darkness...held fast to their love, their connection, this whole time even though he'd had to hide it away in the darkest recesses of his heart and mind. It'd kept him alive, saved him somehow and some way, and he needed it again now, needed to be consumed by it to banish everything else that had happened. She crushed her lips against his once more and threaded her hands through his hair, pulling at him as if there were some way to get him closer still.

After a while, Lois couldn't be sure where she ended and he began, because as they made love, their connection was so strong and so powerful, more than it had ever been before. When they both were spent, he lifted his head back up and brought a hand up to cup her cheek. "Lois, I..." He trailed off, and she watched him shake his head ever so slightly, just the way he always did when he was a little tongue tied.

But before she could reassure him just like she always did, she felt an incredible warmth and explosion inside her chest, of gratitude and grief and belonging and need and sadness and relief and love. So, so much love.

Chapter 15: You Love Me For Who I Am, Like the Stars Hold the Moon

Mid-March 1997

21 Days Since Clark Came Home

*"When my world is falling apart,
When there's no light to break up the dark,
That's when I look at you..."*

*When the waves are flooding the shore,
And I can't find my way home anymore,
That's when I look at you..."*

When I Look At You by Miley Cyrus

Much later that night, Clark lay awake on their bed next to Lois as she slept. Sleep still eluded him, as it had for far too many nights this week, but at least now it was not altogether unpleasant. Tonight's insomnia lacked a heart and mind clenched with fear and dread and guilt; instead, there was a wistful melancholy that had settled over him like a weighted blanket.

His body was tired, drained from the fierce torrent of emotions and — it seemed — from the prolonged use of their connection, as if it were a muscle that needed training and endurance. The feeling — the physical exertion — wasn't unfamiliar, not after living for almost a year

without his powers. The emotional exertion...that, too, was familiar, but it was different now. On New Krypton, he'd survived so long with a dull but heavy ache in the corners of his heart that living without it now was almost...not painful, but strange and unsettling.

But, while his heart was tired and heavy now again, it was also filled with gratitude...reverence for the woman lying next to him. The glow from the moon through the window cast her face in such an ethereal light that he had to reach out and touch the soft skin of her cheek for fear that he was imagining her.

Ever so lightly, he stroked her cheek with the backs of his fingers, aching to be closer and touch her more completely but loath to disturb her. If he was feeling exhausted, she must be more so.

After making love in the treehouse, they'd lain in each other's arms for a long time — with only a brief interruption to go borrow a quilt from his mother's studio in the barn when Lois had gotten chilly. He almost wished they could have stayed that way forever, lingering in the afterglow of the most profound emotional and physical experience either of them had ever had.

Eventually, though, they'd made it back to the house, and he'd sat at Lois' side as she nursed Kallie. They gave his parents only brief reassurance that things were okay — considering — and that was all they'd asked before insisting on taking Kallie for the night to give him and Lois some respite.

Back in their room, in their bed, they'd talked of easier things and made love again, less urgent but no less intense. True, he didn't have much to base his experience on, but he felt deep in his heart that their connection, their bond... well, having it open and thrumming soundly made making love...he didn't even have the words to describe it. He felt like...he hoped...

Being connected to Lois like that...made him feel a small measure like himself again, like maybe her love — their love — was enough to save him. Whether it was a fanciful thought or not, he clung to it, held tight as fastly as he'd protected his love for her when he'd been gone.

The longer he lay there and watched her...well, he wanted it to be comforting and healing and...and it was, to an extent, but ever so slowly, the sorrow crept back over him, the murkiness of it like a fog that made it hard to see the hope of what lay ahead. Needing desperately to touch her again but still trying not to wake her, Clark reached over and, with gentle fingers, brushed her hair behind her ear.

His heart clenched in his chest. How would he ever be able to make it up to her?

"There's nothing to make up," she murmured sleepily.

He startled slightly, not having expected her to make a

sound, let alone speak. And the guilt started to creep back in to rest alongside the sorrow.

She opened her eyes then and brought a hand up to his cheek. "Hey," she said softly, somehow with so much love and conviction and support that it pricked at his heart.

He didn't know if he could handle this type of acceptance. It hurt...it... In the face of everything he'd done, he still couldn't believe he was worthy of it. And all she had said was 'hey.'

"C'mere," she said as she brought herself closer, closing the small chasm that had existed between them.

As if responding to her of its own accord, his body found hers as she molded herself against him. She kissed him, her lips brushing against his, then tugging and teasing before pulling back again. His breath was coming more quickly, but now he was entirely unsure if it was due to an impending anxiety attack or excitement. Was it possible it was both?

For a moment, he couldn't breathe — it felt like he was drowning, sinking in the depths of all the horrors he'd been responsible for, and...and then her lips were on his, her hand threading through his hair to the back of his neck, holding him close as she seemed to be trying to kiss him out of his mind. It was working, too, because he could breathe again, and every part of him felt alive. Right here in this moment. The dark thoughts and fog were receding, replaced by the feel of her lips warm and damp against his own. If he could just hold on to this feeling...hold on to her, then he could —

<<Don't think. Just love me,>> she told him.

And suddenly he couldn't think of a single reason not to.

Their lovemaking was intense and almost a little playful, and when they were spent, it felt like long minutes before either of them was able to catch their breath. Lying side by side in the afterglow, he wrapped his arms around her and kissed the top of her head, entirely too tired to move any more than that.

She was looking him, her eyes gleaming. "That was..."

"I...can't even...words are..."

"Yeah...same," she breathed before snuggling him closer with a grin.

"And...cleaning up is another thing they don't really mention in the romance no —"

Lois' eyebrows shot up. "So you *have* read the books I stashed under my bed!"

He felt his face flush with warmth. She didn't need telepathy to get her answer.

Then an inscrutable look crossed her face, but she hid it quickly, and he could only catch a flash of what she'd been thinking.

"What?" he asked, worried that he'd done something,

said something wrong, that...

"It's okay, love. It's not important right now, and you've done nothing wrong. We'll talk about it later. Promise." She stroked his cheek, and his fear was somewhat allayed, if only by the feel of her reassurance in his chest. "Let's just get cleaned up." She smiled before giving him a quick, deep kiss.

After they cleaned, Lois threw on some pajamas, he assumed to help keep her warm, so he followed suit so as not to feel more exposed. And...as much as he didn't want to hide from her anymore, he still wasn't comfortable with his scar so readily visible.

Almost all the awkwardness abated, though, when they got back into bed and she snuggled in close, settling into the crook of his arm with her head on his chest.

Lois looked up at him, propping her head up a bit, a sated smile on her face and light in her heart. He was sure she'd never looked more beautiful, so much more perfect than any dream he'd had while he'd been gone.

Clark could only marvel — the feel of her lying next to him, her skin still slightly flushed and heated from their intense lovemaking, the feel of utter exhaustion and fulfillment.

How could it even be possible?

The feelings were so stark a contrast to the darkness and anguish still within, and his heart twisted and pulled at the thought that emotions and sensations that were so vastly different from each other could even exist at the same time, warring inside his chest.

His hand reached over to find her cheek, no hesitation as his muscles recommitted the movement to memory. She leaned her head into his palm, reassuring him or maybe herself that they were both very much alive and together.

"What are you thinking about, love?" she asked softly, her voice another anchor to reality in the surreality of the pre-dawn light.

"How you're just like a dream to me," he rasped. "And when I'm feeling like this...lighter and more calm than I can even remember what it's like, I have to look at you, touch you, have to keep finding ways to make sure that you're really here. That I'm really home...that..." His voice broke, and he trailed off, his hand still cupping her cheek.

A tear touched the tip of his thumb, and he brushed it away. "I'm here. You're home," she whispered, her voice and her heartbeat steady in his ears.

<<All I need, Lois. You're all I need. Every breath I breathe... I...>> He wasn't even sure what he meant, just that he felt... He needed to...

<<Let me love you,>> her heart called out.

His heart clenched, all the feelings threatening and surging, and he hadn't even realized he'd closed his eyes

until she touched his face, her fingers smoothing over his brow and his cheek and then moving to cover his hand on her own face, keeping it pressed solidly against her cheek.

Somehow, when he looked at her, he could see forgiveness. He could see the truth. He could feel it in his heart. And he wanted nothing more than to believe her.

He nodded. Even as the tears fell and all the emotions flooded in at once, he nodded. <<Okay.>>

Mid-March 1997

22 Days Since Clark Came Home

The first thing to hit Clark the next morning was the sunlight streaming through the window. His eyes were still closed, reluctant to interrupt this calm and warm and complete feeling with wakefulness, wishing he'd thought to close the curtains before finally falling asleep in the early morning hours, when the next thing hit him. A small bop, almost a slap, against his cheek, and before the confusion could fully settle, he heard a gurgling coo by his ear.

He smiled. Kallie.

Clark opened his eyes and could feel his heart and soul light up instantly with just the sight of her and even more so when she smiled back at him. She ahhh'd and cooed excitedly, kicking out her little arms and legs when she saw him looking at her, and he felt his heart squeeze at how beautiful a melody, how utterly perfect this one moment in time was. And suddenly, even though he'd not slept more than a few hours, he felt more rested and relaxed than...than he could even remember.

"Good morning, my little bug," he whispered as he reached out a hand to catch a wayward fist as it neared his cheek again. He pressed a kiss to her tiny hand, and she unfurled her fist to capture his index finger in her impossibly strong grasp.

At some point after he'd fallen asleep, Lois must have gone to get Kallie and bring her back to bed to nurse and sleep. She couldn't have known he'd wake up this way... or maybe she had?

Behind Kallie's wiggly body, he could see Lois watching him, and he wondered when she'd woken. The love in her heart seemed to match his own but then multiply a thousandfold and flutter around them like a kaleidoscope of butterflies.

"You should sleep, honey," he said. "You couldn't have gotten enough rest last night." A small thread of guilt raced through him, knowing she'd have slept better if he hadn't...

She shook her head gently. "No guilt. We're in this together, remember?"

"I'll try," he promised, the guilt settling low in his chest, at least, and not overtaking the butterflies.

Kallie tugged at his finger, still in her grasp, and gave him another gummy smile that turned his heart upside down. Her little fingers wrapped around his single finger so strongly that he wondered...but for some reason, he didn't even want to think about it, instead avoiding that thought in favor of just watching her.

"I think I could do this all day — watch her — and not get tired of it," he said with awe.

"I have before," she replied softly. "...just stared at her all day, marveling at the little miracle she is and how she moves her legs and arms, how her eyes seem to take in everything she sees like she can't wait to learn more about the world. I think...it wouldn't be a bad way for you to spend the day..."

The tentativeness in her voice pricked at his heart, and he couldn't help but be reminded of how he'd spend the last week avoiding everyone, terrified to be near them... He was grateful the terror was gone, but the guilt he felt about everything lingered heavily.

Doing his best to push it all aside, he freed his finger and laid his hand over Kallie's chest and abdomen. She gurgled and kicked some more, smiling and cooing at him like he was the center of her universe. He could both feel and hear the wild fluttering of her little heart.

"Maybe I'll do that," he said. "Well...I'll spend the day with her and see if my mom wants some help in her studio."

He leaned in toward Lois, and she met him halfway to share a tender kiss, his lips lingering on hers until small fists slapped their faces and they couldn't help but laugh.

"You get some sleep, honey. We'll figure things out," he said as he leaned in for one more quick kiss. Pulling back, he was briefly arrested at the sight of her, or maybe the feeling in his chest — such tenderness and love, but tinged with worry. "I love you."

"I love you too. And you too, little bug," she said, giving Kallie a kiss on her chubby cheeks.

Clark's heart lifted, wishing for a moment that his life could just be this...happy and perfect and full of love all the time.

He stood and gathered Kallie in his arms and headed out to the kitchen. It was still relatively early in the morning, but late enough that his father had set out to work without him. A small flicker of guilt tugged at him, but he realized that after last night or maybe because Kallie was in his arms, it didn't grow into anything more.

"Good morning, Mom," he said, finding her at the kitchen table reading the *Smallville Press* and drinking coffee.

"Oh, good morning, honey," she said as she folded the paper up and put it aside. "Did you sleep well?"

He thought he heard a hint of amusement in her voice.

Oh God...he and Lois had been...loud. And he knew there was no way his parents hadn't heard them. But his mom said nothing further and her smile gave no indication of teasing.

"Yeah," he said quietly, hoping the heat creeping up his cheeks wasn't showing terribly.

"That's good. Your father and I were a bit worried, of course, but...looks like you're in good spirits this morning?"

He nodded, feeling the guilt and sadness start to make its way to the forefront again. "Thanks for last night, for —"

She shushed him and shook her head. "Have a seat. I'll get you some coffee," she said, setting down the paper and getting up from the table. She gave him a gentle look and a squeeze on his shoulder as she made her way to the cupboard.

Clark settled himself at the seat next to his mom's, Kallie still gurgling happily cradled in one arm now, staring up at him with a gummy smile. "Do you think she's hungry?"

Martha returned with a mug of steaming coffee, placing it in front of him and pushing the creamer and sugar his way. "She's probably fine. Lois came and got her not too long ago." Sitting again, she reached her fingers over to stroke the fine hair on Kallie's head. "She's pretty good at letting you know when she's hungry; she's not afraid to speak her mind, just like her mom." She grinned at him, and he chuckled lightly.

"Yeah, I guess that makes sense."

"You'll learn — it won't take you long," she said as she picked up the small creamer pitcher and poured it for him, then spooned out almost the exact right amount of sugar and stirred.

The awe and admiration he had for his mom rivaled his deep love and affection for her. "Do you think..." he trailed off, tracing the handle of the dark blue mug with his fingertips, unsure if he even wanted to risk speaking the words aloud.

"Honey, look at me." She put her hand over his, stilling his movements. "Being a parent is a journey, and I'll tell you the secret...the secret is that no one knows what they're doing at first. You learn along the way. And you get help from those who love you and have been there before you."

Clark had a hard time believing that his mom could have ever not known how to be a mom. The best mom. In all of time and space, he was beyond lucky to have gotten Martha Kent for a mother.

"You're a good man, Clark. I dare say your father and I raised you well, and you've become one of the smartest, kindest, most selfless men I know. You'll be an amazing

father — already are.”

“But she hardly knows me...it’s only been — ”

Martha shook her head. “It doesn’t matter. You love her. Without question.” He followed her eyes down to Kallie, who was staring up at him with some kind of wonder and curiosity, and she let out a squeal and kicked her limbs happily when he smiled at her. “I’m pretty sure that was an ‘I love you,’” Martha said.

His heart clenched, and he had to close his eyes tightly for a moment and take a deep breath. He believed his mom, believed she wouldn’t lie to him, but he couldn’t fathom what he’d done to earn love from this little miracle in his arms.

“I don’t know what happened up there, honey. I can guess that it was pretty grievous, traumatic, and it’s going to take time to heal from it. But...” She put her hand on his forearm, and he looked back up at her. “That doesn’t mean you’re not worthy of love.”

Even though he knew he wouldn’t find anything, he still searched his mom’s eyes for any hint of her trying to coddle or mollify him. She squeezed his arm as she kept her gaze, loving but serious. A look he’d seen thousands of times in his life, but never with quite this much tenderness.

“You’re my boy. You always will be. And I’ll always love you. No matter what. And Kallie here...you’ll always be her father. Love doesn’t come with requirements.”

Clark nodded haltingly, feeling his eyes well up with tears, and when he let out a deep breath, he could feel something inside him release. The corners of his mouth twitched up a bit in a hesitant smile. “Thanks, Mom.”

For a while longer, they sat and drank coffee, watched Kallie make faces and gurgle and make spit bubbles, and talked of inconsequential things. Easy things. Silly facts and surprising trivia about babies. At one point, Martha brought him a small stack of well-worn parenting books and held Kallie while he sped-read through them all, wishing he’d thought to do that sooner.

He set the last book down on the stack and let his eyes wander over the rainbow of tags jutting out of the pages, flagging important notes and sections in an organizational system only Lois would understand. Well, maybe he could too.

He smiled, reminded of their jobs at the *Planet* and how well they worked together, how her brilliant leaps of logic and reckless and impulsive way of doing things set his heart racing in more ways than one. Oh, how he missed that. Missed seeing that gleam in her eyes when she knew she had a suspect on the ropes, caught in a lie. Missed the way her heart raced when she had an exciting new lead. Missed the way she’d roll her eyes at him when he edited her copy.

She’d given so much up. Sure, she was still writing for

the *Planet*, but op-ed was a far cry from front-page investigative stories. All for him. Because of him. Would they — would *she* — even be able to go back to doing what she loved? There was still such an impossibly long road back to normal...whatever normal meant for them. Would they be able to get back there? How was he ever going to go back to work, back to Metropolis?

