

Observational Skills

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Rated PG

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Summary: He was always in the background, always a friend, always loyal, but Luthor's betrayal affected him too. Just what was Jimmy thinking at the end of Season 1, and just how much did he see?

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A/N: After a brief hiatus writing Chuck fanfiction, I wanted to return to the world of Lois & Clark, but I never imagined that the story I wanted to tell would prove so difficult. I started out wanting to write a story that gave a little screen time to Michael Landes' Jimmy. I love Justin Whalin's humor and cheerfulness, but I've always been a bit more drawn to Season 1 Jimmy's desire to better himself and learn from Clark and be there for Perry and make of himself a friend to Lois and expand his own horizons. Writing a story from an observer's point of view, however, is much harder than I anticipated, and in the end, I think this turned into a story that more detailed my role as an observer of Lois & Clark than of Jimmy's of this integral moment in his friends and co-workers' lives. Not at all what I intended, but I'll let you be the judge of whether it turned out.

Thanks to Angel Finally for editing this for the archives!

The doors loomed before us, ordinary doors, really, not too far away from us...and yet they seemed to get farther away the more we waded forward. If only we could reach those doors and the open air outside this ultra-modern skyscraper-turned-prison, we might actually be able to escape the mob that had started out as well-wishers attending a newsworthy wedding and maybe, just maybe, the fiasco that had moments ago been a wedding ceremony.

Outside the doors, I could see the beautiful spring day, the type that always made a work day drag by impossibly slowly. Outside, people walked by who probably didn't care that the Daily Planet had gone out of circulation or that its star reporter had almost just married a criminal. Outside, cars waited. Cars that could take us away from this mess and whisk Lois to safety.

Assuming there was anywhere she'd feel all that safe anymore, I amended. Right now, it was hard to believe that just hours earlier, Lois had been dressing in her fancy white dress while making plans for a future with Lex Luthor. Now, her veil had been lost somewhere in the riot we were leading her from, tears streaked her face and smudged her make-up, and confused despair painted her features into a mask so completely unlike the Lois Lane I had known for three years now. In fact, if I didn't know better—and sometimes it seemed I was always the last one to know—I'd say we had saved the wrong woman entirely.

Jack and I walked in front of the Chief, doing our best to get us out those doors that seemed stuck in slow motion. I glanced about warily, preferring the chaotic view of the frustrated, confused spectators to the tragic view of Lois behind me. I wasn't sure what to think right now about everything, but Perry had told me to get us outside and that was something I could do, a task I could definitely focus on.

Adrenaline left over from our frantic race to Lex Tower and

ensuing confrontation with the billionaire largely credited for over half of Metropolis's thriving economy coursed through me and made my hands tremble when I finally set them to the sun-warmed glass doors. Moving much easier and more smoothly than I would have thought, the doors swung outward.

Outside, fortunately, there was more room, the densely packed crowds swallowed up in the open expanse fronting Lex Luthor's base of operations. I gratefully took deep breaths, still glancing all about, searching even as I felt the sinking feeling of disappointment flutter through me. I had really hoped Clark would be out here waiting for us, a smile to greet us, his hands stuffed in his pockets, that habitual hesitance as he met Lois's eyes, a half-hearted remark about some errand he'd forgotten to do but had been duty-bound to see to.

But he wasn't there. I sifted quickly through the individuals milling about, my gaze flicking from one person to the next. But CK's ebony hair was missing, his dark, almost-slanted eyes, his large, unassuming build, his ambling stride, his voice caught between tenor and baritone—nowhere to be seen or heard.

"I've always been such a good judge of character," Lois said from behind me. The tears in her voice were suppressed, and I could imagine the hints of humiliated anger that darkened her eyes, added that sparking gleam that could bully a powerful politician or captivate a reporter from Kansas. I imagined it, but I didn't turn to see it.

I had known Lois for longer than I'd known Clark, and I liked her—really, I did—but...but Clark hadn't been the same since she'd accepted Luthor's proposal of marriage. Hadn't been the same since he'd gone to see her at LNN. Hadn't been the same since they'd stopped talking after the Chief's retirement dinner. Clark had changed, and I didn't like it. Didn't like seeing the slump of his shoulders, hearing the merest edge of cynicism added to his voice, observing the almost manic energy that had spurred him to continue investigating Luthor without pausing to eat or rest, watching him separate himself ever so slightly from us as he turned all his efforts to saving Lois.