...be Superman again?

He took a sudden, jagged breath. He couldn’t let the guilt get to him, not today. If had to use *kao-zha-aovem-u*, he would.

“Clark?” Martha said worriedly, her voice and the touch of her hand on his arm again startling him back to the present. “Are you okay?”

“I...” Was he? Would he be?

“Honey, Clark...” Another squeeze on his arm. “You’ve got to breathe. Take a breath. I think it’s been a minute.”

Breathe. He could breathe. In and out.

“There you go. Just breathe. It’ll be okay.”

In and out.

“Here, take Kallie while I make you some tea,” she said as she passed the baby back over and went to busy herself with the kettle.

In and out. His breathing slowed again as he held Kallie in his arms. Looking down at her sweet face, he couldn’t help but see Lois in her features — her eyes and her smile. It was hard to think of the past or the future with Kallie in his arms, and he felt his heart trip lightly at the thought.

And maybe that was just what he needed to do — focus on the present. The past only brought on guilt, and the future only made him panic. So...the present. He could do that, surely. He was here, in his childhood home, surrounded by the people who loved him most, and right now...he could use all the love he could get. Kallie grunted and gave a few squeals, and then Clark caught the scent of a now-familiar odor. Love and...more diaper-changing practice. He laughed lightly, the anxiety he’d been feeling ebbing away.

“Mom, mind if I use the changing table in your room? Lois is still sleeping.”

Martha turned and smiled at him and Kallie. “Of course not, go ahead. Tea will be ready by the time you’re back.”

He could do this, he thought as he made his way upstairs to his parents’ bedroom. Just focus on the now.

Clark did his best to keep Kallie happy and entertained while he attended to changing her diaper, and he then made his way back down to the kitchen. Somehow, his mom had made a plate of chocolate chocolate chip cookies appear on the table along with the tea and fresh mugs in

the few minutes he'd been gone.

Before he even sat back down, his mom was warning him. "Now, don't go inhaling all those! You know those are Lois' favorite, and she will be none too happy to find out they're all gone already."

"Okay, okay," he said with a laugh, holding his free hand up in surrender as he settled back in the chair with Kallie again cradled in one arm.

Their teasing was light-hearted, as it always had been in the past, but he knew his mom was also keeping a sharp eye on him. "Nothing gets between that woman and her dessert, *especially* if it's chocolate," Martha quipped.

He chuckled. It was true, and his heart warmed at the fact that his mom knew her so well now. Everything else aside, he couldn't have asked for more, for Lois to find the same kind of love and acceptance from his parents as he had. He knew her relationship with her parents was... strained, to put it mildly, and he wondered, looking down at Kallie's smiling face, if they'd even bothered to check in on Lois this whole time or meet their granddaughter.

He shook himself mentally, bringing himself back to the present and to the gurgling bundle in his arms. Then, the thought of desserts and something in one of the books he'd just read struck him. There had been a whole chapter on keeping the love alive during the first year with a new baby, making sure to take time to be a couple and not just new, exhausted parents.

And though they'd just spent almost an entire day alone, Clark wanted...different. So much of that time had been...hard. Too hard. He wanted something different.

"Mom, I need your help."

"Oh?" she said as she poured their tea. "What do you need?"

"I need to take my wife on a date."

His mom smiled broadly, her eyes twinkling. "Where do we start?"

Chapter 16: You Put Your Arms Around Me and I'm Home

Mid-March 1997

23 Days Since Clark Came Home

"I never thought that you would be the one to hold my heart

But you came around

And you knocked me off the ground from the start

...You put your arms around me and I'm home..."

Arms by Christina Perri

As she stood near the doorway to the porch waiting for Clark to finish saying good night to Kallie, Lois had no idea why she was feeling nervous...or maybe it was excitement...or maybe...

This dress. She'd loved it when she'd modeled it in the

store for Martha — a sleeveless wrap dress that came to her mid-thigh — but now she couldn't help but feel slightly self-conscious. It'd been a long time since she'd dressed up, and she'd had a different body then.

Martha had assured her it looked fabulous, the wrap-style coming together in a V-neck that...well, it covered her new nursing bra just fine, but she suddenly felt like her breasts were a bit too big and ready to spill out. They weren't. Martha had told her as much when Lois had fretted about it fifteen minutes ago, and she'd also reminded Lois that it was quite all right to show off her body a little for Clark if she wanted to. Lois had blushed furiously and swatted her on the arm, but took the compliment and advice.

And the look on Clark's face and the flush of arousal she felt from him when he'd first seen her in it just a few minutes ago...well, there was no denying he found her attractive exactly as she was.

Still, the jitters remained, as if somehow this was their first date all over again, and in a way, it was. At least she'd worn burgundy this time.

She couldn't help but take another long look at him from across the room, feeling her pulse skitter along her body and her breath quicken slightly as she drank in the sight of him in a new charcoal suit, a crisp white shirt, and a tie she hadn't seen before. A small shiver of arousal raced through her, and she bit at the corner her lower lip to stifle a gasp.

It'd been so long since she'd seen him in slacks and a tie, let alone a suit, but she wasn't surprised he'd stolen her breath away. The suit, sure — he'd never not looked good in a suit, especially once he'd been able to afford having them tailored — but there was something about him and the way he was holding Kallie, swaying with her in his arms just one last time, he'd said, before handing her off to Grandma and Grandpa for the evening.

Seeing Clark like this, so carefree and natural with a baby in his arms — *their* baby in his arms — tugged at her heart in a way she couldn't put words to. She had never wanted kids until she'd met him, until he'd made her realize what love could be like, until she'd experienced the world as he lived it.

The emotions welled up in her throat, and she forced herself to take a deep breath, her heart aching that he'd lost that — the seemingly simple way he'd lived and approached life. Sure, she knew it had never been nearly as simple or carefree as it looked, but Clark had always held a certain innocence about him, an innate goodness and sense of justice and morality. He'd lost that up there; they'd taken it from him. She had to hold fast to the hope in her heart, knowing she would so often have to carry the weight of this, of all that had happened, at least until he was

strong enough.

He couldn't know it, not right now, but she found her strength in him. The sight of him with Kallie, watching him love her and marvel at her. Watching him fight so valiantly to stay alive, to hold onto what was left of himself. Watching him do the bravest thing Superman had ever done.

Kallie cooed and gurgled her delight at Clark's kisses and tickles, and Lois' heart squeezed pleasantly. "You're going to make us late for our reservation," she teased him, knowing full well now that he'd spent half the day secreted away in the barn with Martha, transforming it for the date he'd asked her on only a few hours ago. She could hardly wait to see what he'd done.

Clark laughed freely, and her heart squeezed again as she tried to savor, memorize the sweet sound of his laughter. Then she reminded herself — there would be more; it wouldn't be so infrequent now. All the same, she still replayed the sound in her head and let it fill her heart all over again.

Martha finally gathered Kallie up and shooed Clark away. "Go! Don't keep your beautiful wife waiting!"

Wife. The word was heartwarming and saddening all at once. Yes, they'd all but married themselves before he'd left, and in her heart, he was and forever would be her husband, and she his wife, but it was hard sometimes to mourn what had been taken from them.

It didn't matter, she reminded herself as Clark strode toward her. He was alive and home, and they would be okay. That was all that really mattered.

"You okay? You ready?" he asked, the husky timbre of his voice and his warm hand on the bare skin of her upper arm making her shiver slightly.

She nodded, and they bid their thanks and goodnights to the doting grandparents, who were already headed off to the living room with their charge for the evening. Her breath caught when his hand slipped down to the small of her back as he opened the screen door for her and ushered her through.

Oh God, she'd missed that. Oh God. Suddenly, she found herself holding back tears she didn't know what to do with. And as they made it to the porch, the screen door falling shut behind them, he was pulling her into his strong, warm arms.

"Hey," he whispered against her hair, his hand stroking up and down her back against the material of her dress. "What's wrong?"

She buried her head in the crook of his neck and inhaled deeply, taking in the smell of him and trying to memorize that too. "You touching me again, loving me, all the little things I didn't realize I was missing. I need you so much, Clark. I don't know how I survived so long without

you."

She could feel his heart clench and his guilt start creeping in, but mostly she could feel his love for her, surrounding her and trying desperately to make her feel safe and protected.

"I'm sorry," he murmured.

"I know," she said, wrapping her arms tightly around him.

For a long moment, he just held her as they stood on the porch, swaying them slightly as he rubbed her back and placed soft kisses against her hair. She half wondered where he'd gotten this strength, this reprieve from all the emotions that were too much, but all she cared about right now was that she was in his arms and she could feel him, feel their connection, strong and thrumming.

"I miss touching you." He said it simply and without agenda, but the way she felt in his embrace, his body close against hers, and the gentle rasp of his voice made her shiver in anticipation.

"I don't think I ever realized just how much you did touch me. A hundred small touches every day...how loved and safe that made me feel even before I could admit it to myself." Needing to see his eyes, his beautiful face, she pulled back a little to look at him. "You were so patient with me," she said, her voice small and wistful.

He brought his fingers up to brush back the strand of hair that had fallen already from her pinned up hair. "You were worth the wait."

"So were you," she assured him. His fingers were lingering below her ear, and she could feel the sadness, the wistful regret in his heart. It was in her own heart too... hundreds of days gone, thousands of touches lost...

<<I'll make them up. Every one.>> His husky voice in her mind sent warmth flooding through her body, and her breath caught as she felt his lips get closer to the dip of her neck.

Almost unconsciously, she tilted her head to allow him unfettered access, wondering if he would actually count them all. His lips whispered against her skin, the lightest of caresses, first along her neck and then again on her shoulder and her collarbone and behind her ear, loving and not meant to tantalize but making her heart race all the same.

The need to kiss him was overwhelming, and she found and framed his face with her hands, bringing his lips to hers and attacking with abandon. They both had making up to do, and now that he'd finally opened up to her, their connection open and free, she felt as though she was starving for his touch.

She whimpered lightly into his mouth, reveling in the sound of the breathy moans he was making as she felt his hand wander, returning to the small of her back and

pressing gently against her.

“Get a room, you two! Or better yet, a hayloft!”

They both startled at the yell coming from through the screen door, and as the words filtered through their passion-filled haze, Lois started giggling, breaking her lips away from Clark and then laughing into his chest.

“Mo-om! Were you watching?” Clark whined.

“Oh, Clark, of course not! But I happened to walk by the door and notice that you two hadn’t even made it off the porch yet. I didn’t spend hours helping you out this afternoon just for it all to go to waste. Now, off to the barn with you two!”

Lois giggled again and lifted her head. “Yes, Mom,” she said and then grabbed Clark’s hand and put it back where it’d been on her lower back. “C’mon, honey. We don’t want to be grounded.”

Clark still protested weakly at the indignities as Lois started walking with him down the steps, Martha’s peals of laughter following them out into the night. Lois could sense the light in his heart despite his embarrassment, and she found herself flooded with the feeling of immense and profound love she had for him.

She paused, just as they reached the barn doors, and turned to look at him. “Clark...” she said softly as she reached up to touch his face, her fingertips tracing across his smooth jawline. She struggled to find the words, but nothing could come close to describing what she felt in this moment, so she just closed her eyes and felt it instead.

Her eyes opened again when she felt his hand on her cheek, and the look on his face took her breath away. “I know,” he said. “Me too. So much.” His thumb brushed away a stray tear she hadn’t quite realized had fallen. “C’mon, we don’t want to be late.” His eyes were twinkling, and her heart squeezed and twisted, trying to stay in the moment instead of wondering how long it had been since she’d seen such light in his eyes.

Clark had opened the barn doors wide, and when she looked up, she gasped at the sight before her. Thousands of tiny fairy lights glittered all through the inside of the barn, strung across the ceiling along the rafters and from the loft spaces in a pattern that almost mimicked the stars in the sky. “Oh, it’s beautiful, Clark. So beautiful. It’s... wonderful.” She could feel her voice breaking and fresh tears as she took in the rest of the view, his hand settling again on her lower back.

Jonathan’s workbench and tools had been neatly tucked to the side, the main floor area made clear with a small, round table in the center, complete with a flowing white tablecloth and two place settings. Domed covers hid and kept warm whatever dish he’d prepared for them, the lights around the barn catching and multiplying on the shiny surfaces. Martha’s record player had been moved from her

studio to the workbench, where a small selection of records waited to be played. And scattered about the room were little potted flowers in white and pink and pale purple, a bit out of place still in their plastic containers, but beautiful all the same.

As if anticipating her question or maybe reading her thoughts, he answered. “I, uh...” He ran his free hand through his hair. “I’d thought of rose petals across the floor originally, but that seemed...uh, Mom had the idea of getting some like this from town and said we could plant them in the garden after.”

Lois’ breath caught again, but she shouldn’t have been surprised at how well Martha knew her son, how she could have guessed — even not knowing the full account of things — that life and new growth would serve them a million times better for decorations. “It’s perfect,” she said, turning once again to face him. “Thank you.”

He reached up to wipe her tears away, his thumbs stroking her cheeks gently as his hands cupped her face, and he pressed a tender kiss on her forehead. She could see his slight hesitation before speaking, as if he had something more to say, but he simply told her, “You’re welcome.”

They stayed a moment longer, staring into each other’s eyes, and she wondered at the depth of emotion in his eyes and in his heart — an overwhelming love, but tinged with...some measure of sorrow. Not for the first time, she wished she could take his pain away, that they could just be at the part already when all of the bad seemed so far away. “Kiss me, Clark.”

Without hesitation, his head dipped to capture her lips, achingly gentle at first and then with more intensity as she wrapped her arms around his waist underneath his suit coat and melted into him. Unlike their kiss on the porch, this held grief that she tried to meet with compassion, regret that she met with understanding.

<<I love you no matter what. Always.>> Her kiss faltered slightly as she focused on the thought, but she needed him to know, not just feel it but hear it, that he was hers forever, just as he was.

Finally, they pulled away breathless, and he rested his forehead against hers for a moment, letting his hands slide down her neck and across her shoulders, and then he drew her into his arms, hugging her close. “What would I do without you?” he whispered.

She squeezed him tighter. “You’ll never have to find out.”

A long moment passed as they let the strong emotions ebb away, and then Clark seemed to gather himself. He led her to the table, making a gallant show of helping her to her seat and pouring them each a glass of chilled Pinot Grigio. Before he sat himself at the table, he walked over

to the workbench and set the needle down on the record he'd already loaded up on the turntable, and the soft doo-wop notes of "I Only Have Eyes for You" carried through the barn.

She smiled, her heart skipping a beat as he moved his chair and sat himself next to instead of across from her, as if he'd changed his mind from when he'd set up the small table earlier.

He ducked his head a little as he moved his place setting and meal, and she could feel a tangle of apprehension and shyness from him. "It was too far away," he said, his voice soft.

She nodded, almost a bit anxious in her agreement, as she put her hand on his knee and scooted her chair just that much closer to him. It *had* been too far away, as if they were both suddenly worried that something would separate them once again. "So, what did you make us for dinner?" she asked, hoping to distract them both from their unease.

But before he could even answer, she blurted out, "Do you think it's because it's been so long since we've been on a date? That it's awkward — no, not awkward. I mean, oh God, why am I nervous, Clark? You've made this wonderful dinner for us and —" She looked around again at the almost magical appearance of the barn, so many lights that they seemed to twinkle. "It's so magical, so perfect. Why are we scared?"

"Because I don't want to screw this up," he said, his voice breaking slightly.

"You can't, honey! It's perfect. Absolutely perfect. I'm the one that's screwing things up, being an emotional wreck instead of just relaxing and letting my husband wine and dine me under the stars." She swiped at the few tears that had escaped. "You don't need this. This is the last thing you need, for me to start crying all over you!"

"Honey...no, it's okay. It's okay."

"I slammed the door in your face. You gave me a perfect date before, and I slammed the door in your face."

"Lois, it's okay. We made it. We're here. It's okay."

"But...all the time we wasted — *I* wasted. If I hadn't denied my feelings for so long. If I hadn't gotten so caught up in being right, being safe. If I'd just..." <<...*then maybe none of this would have happened. Maybe we wouldn't be where we are right now.*>>

The next thing she knew, he'd drawn her up to standing and pulled her into his arms, her head tucked securely against his chest as her tears soaked into his shirt and tie, his hands smoothing over her back. "Shhh. Lois, oh, Lois." <<*I love where I am right now.*>>

<<*But how?*>> she asked, her voice a whimper of a thought, not wanting to move from where she was, not wanting to look in his eyes and find him stretching the truth just to make her feel better. <<*How can you*

possibly...you went through hell and back and...>>

His hands halted his ministrations, and her heart sank as she felt him straighten up. Part of her desperately wanted the lie, wanted everything to be okay...