Clark had told Lois about Luthor. I knew he had. In fact, probably the entire newsroom had at one point or another heard Clark angrily tell Lois the kind of man Luthor was, and we had certainly all heard Lois's contemptuous dismissal of that opinion. Though I tried to tamp down on the thought, I couldn't help but wonder whether Lois remembered those warnings now. I didn't, however, even bother wondering why Lois hadn't believed CK. Lois Lane was Lois Lane, after all. There really wasn't much else to say on that subject.

But still...it was hard not to turn around and ask her where her good judgment had been during the first days after Luthor had taken over the Daily Planet, when CK had fairly boiled with dark warnings.

"Don't blame yourself," Perry said comfortingly, and despite my own confusion, I was glad he was there for Lois. Glad he knew what to say, glad he was the one who had put his arm around her to guide her forward. The Chief had always loved Lois, at least he had as long as I had been working at the Daily Planet. He always knew what to say, what to do, how to approach a problem, and I knew Lois needed someone like him right now. "He fooled all of us."

"Not me," Jack asserted defiantly.

"I never trusted him," I said as I searched intently for a nearby taxi cab, and for all I could read in the others, even I couldn't tell whether I was lying through my teeth or applying a more than healthy dose of sarcasm.

Lois didn't even seem to hear us. Truthfully, I'm not sure she had heard anything any of us had said since Inspector Henderson had started reading Luthor his rights. She just raised her voice, enough so that I could hear the shrill edge of hysteria encroaching, and asked, "Where's Clark?"

Where was Clark? Well, that was the question, wasn't it? The

question Perry and Jack and I had been wondering the afternoon before, asking the evening before, and so desperately trying not to think about all day. Because if we asked it now, after listening to the message Luthor's back-stabbing crony had left on Clark's answering machine, then images of dumpsters and alleys and rivers inevitably came to mind.

And I, for one, could not even begin to think of CK thrown aside like garbage, could not think of him cold and still, could not think of his empty apartment and all the accompanying pictures of his smiling parents.

I was glad I hadn't turned yet to look at Lois. Glad she couldn't see the momentary flash of despair that washed through me before I could fight it back. Glad she didn't know just how worried she should be. Because Clark might have told her he'd never attend her wedding, but Perry and I both knew that he would have been there anyway, to stop it if nothing else.

That is, he would have been there if it were at all possible for him to have been.

"Where's Clark?" Lois asked, still draped in her wedding gown, and I simultaneously wanted to shake her until she saw what the rest of us had seen from the first day CK had begun working with her and wanted to tentatively hug her or clasp a hand to her shoulder to comfort her, to shield her from the fear that would doubtless assail her when she realized just how long Clark had been missing.

Motion, half-glimpsed out of the corner of my eye, registered, a movement that resembled Clark's casual stride. But the gait was different, I knew without even giving it a closer look, slower and less defined, more hesitant. So I ignored it, ignored the deceiving allure of false hope, and continued to search for a taxi.

"Right here."

I whirled toward that impossible glimpse of hope at the sound of what was, undeniably, Clark's voice, but so drained and pale and hollow that I half-expected to see him staggering toward us, dripping blood on the ground that would, like morbid breadcrumbs, lead us back to wherever Luthor had locked him away.

But he was fine. He was clean, and dressed in one of his clashing suits, and standing there all alone, and looking only at Lois as if nothing else in all the world existed. On the face of it, he looked just like I had, exiting the building and looking all around for a glimpse of him, hoped he would look; on the face of it, it seemed nothing at all was wrong, as if he were simply taking a stroll on a nice spring day.

Only...he didn't move with his customary grace, hardly took a step at all. And his face was shadowed and lined with tension I had never seen in him before. And his hands shook. And his shoulders were slumped as if he carried the weight of the world. And he breathed heavily as if every inhalation cut deep.

Perry's own features rewrote themselves with relief and astonishment and worry as he caught sight of CK. Jack grinned, a quick, white smile that belied the tightness of his eyes. I don't know what my own features revealed—I've never been able to see myself the way I do others, as if framed for the photos I take for the paper—but I have a feeling I looked a lot like Perry or Jack in that moment.

For one long, suspended moment that hung like an icicle on the verge of falling and shattering against cold ground, Lois and Clark regarded one another. And then, as if that moment had never existed, Lois let out a breath and moved toward him, and CK opened his arms to receive her. They met, collided, hung on to each other as if for dear life. Now, Lois's shoulders could begin to shake. Now, Clark could squeeze his eyes shut and press his face into her hair. I think they would have stayed like that forever if the world hadn't insisted on moving forward regardless of their wishes.

The nearby radios crackled and spat out messages and

updates on Luthor's whereabouts, but none of us paid any attention at all. Funny, I suppose, seeing as how we had worked ourselves to the bone to bring Luthor down—seeing as how Lois had been about to pledge her love and life to him only moments ago—that none of us cared to see the end of our quest. Not even Clark, whose fervor for this self-appointed assignment had burned as brightly as the sun.

Or maybe, I thought as I studied him carefully, maybe with Lois in his arms—unmarried and single—maybe he *had* completed his assignment. Maybe this had been his goal all along.

Well, no *maybe* about it. The Chief had known it. I had known it. Jack surely, probably, knew it. I'd even bet that Luthor knew it.

Luthor.

The gasps and mutters from the crowd behind us attracted my attention, and I followed the direction of their gazes. Far above us, teetering on the edge of his penthouse balcony, Luthor balanced between life and death. I gaped up at him, mind spinning, heart lodged somewhere in the vicinity of my stomach. I had worked to bring Luthor down, but never, not even once, had I thought I was working to see him *dead*.

Looking behind him, Luthor shouted something indiscernible...and then he leaped over the edge and succumbed to gravity.

I watched him fall, watched him twist in mid-air so that he looked like he was flying. Only he didn't have a red cape and integrity stronger than Kryptonian muscles and the power of flight. I watched, and at the last second, I turned away. Because photographer or not, there was no way I wanted to see the end of the House of Luthor so up close and personal.

Behind me, from Clark, I heard a strangled "I-I can't," and Lois's [LOIS'] half-gasp, half-shriek. I looked toward them desperately, almost pathetically eager to concentrate on anything other than the sickening, gruesome sound Luthor's body made as it hit the ground. Clark was straining toward Luthor, as if even now he meant to save the man. But it was too late, and anyway, Lois refused to let go of him; her head was turned into his shoulder, fleeing the same sight I had avoided.

A lump crawled its stubborn way up my throat as I saw Clark place his hand on Lois's head and hold her face to him. There was something...tragic, something broken about his expression that made me suddenly want to do anything I could for him—get him a coffee, remount his bass, fix the horn on his golf cart, *anything* just so long as it dulled the edges of the emotion ravaging his features.

Lois tried to lift her head in an attempt to look toward the hideous remnants of her fiancé, but Clark tightened his hold on her and shook his head and murmured something in her ear. And miraculously—once more making me doubt that this was the same woman I'd been working with for the past few years—Lois capitulated and allowed CK to turn her from Luthor.

"Come on, son." Perry's hand was a more than welcome weight on my shoulder, a pressure that reminded me of where I was, reminded me that I was whole and alive and on solid ground. "Nothin' more we can do here. Let's find us a ride and get on out of here."

I had never been so happy to receive an order in my life. I hurriedly moved to secure us a taxi, leaving Lois to Clark's shaky ministrations, vaguely aware of Henderson emerging from Lex Tower to confer with Perry and wave Jack to his side, more intently focusing on my own task.

After flagging down a taxi, I stood there by it, bouncing up and down on my toes, and waited for the others to join me, too trapped in shock and horror to move.

My mind was frozen, I think, in that instant before Luthor had fallen. I lived in Metropolis and had seen things I never would have dreamed of before going to work for the Daily

Planet, but I had never seen someone so close to me die—someone I knew and had at one time admired. He may have always forgotten my name, and he may have all but fired me and led to me getting kicked onto the streets, but Luthor was still a man that I had talked to, shaken hands with, taken pictures of.

And now he was dead.

I wondered if I would ever again be able to look at a picture of Lex Luthor without getting violently ill. Wondered if I would ever again be able to look at all the buildings stamped with his name without seeing him falling through the air toward the ground. My eyes started to move to the spot of ground surrounded by police and EMTs and horrified gawkers before I caught myself and jerked my sight back to the cab.