But then his hand was at her chin, encouraging her to look at him even though she wanted to stay safely tucked in his embrace with her head against his chest, feeling his heart beating soundly against her ear. She shook her head. If she didn't move, nothing had to change and he didn't have to lie to her to make her feel better.

"Please...please look at me," he urged softly.

She took a shuddering breath against his shirt before she finally lifted her head to look up at him. Her face felt flush from the crying, and she could feel the dampness still on her cheeks.

"When I was up there..." His voice was quiet but rough. "At least at first...I kept waiting for this incredible feeling of connection...like I was exactly where I belonged."

Her heart clenched, knowing that he'd wanted nothing more than to connect with his roots, find his heritage...to belong.

"That feeling? That's only happened to me once in my life." He cupped her cheek and brushed his thumb over her damp skin and threaded his fingers through her hair. "The day I met you."

A soft gasp escaped her, and she felt as though her heart might burst and overflow.

"So, yeah," he said, his voice more firm but still thick with emotion. "I love where I am right now. Back in your arms. Where I belong."

"Oh, Clark." She rested her forehead against his, for a moment overwhelmed, her arms still holding him close.

He continued stroking her cheek with his thumb and brought his other hand up to frame her face fully. "Lois, I know where my home is, and it's right here in your arms."

Without hesitation, she melted back into him and held him tightly, as if reaffirming his words and letting him know that she was never going to let him go again. His arms wrapped around her smaller frame, and she let out a deep, shuddering breath against his still tear-dampened shirt. <<*Home*,>> she thought, pressing herself even more closely against him.

<<*Always*,>>

<<*Mine*,>>

<<*Forever*,>>

He kissed the top of her head, and she could feel his heart, just as overflowing as her own. Then he simply held her, his cheek coming to rest against hers, and he swayed them gently to whatever song was playing — something soft and slow — as his hand made gentle circles at her lower back.

His voice was soft, almost a whisper in her ear when he started singing along. “Whoa, my love, my darling...I’ve hungered, hungered for your touch...a long, lonely time...

<<Me too, love. Me too.>> Her heart clenched and she snuggled in closer.

“And time...goes by...so slowly...and time can do so much... Are you still mine?”

<<Always.>>

Lois couldn’t help but smile and laugh lightly as he tried to hit the next notes, and he only sang a bit louder in response. She could feel his smile against her temple as he continued to sing. And then they were laughing in each other’s arms, still swaying as the song faded out.

“Are you trying to imply my singing isn’t wonderful?” he said, laughter still evident in his voice.

She giggled into his shoulder before looking back up at him. “Well, I wouldn’t quit your day j — I’m sorry. I’m sorry, honey. I didn’t mean...I know you’re not ready, and I didn’t — ”

“Hey,” he interrupted softly. “Shh. It’s okay.” His words were meant to comfort her, but she knew he wasn’t unaffected. The light in his eyes had dimmed, the merriment of just a moment before fading to the background — there was no pretending they didn’t still have the weight of everything hanging over them.

She hugged him tightly before pulling back just a little to regard his face once more, bringing a hand up to try and smooth away the worry from his brow. “You don’t have to hide it. We’re probably in for more than a few of these moments. We’ll be okay.”

Clark gave her half a smile and nodded, taking a deep breath, and she felt like he was going to say something else, but instead he cleared his throat and suggested they go ahead and eat. “At least we don’t have to go inside to heat things up,” he quipped half-heartedly, taking off his coat to hang on his chair as they sat back down.

“Definitely a plus.” She smiled warmly at him. The casual reference to his powers was a little surprising but welcome and made her heart just that much lighter. Other than flying himself off to the treehouse and surely some super strength when helping Jonathan with the fence, it was almost like he had been avoiding his powers.

But he didn’t need any pressure about it, especially right now, not on their first date in almost a year. Instead, she rejoiced in watching him give their food a little zap, her heart twisting at the sight of him pulling down his glasses just so and staring at their plates in turn. As the steam rose from their pasta primavera, she sat back to let him regale her with the tale of how he’d picked all the vegetables fresh, straight from the garden and Martha’s greenhouse.

She grinned at him. “If I thought there was any chance

you’d believe me, I’d claim to have helped grow these vegetables. But Mom was far too wise to even let me pretend to help.”

He laughed heartily. “Definitely a smart decision. I’ve seen your house plants and the poor thing on your desk that used to be a plant.”

“She wouldn’t even let me water them!”

“Honey, do you know *how* to water plants?”

“Hey!” She swatted him on the shoulder, and he pretended to flinch.

“What?” he asked, his face the picture of...well, not of innocence, that was for sure.

“Knowledge of a skill is wholly separate from having the time and inclination to practice said skill.”

He was tilting his head and arching an eyebrow at her in that adorably sexy way he did, and she was having a hard time keeping a straight face.

Now it was her turn to ask. “What?” She squared her shoulders in mock defiance but only succeeded in drawing his eyes to her chest.

“Watering plants isn’t a skill. It’s a daily task! It requires zero skill.”

“My point still stands.”

“And that was...?” he asked, raising his eyebrows at her again, except this time it was more suggestive than the last.

“I don’t remember,” she said, jutting her chin out defiantly and crossing her arms under her breasts, being sure to push them up just a bit for his viewing pleasure.

For a long moment, he didn’t speak, and she could see he’d started breathing more heavily, his shirt pulling taut across his broad chest with every breath. Excitement fluttered in her belly at the thought of what was under that shirt.

If she was honest with herself, their verbal sparring matches had always been exciting. But they’d never been...*exciting*. Not like this.

“Lois...” he rasped.

Her breath caught, and every part of her started to tingle with arousal. She swallowed hard and uncrossed her arms, her hand quickly finding and settling on his thigh. How she’d ever managed to keep her hands off this man for two years, then wait another year before making love to him for the first time, she’d never know.

But then her heart squeezed with the feeling of utter yearning and loss, an echo of the sharp pangs of grief she’d felt at the beginning of their date...

She *hadn’t* ever kept her hands off him, and there had never been a day gone by that he hadn’t touched her, either.

A hundred small touches every day...

Desperate for his touch now, she found herself falling

towards him even as he rushed in to crush his lips to hers. What must have been his fork clattered to the table, quickly forgotten as he devoured her with kisses and threaded his fingers through her hair. She whimpered into his mouth, her heart racing and her body flooding with warmth and desire. The hand she had on his thigh crept higher of its own accord, and her other hand was at the back of his neck, tugging him impossibly closer.

And then her stomach roared and gurgled loudly, startling them both apart.

Lois straightened in her seat and tried to catch her breath, her fingertips trailing across his thigh as she slowly brought her hands to her own lap. Clark, for his part, had his eyes closed and his head tilted back, clearly trying to get himself back under control.

Half of a breathless laugh escaped her, and then she inhaled deeply, letting out the breath in a strong whoosh. Her stomach growled again.

Clark laughed, though he still sounded a touch out of breath. "I guess you're hungry."

She blushed furiously, wishing they hadn't been interrupted. "I...uh...the..."

"Breastfeeding," he finished for her. "You've got a much bigger appetite because you're breastfeeding."

Nodding, she looked at him with affectionate awe. "You read the books."

"Yeah," he said softly. "Mom brought them out for me, and I read through them all earlier today."

"Of course you did." She laughed. "It took me *weeks*, maybe even months to read that stack. How long did it take you?"

His face scrunched up, clearly bracing himself for her reaction. "About ten minutes."

"That's so unfair!" she said, swatting his shoulder again. She was hardly mad, though, and she smiled at him. It made her heart feel so warm and full to see the light back in his eyes. For however long she got to see it this time, she'd take the time to enjoy it.

Clark added just a touch more warmth to each of their plates before they both picked up their forks to dig in. He commanded most of the conversation, she figured in an effort to let her eat without too much distraction.

So while she attacked her pasta with gusto, Clark impressed her with more of his recently acquired knowledge of all things parenting and how to rear an infant the first year. She loved that he was so excited to share, and for a while, she could almost pretend that things were halfway normal.

Once Lois had polished off all of her serving and some of Clark's, she sat back fully sated and just sipped her wine. "Mom liked to give me a hard time about all the parenting and baby research I did," she said, "teasing me

that I might as well flag the whole book at the rate I was going." Lois chuckled lightly.

"Hey, I love your rainbow flags!"

"*Thank you!*" she said, her hands flying wide to emphasize her point. "Now, please tell Mom that there's merit to a good organizational system!"

Clark laughed. "I don't know if I'd call it a *good* system..."

"Hey!" she tried to at least be half-annoyed, but she couldn't keep from laughing with him. Then, like an afterthought, she doubled back on him, arms folding over her chest, an eyebrow raised. "Are things categorized? Can you find them?"

"Yes..." he surrendered.

"Then it's a good system!"

"Honey, I think that's only because I know how your mind works," he countered, his eyes sparkling.

"And your point?" She leveled him with a stare.

"You're right. Absolutely right. In fact, it's a *great* system, honey."

"Well, now I feel like you're just trying to score points."

"And your point?" He leveled her own stare right back at her, a gleam in his eye.

Lois opened her mouth to answer, but she had nothing. She pursed her lips, trying not to smile, and all she could do was shrug and let her eyes wander suggestively.

There was a hint of mischief and more than a hint of desire in that gleam, and she could feel her arousal skittering back to life. Still, she'd be damned if she let him win this sparring match too.

But the gleam had darkened to a smoldering desire, she realized, when her shrug had brought his gaze directly back to her chest. She had to bite back a little moan at just the thought of how much he wanted her, and then when the flashes of images started in her head...

Oh God, the man had just invented a new kind of foreplay, and she was entirely unsure if she'd be able to handle it. But, oh wow...at least she'd die happy. Her heart started pounding as she watched his mental images playing out in her own mind...of him lavishing her with attention in all sorts of delicious and passionate ways.

She relished the feeling, her body reacting as if he was really caressing her neck and laying kisses in against her skin.

"Clark!" she cried, her voice a strangled moan that startled them both out of the fantasy.

They were both panting heavily, still sitting in their own separate chairs at the table.

"I'm sorry," he finally said, his voice hoarse.

"Sorry?" She looked at him carefully after dropping her hands to her lap. "Why would you be sorry?" Her

pulse was still pounding, and she'd thought...

"I, uh...I didn't realize I was...broadcasting?"

"Oh," she said, flushing anew with warmth and ducking her head slightly. "I guess we need to...practice this telepathy thing. But, Clark?" she prompted, touching his hand lightly. "I one hundred percent didn't mind the...uh, show. It was almost like I could feel you touching me. You never have to apologize for wanting me."

She watched his eyes darken. "I was wondering why...uh...what was..." He scrunched his face a little.

She gave him an encouraging smile. "It's okay. You can tell me," she said as her fingers started stroking gently over the back of his hand.

"It was longer...the thought...er, I mean. Normally, when I think about you..." He ran his free hand through his hair and took a breath. "It's usually just a quick, stray thought...oh, this is awkward...and I'm not sure how to even explain..."

Lois felt the heat in her body rising again. She was pretty sure she knew exactly what he meant. "Like when you catch a glimpse, some look or movement, and it's sexy even though it wasn't meant to be? Because it's not always the obvious that turns you on, and sometimes your mind lingers...wondering what it might look like if the clothes weren't there? Where you might put your lips, your hands?"

Clark swallowed visibly and nodded. "How did you...?"

Closing her eyes and concentrating, she brought to mind a memory of Clark working at his desk, just a few short feet away from hers in the newsroom. He'd rolled his long sleeves up that afternoon, an infrequent treat to see his forearms, and he had a pencil tucked behind his ear as he typed away at his computer, occasionally wrinkling his nose in frustration. Taking a sip of coffee without looking, it was no wonder that he spilled a bit on his tie and shirt, but all he did was put the mug down and absentmindedly brush at the spots of wetness. She'd known what was under that shirt from almost day one; she knew, and so it wasn't hard to undress him with her mind, letting her fingers trace over the smooth, hard planes of his shoulder and pecs and then bringing her mouth to taste his skin with the traces of coffee spilled...

Lois opened her eyes again only to find Clark staring at her, his mouth agape and his heaving breaths stretching the material taut across his chest again. "You...you fantasize about me?"

"Is that really so hard to believe?"

"But that was..."

"Before we were dating. Yep."

"You've mentally undressed me at work before?" He seemed disbelieving or maybe just in shock. "Before we

were even dating?"

"Clark? Have you *seen* yourself without a shirt on?" She raised her eyebrows at him.

He nodded dumbly, but then let his eyes wander over her body. The heat that followed in the wake of his gaze made her wonder if he was using his heat vision on her. But it could just as easily have been her desire, his desire, starting to dance and meld together through their connection.

Without warning, his memories of early this morning flashed through her mind — and she was finding it hard to breathe, watching from his perspective and feeling his experience even while her own memories of their heated lovemaking consumed her.

<<Clark, touch me. I need you,>> she whimpered in her mind, needing desperately to feel the warmth of his hands and lips on her instead of just the memory. No matter how intense it was.

Instantly, she found herself standing in his arms, her body flush with his, his hands at her lower back pressing her firmly against his hips as he attacked her mouth with unrestrained need. Tongues thrusting and lips moving, desperate to show each other exactly how they were feeling, needing to connect on every single level possible.

He moaned into her mouth as they continued to kiss, one of his hands coming up to cup her cheek so that she'd slant her lips against him at just the right angle. <<I've more than hungered for your touch...>>

She whimpered again, pressing herself closer to him, and her hands set off on a desperate quest to touch him skin to skin. She tugged at the back of his shirt, loosing it from the waistband of his slacks, and then she found and caressed the warm skin of his back. Her reward was a low, breathy moan against her lips.

<<Need you. Need to touch you...>> Somehow even his voice in her head was rasping, thick with want.

Before she could process any further thought, she felt the stark loss of his heat for seconds as she heard and felt him whooshing about. Then suddenly her back was against a soft surface, her body propped in repose by whatever was beneath her, and she could feel the delicious weight of Clark's body as he settled himself above her.

His lips were back on hers instantly, tasting, caressing, exploring, so it took a long minute for her to process where they were. The fairy lights were still there, so they were still in the barn, but she and Clark were much higher up. "Clark?" she said as his lips started making their way across her chin and down her neck.

"Mmm hayloft," he murmured against her neck as he alternated between kisses and exploring with his tongue across her collarbone.

"No hay," she managed to breathe out.

His smile was against her skin. “No animals.”

Her hands moved restlessly through his hair. “Then is it still a hayloft?”

“Mhmm, technicality.”

She hmmm’d a bit in mock disappointment, though it came out sounding more like a moan. It was probably so much better that it felt like a pile of blankets beneath her instead of hay.

Still focused on his task of driving her mad with want, Clark kissed his way up to the other side of her neck and behind her ear before he spoke again, the breath of his words against her skin sending a thrill down her back. “Need hay? I could...go get...hay...two minutes...”

“You...I need you,” she breathed as she found his face and tugged it back up to her lips to get lost once again in his kisses.

Clark shifted his weight slightly to the side, freeing up a hand to trail it enticingly down her side and past her waist and hips to her thigh. Her hunger for him only increased as she felt his hand slip under the hem of her dress and his fingertips dance slowly up her thigh.

She whimpered once more as their hands and lips explored each other’s bodies, and she half-wondered if it would always stay this way now, feeling so starved to touch him and be touched by him. Or maybe that was just how it was for...well, they were effectively newlyweds, no more than a handful of actual, cumulative days they’d had to make love and learn each other’s pleasures.

Oh, she wanted to spend a lifetime loving and exploring his body and he hers. When she felt his hand start to roam higher, a thought tugged at her mind. She tried to brush it away to focus on the way he was loving her instead, but it persisted.

Finally, she managed to pull her lips away from his and took a second to catch her breath before speaking. “Talk... we have to talk about birth control.”

His hand stilled, and when he looked in her eyes, she could see just how very darkened with arousal they were. Still, he nodded, and then slowly, he pulled his hand away and propped himself up, his elbows on either side of her head, and rested his forehead against hers.

After a few deep breaths, he pulled back just enough to look in her eyes again. “I...wondered...worried a little... when I read the books today. It said something about breastfeeding suppressing ovulation for a time, but...?”

Lois nodded, still breathless herself. “Yeah, it’s not... even close to a foolproof plan.”