Behind me, I heard Perry's voice raise slightly before lowering to a muted rumble. He said Clark's name, I think, and I roused myself to turn and look behind me in their direction.

The Chief had a careful hand on Clark's shoulder, but CK didn't seem to be paying him any attention. He was staring at Luthor's final resting place, and in the place of that terrible charge of emotions I had observed earlier, there was now just a terrible blankness controlling his features.

Perry said something else, ducking his head, and CK finally looked at him. A moment later, Clark nodded and began to lead Lois toward me. I watched them come, noting the stiffness of Clark's movements, the sadness inherent in Lois's refusal to let go of him, the weary, worn expression settling over Perry's face as he followed behind them.

As the office gofer, I had had the unique position of being everywhere at once, unnoticed, unobserved, unheeded—and because of that, I had been able to watch everything around me, learned to look for the quieter things behind the headline occurrences. Everyone had a face they put on in public, a façade that hid away what they didn't want—for whatever reasons—people to see and put forth what was acceptable. But in the quiet moments, in the corners and the shadows when only a gofer was in the vicinity, that façade often fell away.

As a photographer, I had learned to look at the world through the frame of a camera, to look at it as if it were framed for its place in the paper next to an explanatory story. Photographers took hundreds of pictures, but you had to be able to sift through those dozens of worthless pictures and find the one worthwhile snapshot that perfectly highlighted and encapsulated the story.

I wasn't the office gofer or a newspaper photographer anymore—in fact, I wasn't much more than a kid relying entirely on a friend's kindness and patience to keep me off the streets—but I hadn't forgotten all the lessons I'd learned at the Planet, hadn't forgotten how to look and see the quiet moments that encapsulated the truths hidden behind façades.

And Clark using his arms to protect Lois from the world, Lois hiding from herself by fleeing to Clark, those were truths that really mattered, the truths behind the headline moments. Truths isolated and brought to light by the image of them walking together toward the cab beside me. Clinging to each other, heedless of what they looked like to the crowd swarming around us, careless of the impression they were giving to the newshounds invited to Luthor's wedding.

Of course the Chief had recognized the danger already—that almost went without saying—probably the reason he was so intent on shepherding them away from Lex Tower and the media as quickly as possible.

"Bill's going to take Jack down to the station to get the charges against him straightened out," Perry informed me, sliding into the front passenger seat of the taxi.

Clark gave me a distracted nod of thanks when I pulled open the car door for him. His arm tightened around Lois's waist even as he bent to climb into the cab. Lois tried to follow him, but the voluminous folds of her wedding gown got caught in the door. Frantic desperation overtook her so quickly that I took a startled

step backward.

"It's all right," CK murmured, but Lois couldn't hear him, couldn't hear anything. The whole of her world had narrowed to the miles of lacy silk keeping her from joining Clark in the car that would take her away from this place. Lois was brave, I knew that. I had been there, usually at her side, the only one halfway allowed into her isolated world of front pages and exposés and undercover jobs and cynical optimism, the only witness to those tiny, rare moments when she sat at her desk alone and thought so briefly of just how unhappy she really was.

Until CK.

He had breached her walls. He had come over to her desk and sat on the edge. He had moved a chair right beside her desk so he could sit there and talk to her. He had dared to make her laugh. He had followed her into the elevator and out of the Daily Planet building and even into her apartment. He had reached across that gulf and placed his hand on hers. He had coaxed her out of her self-contained world, the one sandwiched between the pages and photographs that composed the Daily Planet, and connected her to the wider world that inspired the words that made up those selfsame newspapers.

Lois Lane was brave.

But she was also scared—and as much as CK had integrated himself into her life, I knew Lois just well enough to know that she was probably more terrified of *him* than of anything else.

Except now. Now...

I frowned and moved forward to try to help Lois wrestle the white dress into submission, but it was too late. With a sob of frustrated desperation, she took the fabric into her hands and she ripped off what looked to be a mile of train and let it drop to the ground as carelessly as Luthor's body had fallen. Then she threw herself back into Clark's arms, easily sliding into the back seat, all but in his lap as he tightened his hold around her, the two melding into each other in a way that was almost uncomfortable to watch, it was such a private, intimate moment.

Now, I thought as I stepped over the wilted, stained, discarded material, now—for the first time—Lois was more afraid of *losing* CK than she was *of* him.

I climbed in after my friends and slammed the door. I couldn't deny the rush of satisfaction I felt to drown out the immediacy of the sounds that had whirled above our heads. It was hard to believe just how much I had been looking forward to this confrontation only that morning. But then, strange as it was, it almost seemed I was a completely different person now than I had been before the aborted Lane-Luthor wedding.

"Where to?" the cabdriver asked.

It was a simple question to stump us all, and yet stump us it did.

Lois, surprisingly, was the first one to speak. "I don't want to go back to my apartment." She pulled back just enough to look up at Clark, speaking to him as if he were the only one in the car, pleading voicelessly.

"Okay," he said quietly, never able to deny her anything, equally ready to lay the world at her feet or bring her a perfect cup of coffee and her favorite type of donut. His eyes fluttered closed for a brief moment, and he pulled in a shaky breath. I wondered if it was Lois's proximity and brokenness or something else entirely—something connected to his delayed arrival and his bruised appearance—that so unsettled him. "344 Clinton Street," he said aloud, and anyone who didn't know him at least as well as I did would have missed the tremor in his voice.

Perry and I exchanged a glance filled with worry and confusion, but neither one of us said a word. I personally was afraid to speak, afraid to puncture the bit of peace Lois and Clark were slowly gathering around themselves. Anything I said would surely only be an intrusion at this point, and I didn't know that either of them could really handle anything else coming at them. I thought that if there was the slightest wrong movement or word,

they would both shatter. So I stayed quiet the entire drive to Clark's apartment where Jack, Perry, CK, and I had all been staying.

Whatever the Chief's reasons for staying silent, they apparently stopped applying when we finally reached the apartment. He opened his mouth and released a torrent of orders that made me painfully remember the home I had made at the Daily Planet.

"Clark, Lois, inside," Perry commanded. "Jimmy, start straightening things up and make sure we've got everything we'll need to get this story written up. Just because we don't have a place to print the Planet doesn't mean we need to get sloppy. Lois, honey, I want you to find something else to wear and get cleaned up in the bathroom, all right? Clark, you let her go. That's it. Let go. Come on, Lois, into the bedroom—Clark, help her find something she can wear till we can round up something of hers. Go on, Clark. Jimmy, don't just stand there gaping, son, get rid of those pizza boxes. Into the bathroom, Lois, it's all right, go on. I'm going to put on some coffee for us. Well, Jimmy? Get movin'!"

I was grateful for the direction, grateful for something to do to break me from the numb state that had fallen on me with all the force of a rock, and I think Lois and Clark felt the same. CK let his arms slip away from Lois's wedding-dress-cocooned figure—I wondered if he noticed the lost look that hollowed her eyes, wondered if she noted the slow reluctance of his step back—though he kept a hand on her back as he took her into the bedroom. Retrieving the garbage and then moving back toward the door, I glimpsed Lois clenching a handful of Clark's shirt before reluctantly letting go and stepping slowly into the bathroom, hugging a pile of clothing to her chest in a stranglehold that was surely the only thing keeping the wealth of tears locked behind her crumbling mask.

As the door closed behind her, CK let out a huge breath and sagged forward. I think he slid to the floor, think he might have lowered his forehead to his knees, think he might have closed his eyes over whatever anguish he was feeling, think he might have curled inward to hide his inner pain...but I don't know. Because I averted my eyes, kept moving, slipped out of the apartment to put the trash in the dumpster, gave him whatever privacy he had left to him.

The air outside was warm with just a hint of a cool breeze, but it did nothing to refresh me. Instead, it seemed too clammy, too suffocating, too heavy, smothering me in its oppressive grip. I hesitated before climbing the stairs back to CK's apartment, paused to press my forehead against the cool railing. I wished I could scrub my mind free of the image of Luthor falling, Lois staring at Henderson as she plaintively asked "Evidence? Evidence for what?" Of Clark taking Lois into his arms, staring toward Luthor's body, falling to his knees in his bedroom.