She could feel the apology coming before he could even try to voice it, and she shook her head. “No guilt. No regrets,” she said softly.

“But what if...I mean...we already...several times...”

Her heart twisted a little, and she couldn’t help but

wonder if he...surely, he wanted...but... She gave him a small shrug and a gentle smile as she looked into the depths of his eyes. “We got carried away...we needed... connection. *Needed*. It was a matter of life and death, Clark, and if that results in another life, then...”

She felt her heart flood with his gratitude and love as he dipped down to crush his lips to hers, a long and loving kiss that almost seemed to be filled with hope too. When he came back up for air, his expression was so tender, though she could sense an underlying worry. She worried too. It was far too soon, wasn’t it?

“I know,” she said quietly. “I know it’s too soon. We need more time to heal, to reconnect. So, we can...from now on, we can use...I bought some when I was in Wichita last week.” She smiled at him, feeling all out of sorts that she was nervous talking about protection. With her husband. Whose body was so very warm and wonderfully on top of her. “We can move to the bedroom, or you could go — ”

“Later,” he cut her off, the word a husky demand that sent sparks of desire through her body. But then his face softened. “Sorry, I mean, not yet...I want...I want to do something else first. There are other ways to make love without...intercourse.”

Lois’ heart flooded with love and desire for the man above her. And this time, here in the hayloft without any hay in sight, the lovemaking was all about Lois’ pleasure.

What seemed like an impossibly long time later, she was suddenly in the solid comfort of his arms again, a blanket covering them both. <<*If I could breathe, I’d tell you I love you,*>> she thought, a sated smile coming over her.

He chuckled as he nuzzled at her neck, sounding a little breathless himself. “I love you too,” he whispered in her ear. “God, how I love you.” His arms pulled her in, just that much closer, and she’d never felt more protected and safe and loved and complete.

<<*Your arms are like home to me,*>> she told him. And though she knew in her heart he’d never leave her ever again, she felt the desperate need for his reassurance. <<*Promise you’ll never let me go.*>>

“Never, my love.” He feathered light kisses against her temple and on her cheek. “I’m yours forever. Promise.”

Chapter 17: Come On Home and Let Yourself Heal *Mid-March 1997*

23 Days Since Clark Came Home

“I wear my ring to know what’s at stake

And when the days work at their own pace

You’ll remain my time and place

I feel it in my ribs; I feel it in my soul

The pulse just grows, so loud and so clear

Let your heart beat here...

Heart Beat Here by Dashboard Confessional

Clark's heart beat soundly as he held a sleeping Lois in his arms — her heartbeat, though slower, kept rhythm with his own. The feeling of love and completeness surged in his chest and spilled over. His intense desire had lessened some since she'd drifted off a few minutes ago, but his memory of her passion wouldn't let it fully subside. Still, he was content to just hold her for now.

He wasn't sure what he had expected of their date tonight, other than having the fierce and profound need to spend time with her — just like they used to, but with so much more between them now.

All things considered, he would have guessed that he'd have been the more emotional one. But Lois, for all her incredible strength, had been the one who needed holding tonight, at least more so than he had. And oh, how his heart ached with hers, feeling the sorrow and grief and regret just as keenly. All the could-have-beens and might-have-beens, but nothing they could ever wish to change, else they wouldn't have Kallie.

Tonight, so far, he'd found his strength in her, found that even though he felt as far from Superman as ever, that he could still save her. They could save each other. Because, without her...he was lost. And though it tore excruciatingly at his heart to see her in so much pain, it was a discordant comfort to know that she needed him just as much as he needed her.

His arms squeezed around her, holding her just that much closer and inhaling deeply to comfort himself with the scent of everything that was Lois. She stirred, a gentle movement next to his body, and slowly opened her eyes.

"Oh my God, did I fall asleep?" She ducked her head into his chest before peering up at him again, a steady blush rising in her cheeks.

He smiled at her, his heart warm and full. "Just for a few minutes, love."

"Well, that's embarrassing." A small, breathy giggle escaped, warm against his chest even through the material of his dress shirt.

His heart started racing, reminded of why she'd dozed off in the first place. "I'm choosing to take it as a compliment," he said with a lopsided smirk.

"Is that so?"

He nodded with only slightly more confidence than he actually had. "Yup. See that post over there?" He hooked his head over to the side of them. "Right there, you'll see all of my hayloft conquests."

She let out half a gasp, and then swatted his shoulder as she leaned towards it a bit and squinted. "That bare post? That one there?" she asked.

Clark dipped his head to look over his glasses and made a quick tally mark in the wood with his heat vision. "The post isn't bare."

"Mmmhmm." She narrowed a playful eyebrow at him before snuggling in close against him. "So, farmboy, I may have been your first conquest...but surely I haven't been the only gal you've whisked off to the hayloft. How far have you gotten up here?"

He shifted slightly. "Um..." Yes, they'd had this conversation before...or...at least the basics, but they'd never talked in detail. And certainly not right after he'd just made love to her. At least they still had most of their clothing on. "Second base, I guess? Over the clothes?"

"Wait, what's second base again and third? You know, the problem is that everyone has a different definition of the bases. I think everyone agrees that first base is kissing, up to and including French kissing, maybe necking. And a home run, well...that's obviously intercourse. But second and third covers such a wide range...heavy petting, above and below the waist, over and under the clothes. And there's a whole big playing field between getting handsy and intercourse..."

She was babbling...about the bases of physical intimacy — and he wasn't sure if it was because of his pre-existing state or her babbling or the subject matter, but this was incredibly...

"What?" she asked when she noticed him staring.

"God, you're sexy when you babble."

Her wide grin was almost his undoing. As it was, his heart was racing, and every one of his nerve endings alive. He wasn't sure if she felt it through their connection or she could just read him, but the look on her face said she knew full well what she was doing to him.

"Well..." she started, trailing her fingers over his chest, making him wish his shirt was already off. "All that said, I'm not sure what was clearly no further than third base counts as a conquest for your tally over there." She nodded in the direction of the singed post.

"No?" He swallowed. "Surely you're not saying your...uh, experience was anything less than satisfactory."

"Oh God, no. Ten out of ten."

He barked with laughter. "Lo-is!"

"What?" She laughed along with him. "I'm serious, though..." she said, her tone sobering, almost whispering her next words. "That was the best...experience of my life so far."

"Really?"

"Really." She reached up to touch his face and look deeply into his eyes. He could feel the love and gratitude flowing from her freely. "And I'm so thankful it was with you."

And then she leaned closer, her lips capturing his own,

tender at first, and then increasingly desperate, as though she was trying to tell him how much it meant to her, how much *he* meant to her...but whether the kiss said it or not, he could feel it squarely in his chest, the most excruciatingly wonderful feeling of love and deep affection. Belonging and home.

“Make love to me again, Clark.”

In answer, he pressed his lips to hers again for a deep, impassioned kiss. When he pulled back, he cupped her cheek, running this thumb over her smooth skin. “Will you still let me keep my tally mark if we move this to the bedroom?” he asked, the corner of his lips quirking up slightly.

The sound of her laughter made his heart sing. “Absolutely, farmboy. Take me to bed.”

Happily, he scooped her up in his arms and floated down to the barn floor, and he groaned with pleasure at the feel of her body sliding slowly down against his own. Taking a moment to collect himself now that she was standing on her own two feet, Clark took a shuddering breath.

Pulling his glasses down slightly, he peeked over at the farmhouse. Whether his parents had already gone to bed early or were being conspicuously discreet, he was relieved to see the path to their bedroom would be uninterrupted.

“C’mon,” he said, grabbing her hand and heading towards the house at a half-run with her, feeling almost giddy.

Although he was in a desperate hurry to make love to her, he couldn’t help but stop just shy of the porch and gather her in his arms and twirl her around and around with him. Her resulting squeal of delight only made his heart beat stronger. When they stilled, he held her closer, his forehead touching hers and their lips just inches apart.

And all of a sudden, his heart ached not only with tenderness but some inexplicable feeling of apprehension. He could feel her heart in his, holding him, beating together with his own.

“What is it, Clark?” She pulled back a little, and he could see her searching his eyes, surely wondering why the abrupt change in his mood.

“I...I’m not sure. I guess...everything just seemed so happy, so wonderful...and the second I realized it, I remembered that there’s so much more. So much...” His breath hitched for a moment. “We can’t...I know we can’t stay here, not forever. But for a moment, I let myself imagine that we could, that...” <<...we didn’t have to go back home.>>

“Hey, hey, love,” she soothed as her hands came up to frame his face. “We have time. We have all the time in the world now. Together. One step at a time, okay?”

Her eyes were worried, but he could see as well as feel her love for him, her yearning to protect him, save him — so loud and so clear. He nodded haltingly, swallowing back the tears he didn’t want to deal with right now. “Okay,” he whispered.

She stroked his features with her fingertips, his brow, his cheeks, his lips. “Now, do you want to go take a walk down to the pond or make love?” she asked, her voice soft and gentle.

Her question held no expectation or judgment, and he was grateful. “I...need you...” he rasped. “I...I almost feel like I need you too much. We’ve been...it seems like...”

She shook her head so gently, and he could feel it in her heart. “I don’t think so. Just think of what we’ve been through, Clark. What *you’ve* been through. Starved for touch. Forbidden from feelings. Forced to...” He could feel the anger rise in her throat but she tamped it down. “Look at me...you can’t love me too much.”

Her eyes, her heart, were pleading with him to understand. His heart clenched at the thought that it was all too much and that he might not make it through, but looking in her eyes...her heart holding his...he knew he could let her do the believing for both of them right now. Let her hold him. Let her love him. And he would be okay.

Grateful yet again, he let her take his hand and lead them both to their bedroom. When they got there and had closed the door, somehow he was all nerves, as if this was somehow their first time even though they’d made love several times over in the last twenty-four hours.

And Lois seemed to know, sense that he was hesitant now, whether it was their connection again or it was written all over his face. She stepped towards him and put her hands on either side of his neck, her face close and their lips a hair’s breadth apart. “Love me, Clark.”

Her kiss was gentle, loving, as though she was trying to soothe his soul. His hands came up to rest on her hips to hold her close, and she leaned further into him as she deepened the kiss. Her hands touched him slowly, exploring every part of his face and neck and making him feel both cherished and desired, and he nodded in answer to her silent question when she reached the knot of his tie.

Her lips moved to take the place of where her hands had been as she worked off his tie and started unbuttoning his shirt. He felt his uncertainties bleeding away, replaced with a slow-burning need to love and be loved by the woman in his arms.

“I love you, Clark. I love every part of you,” she told him, staring into his eyes and imploring him to believe her or take it on faith for now if he couldn’t.

All he could do was nod before he captured her lips, his hands threading through her hair and causing it to tumble down out of its loose bun and frame her face.

When he pulled away, he was overcome with the sight of her, love flooding his heart all over again. “You’re so beautiful,” he said as his thumb stroked her cheek, feeling like he couldn’t find the right words, the perfect words to describe her, what he saw when he looked at her, how she made him feel.

Their connection was surging, thrumming with the warmth of their love and desire for one another. “You’re beautiful too, you know. Your body. Your soul. Your heart,” she said, her voice catching a little. “I couldn’t have asked for a better man to share my life with.”

His heart and chest overflowed, and he swallowed past a small lump of emotion. “My wildest dream...my deepest wish...you’re everything come true, Lois. You’re everything.”

She reached up to stroke his cheek, and he could see her eyes shimmering with unshed tears as her hand moved back behind his neck to pull him in closer. Her lips met his, and they moved in perfect tandem, somehow managing to convey all the things they couldn’t put words to, the things only their hearts could tell each other and no one else.

Afterwards, they found their way under the covers, and Lois snuggled up against him, her warm, soft curves molded against him and her head resting in the crook of his arm. And they talked again of gentle things, trying not to venture too near the harder topics, at least not right now in bed. Part of him could feel them crawling ever closer, though, and he loathed the idea that this mostly blissful time with Lois had a timer, some sort of expiration date before they had to face the hard things again.

After almost a year of keeping his feelings so far away, it was daunting having them so near. As Lois drifted off to sleep in his arms, he held her closer and tried to lose himself in the rhythmic reassurance of her heartbeat, so steady and close. He reached out with his senses and gathered three more heartbeats, surrounding his own heart in his mind and protecting himself for his dreams to come.

Chapter 18: Hold On To Me As We Go, As We Roll Down This Unfamiliar Road

Mid-March 1997

23 Days Since Clark Came Home

“Settle down, it’ll all be clear

Don’t pay no mind to the demons, they fill you with fear

The trouble, it might drag you down

If you get lost, you can always be found

Just know you’re not alone

‘Cause I’m gonna make this place your home...”

Home by Phillip Phillips

Lois awoke slowly, the soft light of the sunrise filtering

through the gap in the curtain and tickling at her senses. But as she roused further, she realized it wasn’t the light that had woken her so much as the sweet sound of cooing and squealing coming from the kitchen. She smiled, her heart flooding with warmth and love, and opened her eyes.

Clark was next to her, sprawled out a bit in his sleep and his face adorably smooched against the pillow, and she couldn’t help but notice that he looked more relaxed than he’d been the entire time he’d been home. She touched his cheek and kissed his forehead before she whispered to him. “Sleep more if you want to, love. I’m going to go see Kallie.”

She dressed quickly and threw her hair up in a messy bun before heading out to the kitchen, closing the door quietly behind her.

Jonathan was playing with a delighted Kallie, and Martha hummed a happy tune while getting breakfast started. It wasn’t an unfamiliar scene to Lois, but this time, with Clark home and sleeping soundly in their bed, she could allow her heart to feel every ounce of happiness.

“Morning, Mom and Dad.”

“Lois!” Martha said with delight. “Good morning. How was your night, honey?”

“It was wonderful, Mom. Just perfect. Thank you,” she said, smiling at her before turning to Kallie. “Good morning, sweet girl. Mommy missed you!”

Kallie’s head had already turned when Lois had first spoken, but now that she had her mommy’s full attention, Kallie kicked and squealed with glee. Jonathan handed her over to Lois, who cradled her close in her arms.

“She’s been waiting patiently for you,” Jonathan said. “We thought we’d wait a little longer before feeding her, and here you are!”

“Thanks, Dad.”

Lois got settled in her rocking chair and got Kallie latched as she sat back and listened to the...normalness of this morning routine. With so many things being abnormal — well, different — about this family, it was comforting to have this mundane thing.

As Martha readied a cup of coffee for Jonathan and brought it over to him, she smiled at Lois. “So, Lois, how did you like your pie?”

She stopped her rocking abruptly. “Pie? There was pie?”

Martha burst out laughing, joined by Jonathan’s hearty chuckling. “Yes, honey. Maisie’s very last pecan pie of the season, to be exact.”

“What?!”

Through the laughter, Martha asked, “So I take it you didn’t make it around to dessert? I’d wondered about the lack of dirty dishes in the kitchen this morning. Guess we’ll have to send Clark to the barn to clean up later, too.”

Lois was only half-listening, hoping they'd avoid teasing about *other* kinds of dessert, because...

"CLARK!!"

Five seconds and a whoosh later, he was standing fully dressed in front of her. "Are you okay? What's wrong?"

She winced a little, not meaning to have worried him, but at least he didn't look panicked or anything. "What happened to my pie?"

"What? Nothing...wait, did something happen to it?" He glanced over at Martha and Jonathan, who were quite admirably holding in their remaining laughter.

"I never got it, that's what!" she said, indignant.

"Oh! I, uh...we got sidetracked before we ever got to it," he said with a sheepish grin.

She flushed with warmth at the memory of their other activities last night and was grateful for Martha and Jonathan's discretion — at least when it came to making comments out loud. "Well, go get it!" Lois said, raising her free arm to shoo him away.

"Now?"

"Please?"

"For breakfast?"

"Do I really have to ask again?" she raised an eyebrow at him, mildly annoyed that he was withholding her pie but also enjoying his completely bewildered look.

He opened his mouth and closed it again. And then he disappeared, reappearing again seconds later before the screen door had even finished swinging shut from his exit. He set a dome-covered dish on the kitchen table and took the lid off, revealing the pie.

Her stomach growled eagerly at the sight...well, and because she was hungry and it was time for breakfast. But mostly because it was Maisie's pecan pie.

"Should I..." he trailed off, still clearly unsure how he'd gotten to this place and moment in time when he was being scolded about pie at six o'clock in the morning after literally having woken up just minutes ago.

Lois bit her lip to keep from laughing. She still wanted her pie. "Cut me a piece? Yes, please," she answered as she stood up, Kallie still latched, and moved to sit at the kitchen table.