I wished I could go back to those days before Luthor had bought the Daily Planet, before I had lost the job I had worked so hard for and the people I had come to love like family, before Perry had lost that bit of spark he had always held as Editor-in-Chief, before Lois had lost herself, before CK's smiles had transmogrified into desperate anguish...before my life had taken a turn for the worse.

But I didn't need a black and white photograph or a glimpsed vulnerability to realize that I could never go back. I'd never be able to reclaim the same feelings, the same people, the same life I'd had before all this. Whether the Daily Planet ever came back or not, it would never be exactly as it had. I knew Jack wouldn't go back, not when so many people would always wonder if he really had been the one to set that bomb for Luthor. Cat was gone forever, lost to some paper on the west coast. Steve might not forgive the paper that had fired him after so many years of faithful service. Perry would never lose the wrinkles that now tightened his eyes, would never walk quite as straight and

uninhibited as he had before.

And Lois? Clark? What about them? I was terrified they would never be the same again. They were both, in their own ways, my closest friends. Thanks to my carjacking and lock-picking skills, Lois had many times let me tag along with her. She had helped me when I'd had a crush on her sister, had let me comfort her during that heat-wave when CK had left, had thanked me when I saved her from Barbara Trevino, had smiled at my recounting of my exploits in the ducts when those terrorists had taken over the Daily Planet.

But that had been before. Before she'd lost the paper she loved, the job that had been her life...and her best friend?

I wasn't sure about that last one—and I knew she wasn't either. She had to wonder how much CK would forgive.

I wondered too. Because even though I didn't know everything that had happened, I knew enough to know that Clark might just walk away after this. Might just leave Metropolis entirely and go back to wandering the world.

And I didn't want to lose him. Even forgetting the fact that without him I'd be out on the streets or staying at the YMCA, he had given me so much. He'd encouraged me to stand up to Perry, had helped me with my photography, had invited me to his place and to a few sports games, had taken an interest in my life, had been there for me when Perry had been too busy or distracted. He had been the first one who took me seriously and always been ready with a word of advice or encouragement. The Daily Planet would never be the same without him.

Funny, I couldn't help but think as I began the climb up to his apartment. I wondered how Lois and I had both landed in the same boat—afraid of Clark leaving, praying he wouldn't, not sure where our lives were going. Did Perry feel the same way? Jack? It didn't surprise me at all that CK had so quickly become so important to so many people. That was just the kind of person he was.

When I opened the door to the apartment, I was greeted with the smell of coffee as strong as only Perry White could make it and the sight of the Chief himself setting down four coffee mugs on the table. It was only mid-afternoon, not the usual hour for coffee, but I thought he had the right idea in keeping us occupied. Though I couldn't help but wonder when "keeping occupied" would transition back into "living life."

Perry gave me a nod, but he didn't say a word. Uneasy, I plopped into a chair at the kitchen table and examined my hands as if they might answer all my unvoiced questions. I could almost always find something to talk about, but today, at this moment, silence seemed the safest course.

"Jimmy."

I jumped at the unexpected sound of my name, then looked up to meet the Chief's gaze. "Yeah?" My voice was hoarse, I noticed as detachedly as if it belonged to someone else.

"I promised Bill that once I got Lois and Clark settled, I'd go back down there and straighten a few things out. They're going to need all our statements eventually, but I'll try to give them enough to keep them away from you for a day or two. But..." He paused and shrugged uncomfortably. I looked at him blankly, not at all sure where he was going with this.

"What?" I finally asked when he played with his coffee mug instead of elaborating.

"I want you to stay here, son. With Lois and Clark. Truth to tell, I'm none too sure they should be alone at the moment. I'm not sure either of them would even think to get a bite to eat or...or..." The Chief trailed off, something lodged in his throat that made his own voice sound tight and unfamiliar.

"Got it, Chief," I said, and impressed myself with the confidence I projected. I remembered the courage I had tried to talk myself into while I'd been crawling through the Daily Planet's air ducts thinking lives depended on me. This, though... this felt different. This felt more substantial, more ingrained.

More real.

A bit of the tension leached away from Perry's stance, and he gave me the approving nod I would do almost anything to earn. Promising to help my friends in exchange for that hard-won token of respect, however, seemed a bit like cheating. After all, I would have done my best to help both Lois and Clark even if the Chief hadn't asked me.

I had opened my mouth to say something to that effect when CK emerged from behind the bedroom's partition wall to enter the kitchen. He had removed his suit coat and tie, which made the stiltedness of his movements even more obvious. The thought that he'd move very similarly if he'd been roughed up quite thoroughly by Luthor's thugs planted itself deeply and viciously in my mind. I tried to ignore it, tried to shuffle it to the side with the reminder that I had been mistaken about Perry's bridge appointment too...but I couldn't convince myself. The pain on Clark's features was too inarguable, too evident, too heartbreaking.

"You all right, son?" Perry asked gruffly. He was looking down at his coffee, pretending to be involved in pouring in just the right amount of sugar in order to hide just how strong his emotions were. I knew because I was currently doing the same thing.

Clark was carefully lowering himself into the chair beside me, but he started at the question with an arrested expression. "Uh...yeah. Yeah, Chief. Thanks."

I let out a quiet snort of disbelief, but strangely—or perhaps not, considering the terrible circumstances—Clark didn't hear it, didn't glance at me with that slight, knowing smile to prove he'd heard me, didn't acknowledge my dismissal of his patently false assertion. It was just another mark of how not-himself he currently was.

Perry had to know just how untrue Clark's answer, but he didn't call him on it. Maybe the Chief wasn't sure what to do either, I couldn't help but think. Maybe he was feeling his way forward as blindly as the rest of us.

Once more, I locked my eyes on my hands, curled around the draining heat of my coffee mug, afraid to look up and notice anything else that would further shake the remnants of my world.

"All right, then." Perry stood, then paused, uncharacteristically hesitating. CK didn't even look up at him, but then, I don't think he even realized Perry had stood—maybe didn't even realize Perry was still in the room. "I'll go talk to Bill. Don't know when he'll let me out of his clutches, but I'll call and see if I should maybe pick up some kind of dinner before I get back, all right?"

"Sounds good," I said when the silence had stretched on a moment. Usually, nobody asked for my approval, but the Chief gave me a grateful nod and turned to go. His hand brushed across Clark's shoulder, barely skimming it, but Clark flinched away, his knuckles turning white on the edge of the table. Perry, his back already turned, didn't notice...but I did.

Only halfway into the living room, Perry paused and turned back to look at CK. I caught the glint of somberness evident on his face and wanted to get up and leave the room, but I was afraid that moving would draw more attention to me than was comfortable. Mute, I shrank in on myself and tried to pretend I wasn't present, or failing that, tried to will myself invisible.

"Clark?" The Chief tucked his hands in his pockets and waited until CK looked up and blankly met his eyes.

"Yeah, Chief?"

"Clark, Lois...well, she's...been through a lot."

Despite my resolve to stare fixedly at the shimmering ripples in my coffee, I couldn't help but look up in response to the obvious tremor that passed across Clark's frame at the mere mention of Lois's name.

"I know, sir." Clark's voice was as dry as my throat had been when I emerged from the effects of that pheromone to find

myself high up in the air after escaping a fate as road-kill thanks to Superman.

"Clark, son, I know..." Perry shot a sideways glance to me and I redoubled my efforts at disappearing. "I know we weren't just working to save the Daily Planet, but...remember that she was marryin' the man. Give her time, son. Don't push too hard. It's a lot for anyone to work through, and as strong as that gal wants us to think she is, sometimes...sometimes the breakin' point's a little closer to the surface than you might think."

Another tremor shook Clark's shoulders, and slowly, quietly, I reached out and moved his coffee mug a bit farther away from the edge of the table. He shot me an attempt at a smile before swallowing and looking up at Perry. "Chief," he said slowly, his gaze inexorably moving toward the bedroom. "Believe me, I'm not going to push. I know that...well, that things are not...they're...she doesn't..." Clark ran a frustrated hand through his hair, and for an instant, he looked different and familiar all at once, and then that curl fell forward over his brow again and the strange flash of *déjà vu* passed.

A deep breath escaped CK when Perry clasped his shoulder with a supporting hand. "Things change, Clark," the Chief told him almost inaudibly. "Just give it time."

I wanted to say something too, wanted to support CK as Perry was doing, but my well of words had run dry, so I just gave him an encouraging smile, heartened when Clark's answering semblance of a smile actually looked slightly less sickly than his last attempt.