He was still standing there, dumbfounded.

"Now? Please?" she prompted, gently at first. "You really shouldn't keep a woman from her pregnancy craving — I...I mean, it was. A craving. When I was pregnant. Was."

"I think I need to sit down," Clark said numbly.

Martha swooped in then and patted Clark on the shoulder as he sank down into the chair next to Lois. "It's okay, honey. I'll get it served up."

Lois' heart was racing, wondering what the heck had just happened and hoping she hadn't broken Clark. She put

her free hand out to cover his knee. "Are you okay, love?"

His brow furrowed, clearly having to think about his answer. She rubbed his knee while she waited.

Meanwhile, Martha had quietly set a small stack of plates down on the table along with the pie server and forks.

"It was just a little...weird, I guess," Clark said at last, and for a moment, she couldn't discern if it was melancholy or confusion or hope she felt coming from him. Maybe all of the above. "Another one of the things I missed."

"Yeah," she said, her voice soft as she grabbed hold of his hand and held it, running her thumb gently over the back. "I'm sorry you had to miss it."

He was quiet, and she couldn't quite read his thoughts. It didn't feel like he was intentionally blocking her, but his heart and mind didn't seem fully open either. And there was every possibility he just didn't know what to think or how to feel. She honestly wasn't sure herself.

And while they did need to talk about the bigger things, the harder things, she was loath to do so just yet. She wanted to cling to the levity just a little longer.

Lois stroked his hand to get his attention again. "Honey, I promise next time I'm pregnant, I'll send you all over the world for my cravings. I'll take full advantage of you."

That roused a chuckle out of him, and the corners of his eyes crinkled. "The fringe benefits of marrying a man who can fly?"

"Exactly." She grinned at him.

"Deal," he said, his voice cracking a little.

She gave his hand a squeeze. "We'll be okay, love. We'll get there."

Whether 'there' meant her next pregnancy or the place where everything was okay again, she wasn't entirely sure. But she knew they'd get there.

Lois kept stealing glances at Clark as they walked hand in hand out to the pond on the south edge of the property. Having been away from Kallie most of the day yesterday, Lois had really wanted to take her with them. And Martha had suggested using the baby carrier Lois hadn't gotten around to using, ever, seeing as they hardly left the house.

If anyone had asked her even a year ago, 'man babywearing an infant' wouldn't have even been on her radar, let alone her top ten list of sexiest things in the world. Yet, here she was, finding herself unable to tear her eyes away from the sight of it.

And, sure, maybe it was because it was *her* baby and *her* man, but she knew something fundamental within Lois Lane had changed. Part of her worried, as she had done much of the time he'd been gone, that she would get back

to work and find she'd lost her edge, gone soft.

Though she knew it wasn't fair to put such a spin on it, she sometimes felt like she'd just run away and hidden from her problems. Lois Lane wasn't a coward. She knew she'd been protecting herself and Kallie...and in large part Clark's secret identity, but it was entirely unlike Lois Lane to...do nothing. To lay low.

It had been quite some time since she'd felt like herself. Honestly, she wasn't sure who she even was now. But she did know that she was still a journalist. She still had awards to win and wrongs to right.

She knew they'd get back to Metropolis. Back to the *Planet*. Back...home.

But home had a much different meaning now.

As they neared the dock, Clark squeezed her hand gently. "Hey, are you okay? You've been pretty quiet. And..." <<...it's harder to feel you in here.>>

Their connection, he meant, and she'd noticed too that everything felt a little distant today. She looked over at him and smiled. "I'm okay...just thinking." She led him by the hand over to sit on the old bench that rested up against the outbuilding. They sat down, and Clark put his arm around her shoulders. She leaned in gratefully, not realizing how much she'd needed the comfort of his body close to hers right then. Kallie was sleeping soundly against his chest, no doubt as soothed as Lois was by his warmth and the sound of his heartbeat.

They were quiet for a long moment, and she watched as Clark's gaze swept over their surroundings. She wondered what he was thinking, if seeing this place after however long brought back memories — and which ones. Or maybe he was regarding how it had changed, or how *he* had changed.

He ran his hand along the smooth surface of the bench slats behind them. "I guess Dad put a new coat of varnish on this while I was gone."

She buried her face in his chest and giggled.

"What?" She could hear the amusement in his curiosity.

"The first time I came out here...I got a splinter in my butt." She laughed again and her heart surged with warmth when she felt the rumble of his laugh. "So Dad marched out here the very next morning with sandpaper, the can of varnish, and a paintbrush."

"Sounds about right," Clark said, chuckling as he stroked Kallie's back, moving his hand in a slow rhythm against the soft fabric of the carrier.

"He was so excited, you know? To be a grandpa. *Is* so excited."

She could almost feel his heart squeeze, every happy moment tinted bittersweet. Clark's voice was soft when he spoke next. "He used to warn me, tell me not to get my

hopes up when I wished and dreamed for a family of my own someday. 'Now, Clark, we don't know if that's possible,' he would say. I wondered sometimes at his pragmatism, why he would temper my dreams like that, but I think he was just scared...scared of me getting hurt, terrified of the wrong people finding out about me...but maybe most of all, of me having my heart broken."

Lois nodded against his chest, saddened by his words but understanding them all the same, especially now that she knew Jonathan better. She was heartened, though, by the sight of all Clark's hopes and dreams — all the hopes and dreams she never realized she'd had too — snuggled right there, sleeping so soundly against his chest.

"Maybe part of that was protecting himself, too, not getting his own hopes up. But I always had Mom to balance me out."

"They make great parents," she said. "Thank you for sharing them with me."

In answer, he squeezed his arm around her shoulders and placed a kiss on the top of her head. "So, you said the *first* time you came out here?"

"Yeah. There's no gym out here." She looked up at him and grinned. "So, I would go for walks, kind of explore the property more. You know, this is a really big farm!"

"Just shy of 400 acres. Decent for a small farm."

"Sounds huge to me." She smiled and shifted a little, pulling her knees up to her chest. "It was...kind of an emotional day, and I was surprised to find this clearing, this pond out here...and then the memories all hit me at once."

"Trask."

She nodded again. "I almost lost you that day."

They both stayed silent, reliving echoes of the memories for a long moment.

"The second time I came out here...honestly, it was only because I didn't want Dad's hard work to go to waste." They shared a light chuckle. "But when I was out here...I'm not even sure how to explain it...there was a part of me that felt more connected to you here. I know that seems silly. You *lived* in the house, our room, for goodness' sake. You'd think I'd have felt closer to you there...instead of here, where I only had bad memories."

He seemed to realize she needed a bit more time to wrap words around her feelings, and she was grateful. She'd spent so much time here over the last seven months, thinking nothing and everything — remembering how scared she was watching him almost get shot, wondering if she'd have been more scared if she'd known the truth then, realizing how she'd felt about him. "I think...maybe, maybe because this is where I first realized I'd been falling for you. I remembered that, hung on to that...and then all

the thoughts and emotions that came after it. I spent a lot of time wishing I'd not fought my feelings for you for so long."

"Oh, honey..." She could feel the twist in his heart, mirroring her own. "You needed time."

"And you gave it to me...and then some," she said, grateful and regretful all at once.

Clark gave her another squeeze and another kiss, and she could feel her heart fill with the warmth of his love. "Worth the wait, remember?"

"Yeah," she said softly. "And Clark?" she shifted so that she could look at him more squarely, even though it took her further from the warmth of his solid frame. "It's my turn to give you time. All the time you need. Going home, I mean." Her heart twisted again with the knowledge that the road home might be even longer. "We'll figure it out. Whatever you need."

<<Thank you.>>

Lois nodded and snuggled back into his side, bringing a hand up to cover his own on Kallie's back. A gentle breeze had kicked up, and the sound of leaves rustling and the water gently lapping at the pond's edge filled the silence. Time seemed to float away as they sat, letting their feelings ebb and flow and just be, just the three of them. Her little family. She closed her eyes and took deep, calming breaths, her chest rising and falling in counterpoint to his.

In her mind, a strange yet beautiful place appeared, and she gasped lightly before she realized it was Clark's memory. There was some sort of grand courtyard, a large expanse of land, filled with all sorts of strange plants she'd never seen before in a warm splash of colors — lots of reds, hints of oranges, and dashes of pale pinks — somehow mixed in perfect harmony with the cool of the blues and purples. Leaves in strange shapes and vines whirling this way and that, and gossamer-light petals on what looked like flowers amongst all manner of trees.

Tall but tattered walls surrounded the grounds, a shimmering sleek material, not metal but nothing like stone. There was a vague sense that this had been carefully architected and well-manicured at some point, some of the plants in what used to be rows but now overgrown and ragged and the colors following only some semblance of a pattern. An impossibly tall archway marked the entrance, a phrase engraved in Kryptonian symbols across it.

It seemed to be night in this strange place, but that made it all the better, for there were little floating lights that just hovered there, almost like large fireflies or stars that had fallen only to hang mere feet above the ground. Some of the plants themselves seemed to glow, giving off an ethereal light in many colors.

Eyes still closed, her hand moved down to his knee and

gave it a squeeze.

"It's beautiful, Clark," she whispered. "On the archway, what does it say?"

"*Kaogahv skilorodh zhehd zw kehpes shokh*," he said, his voice quiet, and it sounded oddly beautiful to hear the strange tones from his mouth instead of in his mind where she'd heard them most. "It's a Kryptonian proverb: Let the person who has truth speak."

He let the silence stretch between them, perhaps wondering what truths were left to speak. After a time, he spoke again. "There was a young village leader there — on New Krypton, not here in the garden — she reminded me so much of you. Tenacious and feisty, and her youth making you wonder where she might have gotten all that bravery from." His sadness and grief filled her heart, and she took hold of it to lessen the pain. She knew there was so much more, but he'd get to it in his own time.

"Her village was under siege...I..."

Lois felt the conflict in his heart, the anguish and guilt, though she didn't know the details. She didn't need to know the details. She did her best to surround him with acceptance and forgiveness. <<My love, you have it no matter what.>>

Though their eyes were still closed, she could sense him shaking his head, not to deny her support, but to skip ahead in his memories, to the easier part. "She had been brave enough to challenge me and speak the truth, even though she risked death to do so, her village almost..." He paused and cleared his throat. "I asked her to be the first representative, to be on my advisory council for forming the new government."

Her heart went out to him again, knowing that there was so much pain wrapped up in the triumph of his actions, this young woman's actions. And she saw a vision of her in Clark's memory — a slight figure with short and tight, dark curls against her deep olive skin — and a name — Dene-Ra. Lois sent a silent prayer of thanks to her, grateful for the confidence and the optimism she'd clearly shared with Clark when he hadn't possessed any of his own.

Dene-Ra faded from her vision and they were back to the garden. Lois took this shift to mean everything was still too fresh and painful, but then he spoke of her again.

"She was more like them...like Jor-El and a small faction of those on the expedition, New Kryptonians who had believed in peace. This garden was built shortly after they colonized," Clark said softly. "An edict from the old world to the new world. *Shahrreth Zehdh-Tahn*, they called it," he said solemnly. "It doesn't translate so well, but it essentially means a place of hope for unity and belonging — meant to be a reminder of what New Krypton should strive to be. They were optimistic, idealistic..."

“It didn’t last long?” she asked even though she’d heard the answer already from his heart, her eyes still closed to take in the beauty before her.

She felt him shake his head. “I used to come here to the gardens...those times I didn’t spend in the war room or my bedchamber, when I could slip past my own guards but still be relatively sure of my safety.

“Other than in my head, where I could be with you, it was the only place that made sense to me. Except it didn’t make any sense at all why something so beautiful, so peaceful would have fallen out of favor and into disrepair.”

“But life persevered anyway,” she said, marveling at lush overgrowth that didn’t seem to care that no one had tended to it in far too many years.

“Persistent, tenacious plants that seemed so incongruous with the rocky, desolate landscape around them. It reminded me of you...how you demand the world be a better place, and because of you, it is.”

“Oh, Clark.” She snuggled closer into him, wrapping an arm around him and Kallie as best she could. She was half-desperate to kiss him but still reluctant to open her eyes and break the spell.

“This place made a certain kind of sense when everything else just seemed so far away from...everything. Jor-El spoke of ideals and customs, values like optimism and peace. Unity. It was disheartening to know that a culture, a people so desperate and determined to survive, would turn away from those ideals when they could have, should have embraced them.”

Lois could only hmmm. It didn’t make sense to her, their cold and utilitarian ways, and she could only guess that there’d been more truth to Ching’s claim that she’d given him credit for. They’d needed Clark even more than they’d known, for reasons they couldn’t have begun to comprehend. She still wasn’t sure they’d deserved him.

“I would come here and try to remind myself why I was there...but so often, I could only think of you. There’s this place in the Peruvian Amazon I found one year on my travels. Bioluminescent plants and insects in a jungle full of exotic plants of all shapes and sizes. It was so stunning, so beautiful — I kept meaning to take you there...before everything happened.”

Lois hugged him tighter.

“I felt closest to you here,” he continued, his voice still soft and wistful. “Because it reminded me of you, and maybe because it was similar enough to somewhere on Earth. Or because I had time and space for breathing and could almost, even if just for the barest of moments, imagine you with me. I wish you could have been there.”

“I’m here now,” she said softly, squeezing him tightly again. “Show me.”

And so they sat there and toured the gardens in their

minds, Clark telling her all the names of the plants and making up names for the ones he didn’t know. At the back of the gardens, hidden from view of the front entrance, was a waterfall — but not of water. Iridescent, crystalline liquid cascaded from a high, cliff-like wall into a shimmering pool. The hum and burble of the falls had a melodic quality to it and a calming effect on both of their senses.

She was awed by the beauty and the unfamiliarity of it all, and she found her heart so full, comforted by the knowledge that, amidst all the horrors up there, at least he’d had this.

Against her arm, she could feel Kallie start to wriggle. With a half-reluctant sigh, Lois opened her eyes, the images and sounds of the garden disappearing. Clark still had his eyes closed, and she felt her heart surge with love — how peaceful he looked, just in that moment. She reached up to touch his cheek, and she leaned in to press a feather-light kiss to his lips.

“Thank you for showing me.”

His eyes found hers. “Thank you for being there...for understanding.”

“Of course, love. Of course.” She kissed him again, not much deeper but trying to convey everything she was feeling, her gratitude and acceptance.

“We should get back,” he said.

“There’s no rush. I can feed Kallie here. We can stay a little longer.”

“I mean home. Metropolis.” His voice was solemn but calmer and more certain than she’d heard from him since he’d been home. He started taking a fussing Kallie out of the carrier, slowly unwrapping the long swath of cloth while holding her.

“But you’re not — are you ready?” she asked, unsure if the building anxiety was hers or his, and she watched him carefully as he soothed Kallie, rubbing her back and bouncing her so gently against his chest. She wondered if he realized how natural he looked.

“I don’t know if I’ll ever be ready,” he said, sadness and a slight waver in his voice, as he placed a soft kiss on Kallie’s head. “But you are. I can’t make you stay here so much longer than you need to.”

“But, Clark...that’s not — it doesn’t matter! You need more time. We need more time...it’s...” she trailed off, unsure if she could finish with the sudden lump in her throat.

“Here, she’s hungry,” he said quietly, handing Kallie off to her.

Lois took Kallie reflexively, tucked her in the crook of her arm, and lifted her shirt, getting her latched and feeding while the emotions stormed in her own chest. She just watched Kallie suckling for a long moment, trying to

figure out what to say...trying to figure out what she was even thinking. Clark was silent too, watching Kallie along with her and bringing his hand up to stroke the soft hair on the top of her little head.

"It's time, though. Isn't it?" he asked.

"We can't just...go back. It's not...it's not that simple." He wasn't ready. He wasn't thinking clearly, thinking through all the details, all the things they needed to talk about. "Let's head back to the house. We should talk to Mom and Dad."

Chapter 19: Haven't Forgotten My Way Home

Mid-March 1997

23 Days Since Clark Came Home

"So I'm holdin' on (I'm still holdin')...

I'm barely holdin' on to you

I'm hangin' on another day

Just to see what you will throw my way

And I'm hangin' on to the words you say

You said that I will be okay..."

Broken by Lifehouse

"Well, if no one else is going to say it, I will!" Lois cried, smacking her hand down on the dinner table and making the plates rattle. "How are you going to survive being in Metropolis and hearing EVERYTHING, Clark? All the sirens, alarms, cries for help. You can't. I know you can't. It'll eat you up inside. So if we're going, we're really going back...you're going to need to wear the suit again."

Clark stared, his chest heaving with ragged breaths and his heart pounding in his chest, yet somehow still in rhythm and in tune with hers. She'd stunned them all into silence — him, Mom, Dad — and thankfully hadn't woken Kallie.

She was right. She was right, and the fear of it all clenched through his stomach. "I don't know," he ground out, his voice rough and uncertain.

"Then we can't go." Her eyes bore into him, imploring him to...he wasn't even sure what. "I won't do it. I won't watch you suffer like that. Not when I've just gotten you back."

"But...work. I know you, Lois. You need to get back to work." His protest sounded weak even to his own ears, but he hated being the one to hold her back.

"It's waited this long, Clark. It'll wait a bit longer," she said, somehow with no anger or sadness, though there was an underlying frustration.

"There are other things to consider," Martha added in, gently.

They all turned to look at her. It'd been him and Lois arguing for ten minutes now and his parents had been all

but silent.

"Everything you told us, honey...you're going to need help, professional help. A trauma therapist, maybe someone who works with combat veterans, PTSD."

Martha looked at him, and he could see the anguish in her eyes, knowing everything he'd been through — the pain he'd wanted to spare them but hadn't been able to.

"You're not going to find one in Smallville, son," Jonathan said. "And these things don't just heal on their own, no matter how much love you're surrounded by."

"How am I supposed to see a therapist — how would that even work? It's not like I can just waltz in somewhere in the boots and cape and tell them Sup — tell them I'm broken beyond repair."

"Don't say that!" Lois leveled a serious stare at him. "You are *not* beyond repair."

"Superman. Doesn't. Kill." His voice was quiet and strained, and he could barely get the words out past the lump in his throat. Every single cell in his body was urging him to flee, to run away and shove the feelings deep down inside. The ugly truth that no one seemed to want to acknowledge but him.

Everyone was silent, and all he could hear for a moment was the ticking of the clock on the wall, marking the seconds incongruously with the three rapid heartbeats around him.

"It was war, Clark. It's different," Jonathan finally said, quietly but in the tone he always used when he was deadly serious. "There are men and women out there every day in the military, making choices they would never make under normal circumstances, pulling triggers they'd rather not pull. They didn't set out to be killers and they aren't considered as such, either. War is ugly and unfair, but it didn't make you a murderer."

"But...Superman doesn't have that luxury, that excuse. I *have* to hold myself to higher standards."

"Superman wasn't up there," Martha said. "Clark was. Kal-El was. You didn't have any powers; the same standards didn't apply. You can't blame yourself."

"But I do. I know what I did. I can't stop thinking about it. And I don't know how to be Superman because of it."

"Dad's right. They're right." Lois' voice was low, almost reluctant. "I've seen it before... I didn't even make the connection until now. But my first Kerth — the soldiers on the front lines of the Gulf War? I did a follow-up a year later, and...you need help, Clark. They needed help, and not all of them got it."

"Okay," he said, his response quiet but automatic. There was an unspoken fear in the pit of Lois' stomach that he didn't want to explore further.

“Okay.” She grabbed his hand and interlaced her fingers with his.

He held on tight to the feelings of love and connection and concern and support she was surrounding him with. “How do we do this, though?” Clark asked.

Lois squeezed his hand. “We can wait, honey. We can wait a little longer.”

He shook his head and took a deep breath to steel himself. “You all are right, though. I need professional help, and that’s in Metropolis.”

“Couldn’t you just...fly in for appointments and come back here?” Lois asked, and he could feel the silent undercurrent of desperation, wanting to keep him safe and protected.

He knew without asking that she’d stay here with him until he was ready, that she wouldn’t leave his side anymore than he would hers, not after being apart so long without knowing if he’d return. And it killed him to think she was sacrificing more for him.

He felt more than saw her shake her head. <<It’s not a sacrifice. We’re in this together.>>

“Okay,” he said again, aloud for his parents’ benefit.

“Good. We’ll find you a therapist, and then in the meantime — before you’re ready to go back — we can work on our plan,” Lois said, her voice rough with emotion.

Clark nodded, the anxiety settling a bit but leaving a deep tension that made his muscles ache. The idea of talking to someone he didn’t know...about...everything...

He didn’t want to think about that right now. But the plan — working on the plan sounded productive, distracting. Complicated. “How do we even begin to make a plan to address my reappearance, both my reappearances? When it’s time, that is.”

“Well, they can’t coincide,” Jonathan warned. “As much as this Wells character says your identity was protected when he brought the other Clark here, I can’t say I fully trust him on that. You still have to be careful.”

“And there’s...my mess to clean up.” Lois shifted uncomfortably in her chair.

Martha was quick to answer her. “Honey, no. We’ve been over this before. You did what you had to do. The only thing you could do. We knew this was coming, that we’d have to address this when Clark got back. So we’re just going to address it. No blame to be had, okay?”

“Okay, Mom,” she said. He hated how small her voice sounded.

“We should probably bring Mr. White in at some point to coordinate our facts,” Jonathan said.

“You think we should tell Perry...*everything*?” Clark eyed his father, not quite believing he’d suggest such a thing.

Jonathan’s eyes darted to Martha and then to Lois. They were all looking at each other, and no one spoke for a moment.

Lois squeezed his hand. “Honey, Perry knows.”

Clark felt a flush of icy fear shoot through him, and it took him a few moments to fight against the long-ingrained fear of anyone finding out his secret. This was Perry. It would be okay — already was okay. Even his dad wasn’t upset.

Lois brought her other hand up to hold his more fully, running her fingers along their knuckles. “He’d apparently known for a while — even before you left, maybe — and when the other Clark left again...well, Perry was really confused. So now he knows it all. He helped keep the rumor alive...all this time.”

“Oh.” Clark wasn’t sure what else to say.

“That’s probably a good idea, Dad, to bring in Perry,” Lois said. “But I just don’t know how to escape the fact that I essentially told the world that Kallie is Superman’s child.”

His heart clenched. “She is,” he whispered hoarsely.

“Oh, honey. I know. I know. She is.” Lois’ hand came up to stroke his brow, and she seemed to be searching his eyes for...forgiveness, maybe. “She’s yours. Ours.”

“Can’t Clark — Superman, rather — just deny the rumor, publicly?” Jonathan asked.

“I don’t want to lie, Dad. I...I’ve already compromised my morals, my ethics. I can’t add to it.”

“Honey, how is it any different than saying Clark is not Superman?” Martha asked.

“Because I don’t actually have to *say* that to anyone... it just...is. And besides, I’m not sure I’d be able to get those words out of my mouth...” His eyes dropped to the table, to his hand joined with Lois’, and he wished desperately that this wasn’t so hard, that they could just go home and be a family. No rumor. No trauma.

No one knew what to say next, and it was a few moments before Martha got up to start clearing plates. “Well, I think we’ve probably earned ourselves a break,” she said.

Jonathan got up automatically to help, and he started scraping the scraps into the waste bin, then handing the plates to Martha to pile in the sink. “Lois,” he started as he scraped, “maybe you could go ahead and give Perry a call? We’ll probably need his help to solidify a plan.”

Lois nodded. “Sure.”

Clark wasn’t sure what was more awkward...talking to Perry knowing that he knew, landing on the roof of the *Planet* with his jeans and t-shirt on — in front of Perry, or the idea of the flight back when he’d have to carry Perry in his arms.

It was all awkward. All of it.

Even just flying alone by himself on the way there had been awkward. And he hated that. Using his powers again should be comfortable, easy...like riding a bike.

“Clark.” Perry cleared his throat and nodded his head in greeting casually, though Clark could tell he was trying carefully to school his expression.

“Mr. Whi — Perr — uh, Chief.” He felt...exposed, vulnerable having Perry know his secret. Would it have been better, easier if he’d worn the suit? He’d been in the suit in front of Perry plenty of times...but he’d just as often been in front of Perry in jeans and a t-shirt too.

“Knowin’ it is quite a different sight than, ah, seein’ it.” He nodded again, eyebrows raised, Clark assumed in reference to the flying, to the...well, the whole secret identity.

“I...” Clark didn’t even know what to say. What did he say? Throw his arms wide and say hop aboard?

“I’m really glad to see you back, Clark. Really glad.” It was rare to hear Perry’s voice so gruff with emotion.

Clark’s heart clenched, his chest tight, and he could feel the tears threatening. The thought of flying here and picking Perry up had been so nerve-wracking, he hadn’t even thought about how it would feel to see another person outside of family again, especially someone who was almost like family.

“Thanks, Chief,” he choked out, ducking his head a bit and shoving his hands in his pockets.

“Congrats on the little one.”

“Th — ” He tried to clear the lump from his throat.

“Thank you,” he whispered weakly.

“Can’t wait to meet her.”

Whether it’d been an intentional lifeline or not, Perry’s words reminded him of the task ahead. Well, the immediate task: get Perry to Smallville. And taking his friend to meet his baby seemed a whole lot easier than flying his boss to his childhood home to plan his uncertain future.

Clark cleared his throat again. “Ready?”

“As I’ll ever be.” He shrugged lightly and stepped towards Clark.

It got awkward again when he cradled his boss in his arms, and more awkward as he held him securely as he flew. Neither of them talked on the way, and for that he was grateful.

As they headed towards Smallville, Clark thought about having Perry in on the secret. He supposed it was good to have someone else on the inside, especially someone like Perry. Heck, when he got back to work, it would be a load off his mind to not have to worry about getting fired because of Superman-related absences.

...assuming he managed to put the suit back on.

He wondered, also, at the generosity of the man in his arms. Lois had said any time gone that the *Planet* wasn’t covering with paid leave, Perry was paying out of his own pocket. Not for the first time, he felt inadequate and undeserving of the support and unconditional love he’d gotten. Then he heard, though it wasn’t telepathy, Lois’ voice in his head, admonishing him, reminding him that love had no requirements.

Clark landed on the porch and set Perry down, stepping back a bit to let him gather himself and smooth out his suit.

“Chief?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks...thank you for everything. Lois told me...I just...”

Perry reached over to rest his hand on Clark’s shoulder and gave it a squeeze, looking him solidly in the eye.

“You’re welcome, Clark. I...you’re welcome.”

Clark knew there was so much more he himself wanted to say, but the words just seemed inadequate and hard to come by.

Perry gave his shoulder a final squeeze and said, “C’mon, son, I need to meet this baby of yours.”

They made their way inside, where Perry gave Lois a strong, emotional hug that Clark could feel the echoes of within his own chest, and there were brief greetings with his parents before Perry swooped in and gathered Kallie in his arms.

She settled there without reservation, fascinated, it seemed, by his thick eyebrows and animated expressions. Clark’s amusement fought with a fondness and affection he wasn’t sure what to do with. Either way, his heart was lighter for it, and Lois’ was too, he could feel as she pulled him over to sit with her on the couch.

For what seemed like the better part of ten minutes, they all watched and listened as Perry told Kallie an Elvis story — in baby talk. When Perry finally wrapped up his story, he relinquished Kallie to Jonathan.

“Here you go, kiddo. Back to Grandpa.” He cleared his throat and looked around at everyone else. “What? It was a kid-friendly story about a boy’s love for his momma. Can’t get more wholesome than that.”

Everyone chuckled lightly, but now that the cheerful diversions were over, the energy in the room started to change. Difficult and precarious work lay ahead for them now. There was no sense in delaying.

Perry settled himself back in one of the armchairs and propped one leg up, ankle on his knee, and he tented his fingers. “So...now that I, uh, know that you know that I know...first things first,” Perry started, turning to Martha and Jonathan. “I wanted to reassure you that your secret is safe with me. I imagine it must have been hard all these years keeping something like this to yourselves.”

“Thank you, Mr. White,” Jonathan said.

“Please, please, call me Perry.” He held his hands up as if to ward off the formalities.

“Thank you, Perry,” Martha said.

“Of course.” He nodded. “What Clark does...well, there’s no accounting for how much better off Metropolis — the world — is for his presence as Superman.”

Clark shifted in his seat, tensing a little, and Lois squeezed his hand.

“And his presence and work at the *Planet*...” Perry continued. “Well, I’m sure Lois would agree with me that the paper wouldn’t be nearly as good without it.”

“No, it wouldn’t,” Lois said quietly, squeezing his hand again.

“So...” Perry started slowly. “Lois told me a bit over the phone, but not everything, I gather. And — ” He held up a hand and looked directly at Clark. “ — you don’t want to tell me more if you don’t want to. That’s yours to deal with how you need to. I just...well, I’ve had friends back from war, and I know it’s far from easy. I, uh...I have some contacts for you — Lois said you’d be looking for therapy?”

Clark nodded awkwardly. The reality of it still made him nervous.

“Good. Good.” Perry cleared his throat. “I have people you can contact. You can make a choice or I can help...if you want.”

Clark nodded again. “Thanks, Chief.”

Perry tipped his head in acknowledgement. “And now that’s settled...” He paused, leaning forward a bit in his seat. “Now is the, uh...more delicate part.”

Everyone waited, and the silence seemed to stretch through the room uncomfortably until Kallie gurgled.

Perry started again, “There was the, uh, rumor that Lois started with the other Clark when he was here. Now, Lois, you told me to let that play out...and I did...not.”

“What?!” Lois tensed and edged forward in her seat, and Clark could feel a mix of anger and fear from her, rising to the surface.

He held his hands up again. “I clamped the lid down tight on that rumor. The only people that really needed to hear it were in the building at the time. And I let everyone know that it was not, under any circumstance, acceptable for their colleagues’ personal business to become fodder for the *National Whisper* or the *Dirt Digger*. If there was a story to be had, then it would run in the *Planet*.”

“But, Perry — ”

“Now, Lois, honey, hear me out. You weren’t thinking clearly at the time — no fault of your own! — but I knew the best thing for that rumor was to let it die out. The gossip mill died down after a few days, and I didn’t do a thing to stir it back up so it wouldn’t spread. Can’t have

every xenophobic whacko or super villain in the world after you and your baby, can we? That’s the last thing you and Clark needed.”

Lois sat back again, but was no less tense. Clark was just as tense, suddenly terrified about what fate could have befallen his family...the danger that Kallie might still be in one day if the truth ever got out.

“So, what now? Does everyone just think Clark and I up and left the *Planet* after a ridiculous tiff? That I would abandon my career for...for...” Lois trailed off, looking over at Kallie. Clark felt her heart twisting, and she squeezed his hand even harder.

“Of course not! I put you on medical leave. Told the mucky mucks upstairs that you had a high-risk pregnancy, doctor-ordered bed rest for the rest of your term, and that if they even thought about firing the best damned journalist they’d had in years, I’d have legal on the phone so fast they wouldn’t know what hit ‘em.”

“Oh.” Her grip loosened. “That...that’s a much better story. Thank you, Perry.” There was a slight tremble in her voice, but still she sounded relieved. “What about Clark? What did you say about him?”

“Ah, well...” Perry uncrossed his legs and smoothed his slacks out before recrossing his legs again. “That’s a bit more complicated.”

“Complicated how?” Jonathan asked, more than a hint of worry in his voice.

“With Lois out of the newsroom and Clark gone and the rumor kaput...” Perry paused to clear his throat again. “The problem is...was...well, I put Clark on vacation for as long as I could — a week or so was all I could manage, but then the higher ups wanted to know where their other star reporter was...”

“Perry,” Lois interrupted. “Just tell us.”

“Clark doesn’t currently have a job.”

“Perry!” Lois yelled.

“Now, Lois, there wasn’t much to be done about that — no easy excuse to be had for his absence. I tried — came up with a story assignment that would have him out of town indefinitely, but it was a bit of a flier, to be honest. The suits upstairs wouldn’t approve of it without more substantial leads, which, of course, didn’t quite exist. But we’ll figure it out. I’m still the editor, after all.”

Clark wasn’t sure whether to feel sick to his stomach or relieved. No job was just as well, wasn’t it? He wasn’t even close to ready to come back.

“How do we explain Clark’s absence, then? I doubt they’ll let you just give him his job back after he left without cause.”

She stood and started pacing. He knew she thought better when she paced, but it was making his anxiety worse. It was long minutes while everyone watched her as

if there were a tennis match in the living room. And then Clark saw it. That look on her face that he hadn't seen in so long, the one that never failed to make his heart beat faster, make him fall more in love with her while worrying what trouble she would find next.

"What if Clark brings them a story they can't refuse? An exclusive literally no one else could get?"

Everyone was looking at her expectantly, and Clark had an uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach.

Perry had an eyebrow raised. "...Superman's Return?"

She pointed a finger at him. "Not exactly, because that wouldn't explain his absence. They'd want to know what he's been doing for the last seven months, make sure there was nothing illegal or untoward happening in that time that would come back and bite them, give them a PR nightmare."

"Fair point," Perry said.

Lois came back to sit down next to Clark, and she took hold of his hand and rubbed gently at his knee with her other hand. "Honey?" she said softly. "What would you say if we told everyone that there had been a unique opportunity for a *Daily Planet* reporter to join Superman on New Krypton?"

"What?" Part of him couldn't even comprehend what she was saying. "When? How? Why?" It's too dangerous, he wanted to add. But it was a cover story. No one was going with him. He wasn't going back.

"After the other Clark left. We'll just keep it vague — the fewer details the better — but that Superman came back briefly and made the offer. And because I was pregnant and couldn't go myself, I insisted that you take this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for exclusive coverage of Superman's time on New Krypton."

Clark tried not to flinch.

"Lois," Jonathan said. "Surely, that's...well, isn't that too...? On the nose?"

"And besides," Martha piped in, "who would believe that Clark would leave you behind on Earth, while you were pregnant, no less?"

"Except...I did. That's exactly what I did."

Martha gasped. "Oh, Clark."

And then Lois had both hands on his face, making him look at her, her thumbs gently stroking his cheeks. "Clark, no. No, no...honey, you didn't know! It's not the same... it's different. If you were just Clark — no powers, no Kryptonian heritage — I know you wouldn't have left." Her fingertips traced along his brow. "I know you — your heart, your beautiful soul — you had to go. You wouldn't be the man I love if you hadn't. And you couldn't have known about Kallie, so I won't have you feeling guilty about it, okay?"

His chest was tight, and a lump had formed in his

throat, but he nodded.

"And you're right, Mom," Lois continued. "It would be hard for anyone who knows Clark to believe he'd leave me, unless..."

"Unless he thought you'd been unfaithful with someone he considered a friend," Martha finished.

"It's right back to where I started with things after the other Clark left. I still don't know what the hell Wells was thinking, bringing him in and then snatching him away after only a month." The rancor was evident in her voice.

"It makes sense, the rumor," Jonathan said. "But isn't it a little bit...far-fetched to have a reporter going into space like that?"

Perry barked with laughter, and everyone stared at him.

But Lois spoke before Perry could explain. "I, uh... have been known to go to extremes to get the story before. It's not...unheard of."

"Really, Lois?" Martha asked. "I know Clark has mentioned you being impulsive and a bit reckless at times..."

Lois laughed, and Clark couldn't help but smile a little despite the gravity of the situation.

Perry explained, "The first time Lois met Superman, she was all set to send herself up to the Space Station Prometheus with the rest of the Messenger crew."

"Lois!" Martha chided. "Were you just going to *live* up there?"

"I hadn't planned that far ahead! I was doing what I had to do for the story." Lois looked over at Kallie in Jonathan's arms. "I wouldn't now..."

"Of course, you wouldn't, honey," Martha said, smiling warmly. "I guess I just didn't realize quite how daring you used to be."

Jonathan piped up again, "But the fact of it seems to be that this would require Clark to write articles about his time up there. Are we sure that's such a good idea?"

"Jonathan, honey, journaling can be a very important tool in therapy, helping process emotions," Martha said.

"Articles don't exactly sound like therapy, Martha," Jonathan said.

"Actually," Lois added, "it can be very cathartic. And it's not like he'd have to share everything, all the details."

All of this was overwhelming. Clark felt like he was in this weird limbo with everyone talking about him as if he wasn't here, except he was here. He was back, and he wanted a say. And he wanted to do whatever it took to get his life back. To make sure Lois got *her* life back.

"I'll do it," Clark said, his voice quiet but his tone firm.

They all turned to stare at him, the room silent but for Kallie's whimpering. Clark stood and went over to Jonathan, taking Kallie gently from his arms. He cradled her in his arms and rocked her gently, running his

fingertips over her soft cheeks, and she quieted.

“How can I not?” he asked, looking at everyone in turn. “She deserves to live in a world with Superman. So how can I not do everything I can to be okay again?”

Chapter 20: Hold On To Me And Never Let Me Go

Mid-March 1997

23 Days Since Clark Came Home

“Cause with you, I’d withstand

All of hell to hold your hand

I’d give it all, I’d give for us

Give anything, but I won’t give up

‘Cause you know, you know, you know

That I love you, I have loved you all along...”

Far Away by Nickelback

They were all sitting around the dinner table, and Lois was begrudgingly sharing the rest of her pecan pie with Perry and Jonathan. Martha had made everyone some tea, and for a while, nothing but the clinking of forks against plates could be heard. That and the symphony of crickets and the occasional frog, the sound drifting in on the evening breeze through the screen door.

Clark sat next to her at the table, holding Kallie as she slept. Lois’ heart clenched as she watched them, the two most important people in her life. He looked up at her and smiled. <<*I love you.*>>

<<*I love you, too. Are you sure about this?*>>

He reached out for her hand, and she took hold of his, giving it a squeeze. <<*As long as I have you with me.*>>

<<*Always,*>> she told him.

Lois wasn’t sure at all. She had faith in his determination, his desire...but would they have to go back sooner than he was ready? Perry said he could try to make her maternity leave extend as long as possible — and Clark would start therapy right away — but she worried that everything was suddenly happening so fast. Who had started the countdown clock on their — okay, well, it wasn’t exactly a *quiet* Smallville life with all the emotional upheaval, but it was certainly a whole lot quieter and calmer than Metropolis would be.

As much as she yearned to be back there, she’d gotten mighty used to small town living and the peacefulness of the country. Lois Lane, of all people. She wondered if she’d be able to sleep soundly right away with the sounds of the city in the background or if she’d need time to adjust as she had when moving here. Would Kallie have trouble adjusting too?

And Clark...would he be able to sleep? Or would he stay up, plagued by every call of distress within the cacophony that filled the night skies of Metropolis? She wished he could turn his super hearing off, try and save

himself the guilt of not responding to every distant — and not-so-distant — S.O.S.

“Ahem.” Someone cleared their throat across the room. “I’m afraid we need your help...or rather, you need ours... I think.”

Lois froze. She knew that voice. She hated that voice.

Every head whipped around toward the screen door.

“No,” Lois said, her voice steely and low. “I don’t want to see you!”

“Ms. Lane, if you’ll just listen for a moment...I’m afraid I’ve made a bit of a mistake...”

“A mistake?!” She felt the fury rising, her chest tightening. “Damn right, you made a mistake!”

“Lois, hang on. Just wait,” Clark said...but it wasn’t Clark, it was...

The other Clark stepped out in front of the screen door, smiling at her briefly before looking at Wells. “I told you you should have let her see me first.”

“Quite. Quite right you are,” Wells said, stepping aside and taking off his bowler hat to fiddle with.

“No...” Lois shook her head, suddenly terrified of why they were here, why they were back when *her* Clark was home. “No...he’s not going anywhere! We’re fine. You can just go. I mean, not that I-I’m not glad to see you, Clark — other Clark. It’s good to see you...I just... How are you?” Lois couldn’t keep track of all the feelings wrenching through her chest.

He smiled then, a smile like she’d never seen from him before. There was something...

“Lois, there’s someone I want you to meet,” the other Clark said.

Lois gasped. “You found her!” she breathed. Her emotions shifted abruptly from wresting to skittering as a woman who looked alarmingly like her moved from out of the shadows into the glow of the porch light. Lois gasped again and looked back at the other Clark. “You found her,” she said, her voice a whisper.

He simply nodded, a wide smile on his face and his eyes moist.

Lois flung open the screen door as the other Clark jumped back out of the way, and she launched herself into his arms. “Oh, Clark, I’m so happy for you!” She squeezed him tight and then pulled back, swiping at the tears slipping from her eyes before she held out a hand to her double. “You must be Lois.”

“I’ve...heard a lot about you.” The other Lois smiled nervously and shook her hand. “Congratulations...? On the baby...she was born already, right?”

“Thank you,” Lois said, smiling and nodding. “Kallie. Just about 2 months old now.” She turned, seeking her daughter out and found her still in Clark’s arms...amidst a sea of very shocked faces.

“I...” Lois started, her eyes darting between the two groups of people, who were all looking to her for the answer. She gestured at the new arrivals. “Lois. Clark. H.G. Wells. Some of you have met before, and...I’m going to make myself some coffee. Have at it.”

The flurry of words and movements started instantly, as if she’d had some power to freeze and unfreeze time. She made her way to the coffee maker and busied herself with the preparations, her mind reeling with possible reasons Wells was back, and with two doppelgangers this time.

As she filled the filter and the pot, trying to tune out the din around her, Lois could feel sadness from Clark and a resentment roiling just under the surface. While she assumed it was about Wells’ presence, his actions, she couldn’t discount the fact that Clark might have some feelings about the other Clark’s role in everything. She would have to ask him later.

After pressing start, she stared at the coffee maker for long minutes and wondered if it really would brew more slowly under watchful eyes. She felt Clark come up behind her slowly, his hand coming to rest on her lower back. “I put Kallie in our room,” he said softly, the sadness still lingering within him. “Are you okay?”

She turned into him, and he wrapped his arms around her. “No, probably not?” she whispered into his chest. “Can’t our life ever be normal?”

He chuckled lightly and rubbed her back. “Normal isn’t our watchword, remember?”

Her laughter against his chest was a warm puff of air, and she loved that they could laugh a little more easily these days even though the worry was still there underneath. “This little corner of the kitchen isn’t a very good hiding place, is it?” she said, still whispering, and a bit afraid to look up from her small haven in his arms.

“We could escape to the treehouse — have us there in four seconds?” he said, his voice low and ever-so-slightly husky. “They’re all waiting in the living room. Might not even see us.

“I wish, but we should probably face the music sooner than later,” she said softly as she patted his chest and pulled back a bit. “Besides, I can smell my coffee is ready.”

Clark reached for her mug and took it off the rack. “May I?”

Her heart hitched along with her breath, and she nodded, watching as he lovingly made her coffee and the rest of the world fell away. With cream and sugar because he knew without asking that she’d want the real deal right now. He stirred everything together, and before he handed it over, he blew a faint puff of air over it, making sure it was the perfect temperature.

“This is the best cup of coffee I’ve ever had,” she said as she brought the mug to her lips, her heart so full that she thought it might burst.

“You haven’t even tasted it yet.” He smiled so warmly at her, his eyes shining.

“Doesn’t matter.” She stayed, staring into his eyes for another moment longer, and then she took a sip. “Yep, best cup of coffee ever. Thank you,” she said, finding it a slight struggle to get the words out past the lump in her throat.

Clark leaned in to kiss her forehead, so excruciatingly tender, and she could feel his love surging in his chest — mixed with all the sadness and grief, but so strong was the love that she knew in her heart they’d make it somehow despite all the worries and the doubts.

“C’mon,” he said softly. His hand fell to settle on the small of her back as he led them out of the kitchen and toward the living room. “Let’s go face the music.”

Lois’ head was spinning already. Clark. Lois. Lois. Clark. “Hang on! Before we go any further, I think we should...come up with some nicknames or something because this is getting really confusing really fast.”

Martha nodded, then turned to the other Clark sitting next to her on the couch and his Lois next to him. “Clark... maybe we could call you Jerome? I mean...assuming that’s your middle name, too?”

“It is.” He nodded. “And sure, we can try that. I can’t promise I still won’t answer to Clark, but I think it’ll help.” He smiled nervously.

“What about you, dear?” Martha asked the other Lois.

“Joanne,” she said. “Joanne’s my middle name.”

“Mine too,” Lois said, smiling slightly. “Okay, I guess since that is settled, you can go ahead and continue, Mr. Wells.”

“Ah, yes. Thank you Ms. Lane. Definitely a good idea!” Wells said from his seat in one of the kitchen chairs they’d moved to the living room. “Now, as I was saying, when I brought the other Cl — sorry, right — when I brought Jerome here to take Clark’s place, well, it turns out I was attempting to fix the wrong problem. So I — ”

“What do you mean you fixed the wrong problem?!” Lois fumed. She felt Clark’s hand squeeze her knee gently, as if to say she should calm down and let Wells finish. She didn’t want to calm down, and none of the other six people in the room seemed to be properly outraged.

“That’s not precisely it,” Wells said a bit nervously. “You see, on my last visit to Utopia — or rather, the absence of Utopia — it had seemed clear to me that the culprit was Superman’s prolonged absence from the planet — and Clark’s absence from the, uh, *Planet* — ” Wells paused to chuckle at his own words, but Lois was not amused. “Anyway...that surely such a long absence from

both Clark and Superman at the same time would have let the secret out of the bag and sown a great deal of mistrust in Superman. Thus, no Utopia.”

Lois was jolted by a sudden pulse of righteous indignation from Jerome just before he spoke.

“So, that’s what you’ve never wanted to tell me? That my universe *has* no Utopia?” Jerome ground out, his jaw tense. “What is it with you and your fixation on *this* universe? Did you make a mistake bringing this Lois to my universe too? Having her create Superman?” He stood abruptly and took a step towards Wells. “Or was that just part of your long play so that you could have an extra in case of emergencies?”

Joanne was on her feet in seconds, holding his arm and talking softly to him. “Honey, please, calm down. We talked about this.”

The room was silent but for Joanne’s murmuring as she coaxed Jerome back to their seats on the couch next to Martha. Lois watched them in wonder, fascinated by the way just her touch had calmed him, and then more so, her words.

Her heart was thudding in her chest, not often used to hearing such an angry tone from Clark, either Clark. His words struck deeply, his fury with Wells for interfering — how terrible it must be to feel like he was always coming in second to some ridiculous ideal.

No one seemed to want to say a word, but she realized now that it wasn’t that the other people in the room weren’t properly outraged...it was that everyone was doing their best to keep a tight rein on their anger. Martha was sitting tight-lipped next to Jerome, one hand on his back to soothe him. Joanne, next to Jerome and still holding his hand, kept darting small glares at Wells. Jonathan, at the end of the other couch with her and her Clark, had his arms crossed in front of his chest, his brow set low. Perry, in another kitchen chair, was tugging at his tie like he did when he was stressed, and his eyes kept jumping from Wells to Jerome.

Lois glanced at Wells, but he was avoiding eye contact and fidgeting with his hat again. To her surprise, she actually felt a measure of pity for Wells. She had to respect the courage it must have taken to come here knowing there were two infuriated Supermen and worse, two violently protective and pissed off Lois Lanes.

She cleared her throat. “Mr. Wells?”

“Right, yes,” he said, seeming to come out of his stupor. He set his hat neatly on his lap and rested his hands on either side of it. “First off, Clark...other Clark...er... not that you’re the *other* or...right Jerome, sorry. Anyway, I am terribly sorry I’ve made you feel this way. Tempus was the one to have thrown Ms. Lane and me into your universe, but that doesn’t excuse how I’ve treated you. I-I

was...unthinking, and for that, I am sorry.”

Jerome gave him a curt nod, his jaw still tense and lips in a tight line.

“You see,” Wells continued, “part of my mistake, and why I came to take you back after only a month is that I didn’t realize you were to be needed when your Lois — er, Joanne — arrived back to Metropolis. It was then that I went to check on this universe’s Utopia and...well, found that I’d been wrong in my presumptions.”

“Wait!” Lois said. “Presumption?! As in, you made a *guess* as to what the problem was? You didn’t know for sure before you tried to ‘fix’ things? Are you serious right now?”

Clark’s hand was on her knee again, but not to calm her this time. He was reeling a bit himself, and she could feel his anxiety start to build.

“Ms. Lane, time travel is...well, things can be downright fiddly when you meddle with larger events — ”

“Hah!” she and Joanne cried at the same time.

“ — I, ah...It’s all a bit of a guessing game which cause will...cause which effect,” Wells said, clearly a bit off-kilter. “You see, it wasn’t at all that the world learned of Superman’s secret identity; that had no bearing on the foundation of Utopia.” Wells paused to look earnestly, even apologetically, at Jerome.

“So, let me get this straight,” Perry said. “You’ve been essentially playing Russian roulette with Lois and Clark’s future here?”

“Well, perhaps the metaphor is a bit extreme,” Wells said. “But it is a bit like shooting in the dark when it comes to finding the precipitating event, and I...uh...still haven’t quite put my finger on that exact event yet. So, I’m not sure what to...fix.”

Lois felt her temper flare again, and there were other grumblings around the room as well. Clark was still tense beside her.

Martha beat her to the punch...and was probably much kinder about it. “Okay, Mr. Wells...” Martha started. “Then why don’t you start by telling us what else you’ve ruled out as the precipitating event?”

“Thank you, Mrs. Kent,” Wells said. “You see, I had thought maybe it was the fact that Earth was without Clark, but that proved not to be the case since the ot — Jerome — was indeed here. So, after that, I thought that perhaps the problem lay in the fact that Clark was without Earth, as it were, for so long! But when I tried to rectify that, something was even more amiss. He left for New Krypton, but then came back the following day because apparently a faction of New Kryptonians invaded Earth instead. Can you believe it? Smallville under siege. It was qu — ”

“Wells!” Lois interrupted, trying to help move things

along...but more importantly, save Clark the stress of hearing about alternate timelines that might only upset him more. “I think we’re all getting a bit dizzyed here. What was next?”

“Yes, quite. What seemed to be the real problem was that...Clark had come back from New Krypton and Superman, well, he only sort of did...he was a changed man, and never could get back to the values and principles he once lived by.”

Lois felt Clark freeze and his heart wrench as Wells spoke, his worst fears confirmed, and she desperately wanted to yell at Wells again, but instead, she focused her energy on trying to project her love to Clark and surround him with it. <<*You’ll be okay. You WILL.*>>

“So, naturally, I wondered what had gone so wrong...” Wells continued to prattle on, either oblivious to Clark’s distress or too nervous to stop explaining. “...and I found that this universe’s original timeline...showed no evidence of New Kryptonians. Utopia was there; New Krypton not a part of its history at all.”

“What does that mean?” Jonathan asked. “They weren’t supposed to come here in the first place?”

“Precisely,” Wells said. “But something, somewhere altered the timeline, and made the New Kryptonians show up. I believe whatever it is that altered the timeline is what we need to fix. I, unfortunately, need your help to solve this enigma, because by going to New Krypton, experiencing the war up there, well...I went to the future and had a chat with this psychiatrist fellow, this Dr. Jonathan Shay, one of the foremost experts on something called PTSD. It seems Clark here came home with PTSD as well as what Dr. Shay calls a ‘moral injury’ and was never quite the same afterwards.”

Her Clark...she could feel that his panic had subsided, but in its place was an anger and grief so profound that she almost couldn’t breathe. The feelings were so overwhelming that she couldn’t hope to comfort him in any way.

The room was silent once more, as if everyone else could feel Clark’s emotions too. And maybe they could...they were practically overflowing, flooding the room.

She watched his jaw tick, and he took a breath before leveling a heavy look at Wells. “Why?” he asked, his voice low and rough, but it had a sharp edge to it, and there was no mistaking the resentment and pain underneath.

Wells flinched and shrunk back into his seat. “Wh-what do you mean?”

Clark stood, and his voice rose, the edge still there and sharper than ever. “Why didn’t you just stop me from leaving in the first place?”

Wells sat there, wide-eyed and in silence, unable to produce any words when he opened his mouth. The

tension stretched.

Then Lois felt a sudden lurch of grief in her heart, and she reached for Clark, holding him back and urging him to sit back down because she knew he wanted to escape, find the solace and cold comfort of the treehouse — anything but to be here and be in so much pain. <<*Stay. Please, love.*>> He sat again slowly, his eyes not even on Wells anymore but somewhere in the middle distance. <<*I know it hurts. But we need to do this.*>>

<<*She’s right,*>> came Jerome’s voice in her mind... certainly in Clark’s mind too.

She and Clark looked up abruptly, finding Jerome staring at them, just as startled.

“Did you just...?” Lois asked.

“I...guess I did,” Jerome said. “I didn’t know...we... it’s only ever worked with Lois — I mean, Joanne.”

“What’s going on?” Martha asked.

“Telepathy,” both Loises and Clarks said at the same time.

“Oh my!” said Wells.

Perry, Jonathan, and Martha were all staring, and Perry looked supremely confused. Lois was startled but not altogether surprised that the telepathy worked with their doubles, given that she and Jerome had shared an echo of a connection before. Wells was oddly quiet, seemingly lost in thought, while Lois explained the telepathy and the connection — including what she’d learned from Clark — to everyone who didn’t know.

“Mr. Wells?” Lois prompted. “Is there something...do you know anything about all of this?”

He gave a small nod before he started. “One of my fellow inventors — a science theorist by the name of Dr. Gregory Reeve, who was delighted, by the way, to hear of my proof that parallel universes exist — anyway, to the point, he had a theory about counterparts from multiple universes and how they might be somehow...cosmically linked. Something more than just the typical mirroring of universe events — Clark being sent here as a baby, Perry White being editor of the *Daily Planet*, Lois Lane being an award-winning reporter...so many things mirrored across universes. But the cosmic link was — well, it’s all of course theoretical — but he suggested that counterparts might also share parts of experiences somehow. To be frank, he did get a bit technical at that point, and I’m not sure I followed.”

“But that doesn’t quite explain why I felt such a strong connection to this Lois when she came to my universe,” Jerome said. “She’s not my counterpart.”

“Ah!” Wells said. “But she *is* your counterpart’s soulmate! And it seems, from what this Lois said, that there’s a bit of Kryptonian physiology at play as well. Oh, this is very exciting! Dr. Reeve will be — ”

“Mr. Wells, please,” Lois said. “I...we would prefer it if you didn’t share so much about us and our private lives with your scientist friends, especially the stuff that’s Kryptonian in nature.”

“Right, sorry. You’re quite right.”

“So you’re saying...” Joanne started slowly, and Lois could feel a faint but peculiar sadness from her. “...that Lois and I both went to the Congo four years ago, and there was some *thing*, some event that meant she came home and I...didn’t?”

Lois was getting echoes of her counterpart’s grief and...regret. “I’m sorry,” she told Joanne. “I don’t know any of what you went through, but I can imagine it...well, I’m sorry.”

“Thanks,” Joanne said, taking Jerome’s hand in her own. “I’m doing a whole lot better now. Clark and I may not have family quite like you do...” She nodded to Martha and then Jonathan in turn. “But we have each other, and our own Perry, too.” She grinned a little and looked over at Perry.

Martha gasped. “Clark! Your parents all those years ago...” She looked from Jerome to Jonathan. “Hang on... Jonathan, didn’t we...there was a very near miss we had 20-some years ago. I’d almost forgotten...”

“That’s right!” Jonathan said. “I lost control of the car for half a second. Almost had a wreck! We’d assumed it was just some muscle spasm or something, but...”

“The doctor gave you a clean bill of health, and nothing ever came of it.” Martha’s hand went to cover her mouth. “...that could have been...”

No one quite knew what to say after that, as if they were having a collective moment of silence for the other Martha and Jonathan Kent.

“What if the precipitating events are linked across universes too?” Jerome said. “And what would happen if someone was in the wrong universe when one happened?”

“What are you getting at, honey?” Joanne asked.

“What if my being here during this Clark’s absence was actually what caused there to be no Utopia in the end? Wells already admitted it was a mistake bringing me here. What if there was some sort of ripple or butterfly effect?”

Lois felt her adrenaline start pumping, that tingling feeling she always got when there was a juicy lead to be found. “But Wells said that there was a Utopia when Clark didn’t go to New Krypton, and there was never any trace of the New Kryptonians at all in the history. So, that means *something* happened somewhere to make them come and find Clark.”

“Okay,” Joanne said, clearly feeling and building off Lois’ own excitement. “So, Clark, did they tell you *why* they came looking for you? Why they needed you to come?”

“They said I was the rightful heir to the throne as Lord Kal-El of the House of El, and they needed me to —”

“Hold up! We’re royalty?” Jerome said, his eyebrows high on his forehead.

“Honey!” Joanne said. “Shh, you can freak out about the details later. Lois and I are on to something!” She turned to face Clark again. “Now did they tell you anything else? If it’s royalty, does that mean someone died or abdicated the throne?”

Joanne and Lois both looked at Clark expectantly, and Clark looked a little frazzled. She gave his leg a squeeze.

“Yeah,” Clark said. “My uncle Zor-El of the House of El. Actually, Zara said she suspected it was an assassination, but since he was older and frail, no one would authorize an investigation into his death. She said he’d been trying to reform the government, make changes that were upsetting the —”

“Wait!” Jerome said. “Did you say Sorrel?”

“No, Zor-El, with a Z.”

“Honey?” Joanne said to Jerome.

“Sorrel Ellis. He was an older guy, a political activist... I barely remembered the fact that he had been trying to run against Perry for mayor.”

“Say what now?” Perry asked, eyes wide.

“Mr. White,” Jerome said, “you left the paper to run for Mayor of Metropolis. Actually, you *are* the mayor now... er, well, your counterpart is the mayor.”

“Well, I’ll be!” Perry said in wonder. “I can’t imagine ever leaving the Planet, but good for me — er, him. But you said this Sorrel person was going to run against me — er, him. Who *did* run against him?”

“Tempus!” half the room exclaimed in unison.

Jerome spoke up first. “Sorrel Ellis never ran for mayor because...he died a somewhat unexpected death shortly before the campaigning started. No one...thought anything of it because he was a bit old and somewhat frail...” He trailed off slowly.

“Oh, boy,” Perry said with a chuff. “This all sure is one hell of a story. I wish it was something I could publish.”

“Perry!” both Joanne and Lois said.

“Sorry, sorry. My mind is reelin’ with all this wild information, and about the only thing that makes real sense to me is a good ol’ story about political corruption and murder.”

Lois and Joanne both leveled disapproving glares at him.

He put a hand up in apology for each of them. “Sorry! I’ll be good.”

“If I’m following along here,” Jonathan said, “then it seems like the way to ‘fix’ the issue, for lack of a better term, is to go back in time in the other universe and stop this Tempus fellow from killing Sorrel?”

“In theory...” Wells hesitated, taking a deep breath. “It certainly sounds like the simple answer, but that event there set off several subsequent events that, well...even if we were right, and if we were successful, then exists the very real possibility that this Lois and I would never be taken to the alternate universe and there would be no Superman.”

Lois felt the lurches from Joanne and Jerome, a gut punch of mild panic and grief at the idea of a what-if scenario like that.

Wells shook his head strongly. “I won’t do it. There is just too much risk involved for a purely theoretical fix. Too many paradoxes and pitfalls with that one. I’m afraid that’s not the solution.”

“Then what *do* we do?” asked Martha.

“Well, I *could* attempt again to...uh, keep Clark from going in the first place?” Wells offered hesitantly, throwing a nervous glance in Clark’s direction. “Let him know the consequences of going so that he can decide to stay?”

Lois felt a wave of complicated emotions flood Clark’s chest — her own, too. “You can’t...” she said softly as she put a hand on Clark’s back and moved to hold his other hand in hers. “He’ll choose to go every time. It’s who he is. If he can help...he will. And on New Krypton...yes, terrible, horrific things happened that changed him. But he also did so much good. He changed the government, saved lives, set them up for the future.”

There was a steely resolve within him now, and a profound sadness and love that all didn’t quite make sense together. Yet at the same time...it made perfect sense. She knew what he was going to say before he said it.

“Kallie,” he said, his voice low and thready. “I’m not giving up Kallie.”

“Of course not, honey,” Martha said. “No one wants that. We’ll just come up with another solution.”

Lois was cataloging everything in her mind, all the details and emotions and people...and there was only one clear answer. “We already have one,” she said.

“We do?” everyone asked.

Lois nodded. “It’s the one we came up with earlier. Everything we planned before these guys showed up. Clark gets therapy, professional help for PTSD, and we do our best to get back to our regular lives to create a sense of...well, whatever the heck normalcy means for us.”

There were a few chuckles around the room, hers included. She continued, “And our biggest concern, Clark’s biggest hurdle, was not being ready to be Superman. We happen to have a Superman right here if he’s willing to help out, and guessing by his presence here already, I’m assuming he is.”

“When Wells came to us asking for help,” Jerome said,

“I was hesitant, of course, but...he mentioned you were struggling and that the solution wasn’t clear.” He looked down at his hands for a moment before looking back over, directly at Clark. “I know the struggle, how hard it is to try and be...super...when you feel anything but. I don’t know what happened up there or what you’ve been through. I know my path is so much different than yours, but I want to help.” He glanced at Joanne, and she nodded and took his hand. Then he looked back at Clark. “...if you’re okay with that.”

Martha regarded Jerome with concern but relief, too, reaching out to give his arm a squeeze.

“I can help, too,” Joanne said. “I’ve...well, I have experience with PTSD.”

Lois watched Jerome take Joanne’s hand and look at her with so much love and admiration as he brought her hand up to place a gentle kiss on it.

Lois couldn’t help but notice Martha’s rather delighted look. Martha asked, “Does that mean you’ll both be staying for a while?”

Jerome nodded and put his arm around Martha, giving her a gentle squeeze. “As long as we can come for Sunday dinners?”

Martha swatted him on the shoulder. “You’d better!”

The tension seemed to drain from the room, though it was still heavy with emotion. As a lighter conversation continued around them, Lois looked at Clark and ran her hand up and down his back. He had tears in his eyes, but she could at least feel a measure of relief from him and...some sort of gratitude that came with complicated feelings of guilt. <<*You deserve it, love. If you still don’t believe it yet, believe me.*>>

He nodded, a tear slipping from his eye, and he brought their joined hands up to his lips to kiss hers. <<*I love you.*>>

<<*I love you too.*>>

At some point, Jonathan brewed some more coffee, and they all stayed up late working to finalize the details — who would be staying where, what communication would be like, what Jerome would say as Superman at a press conference announcing his and Clark’s return.

Wells headed out on his own, bidding everyone the best of luck and a promise to be back to return Joanne and Jerome to their own universe in several months, though Lois thought she might hold her breath on that estimate. Jerome flew Perry home and then came back for Joanne, and they headed to Clark’s apartment to settle in for their long stay in Metropolis.

Lois and Clark lay in their bed after everyone else had long since left and gone to sleep. Kallie was between them, sleeping soundly again after Clark had fed her, and for a

the wonder and expanse of the sky above her, a brilliant blue with sparse clouds so starkly white and distinct they looked like actual cotton in the distance.

It'd been about two months since Clark started therapy and their counterparts got settled in Metropolis, after a press conference announcing Superman and Clark's return. Things were hard...but good. Oh, so good. Her heart had never been so full.

A gummy smile glided into her field of vision from beside her. "Look, Mommy! I can fly!" came Clark's singing. Kallie kicked her legs and arms in the air, gurgling happily.

Lois laughed freely, feeling the warmth and steady thrum of their love in her chest, every day just a little less tinged with grief and sadness. "Let's hope you don't start flying until you're older, bug."

"Mommy, why are you laughing?" Clark intoned, his voice still high and playful, his arms stretched to keep Kallie above Lois' face.

Lois laughed again, and Kallie reacted by laughing and squealing herself. Clark brought Kallie back, straight over his body, and Lois shifted onto her side and scooped back a bit so she had a better view of her little family.

Clark started singing, his voice gentle but rumbling and off-key, "I don't need no money...fortune, or fame...I've got all the riches, baaabyyyy one man can claim..." He brought Kallie down for a kiss on her cheek before raising her up again, letting her enjoy the sensation of "flying" in the air.

Lois' heart squeezed, and she felt as though her chest would overflow with all the love and all the hope that filled it.

"I guess...you'd say...what can make me feel this way?" he crooned slightly out of tune. "My girl...myyyy girl...talking 'bout my girl."

Tone deaf, she thought, *but sexy and adorable*. She grinned broadly as she watched him interact so freely with their daughter.

"I heard that," he said in mock-accusation, looking over and quirked an eyebrow at her.

She ducked her head and blushed a bit. The telepathy was still taking some getting used to. "You heard the sexy part, too, right?" she said, trying to save herself. "Sexy and adorable?"

<<*And mine*,>> she told him.

He flashed her a devastating smile as he brought Kallie down to rest on his chest, his eyes glistening with a hint of moisture and a twinkle of mischief. He leaned towards her, and she followed him in, their lips meeting in the middle for a slow, sweet kiss.

The road ahead was still impossibly long and often felt unfair — his healing had only just begun. But seeing him

like this, feeling him like this, so close and within her heart — she knew, knew everything would be okay in the end.

THE END

End Notes:

Well, that's it!

When I first started writing this story, I had no idea it would end like this and spawn yet another sequel, but I think that was always going to be the case... Clark has to heal in Smallville...and then it's Superman's turn in Metropolis. I also had no intention of writing about altLois and altClark from *Away From the Sun* again...but here they are!

We'll see everyone back in Metropolis in the fourth story in this *Wherever You Will Go* series. It's a story that's not yet written and will probably be another long one! There are tons of notes and ideas and a general direction for it, and I hope to start writing it soon. While I won't PROMISE anything, I do anticipate this sequel taking far less than 18 years to get written. ;)