Seeing the almost-smile, a flash of relief ghosted across Perry's face, and he turned, wrapping his gruff persona around him like a security blanket as he hastily made his exit, muttering something about Chinese for dinner since his crayfish obviously weren't appreciated by less refined palates. Feeling the resulting faint smile on my own lips made me feel a bit better. After all, Perry was back to normal and Clark...well, he hadn't said anything yet that sounded as if he were planning on leaving Lois and Metropolis...and me.

But he also hadn't said anything about staying, and he still hadn't moved from his frozen position looking toward the bedroom, and his truncated sentences certainly hadn't been full of hope or forgiveness.

"Your coffee's getting cold, CK," I said conversationally, just to break the oppressive silence, to chip at the mask of bleak despair overtaking his face, to drive away the memory of how much I had missed him when he'd left during that heat-wave earlier that year and my fear that history was doomed to repeat itself.

"Huh?" Startled, he turned to look at me, then looked down when I gestured to his milky coffee. "Oh. Thanks, Jimmy, but...I'm not really thirsty right now." He hesitated before looking over at the phone beside his couch. "I should call my parents, though. I was supposed to call them last night, and they'll have seen the news. I need to let them know I'm okay."

My eyes narrowed at the mention of his absence over the past day, and when he stood, I reached out, ignoring the twinge from my still-weak shoulder, and grabbed hold of his arm. "CK!"

My hand fell away from his as if burned and my jaw dropped almost to the table when he let out a gasp of pain and tugged free of my touch. The awkward way he held his arm against his side tilted his hand and revealed what looked like a crisscrossing of burns across his palm. The pain evident in his eyes revealed the truth behind his slow, stilted movements. The way he turned away from me, hiding the depths of his reaction, revealed his reluctance to let anyone know that he'd been hurt.

That Luthor had hurt him.

Unfamiliar anger flared up inside me, burning through the numbness besieging me since I'd seen a man throw his life away right in front of me.

"Happy days are here again!" Those had been my own words,

the welcome I'd given to Luthor when he'd bought the Planet, when I thought he'd saved my job, when I assumed he was a hero. But these weren't happy days and Lex Luthor wasn't a hero. He was a bully, and I'd had plenty of practice with those, from the first days of kindergarten all the way to the Daily Planet newsroom.

"Clark," I said, shock reverberating through my voice.

"I need to call my parents." He took a step forward, but I was faster, already on my feet and stepping in front of him.

"Clark!" I said again, tasting the strangeness of his proper name coming from me. "What happened last night? Where were you?"

"I was...detained." Clark looked so beaten that I felt guilty for pushing the issue, but I was worried about him, almost as worried as I'd been about Perry when I thought he was dying.

"It was Luthor, wasn't it?" I hadn't heard that cold note in my voice since reform school, hadn't felt this kind of fury building up inside me since my dad had left for the last time. "What did he do to you, CK?"

"He's gone now, Jimmy." I think he was trying to convince himself more than me because his eyes fell closed for a few seconds and he mouthed the words again, nothing more than a mere whisper. "It's over, okay?" he added, louder.

"No, it's not!" I cried, wishing I knew how to explain the terrible feelings of uncertainty within me, wishing I was brave enough to ask him not to leave Metropolis like both my parents had. "It's not over, CK. If it were over, we'd be at the Daily Planet, working on getting the next edition out, and you and Lois would be partners instead of strangers, and I..."

And I'd be able to expunge the images of Luthor falling, of Lois crying, of Clark going to his knees in his bedroom. I'd be able to think beyond this moment, be able to see those moments of picture-perfect truths framed in black and white, be able to see real secrets exposed in unguarded moments.

"It is over," Clark insisted stubbornly. "Everything's going to go back to the way it was before."

"Then what about these?" I asked quietly, and before he could stop me, I pushed his sleeves back from his wrists.

There, illuminated by the afternoon sun, burns marred the skin of his forearms, lines of red, angry wounds that made it look almost as if he'd been pushed into molten bars.

After a brief pause—or maybe it only felt like that because I was frozen at the sight of what Luthor had done to Clark—CK calmly pulled his sleeves back down and met my astonished gaze. "They'll heal, Jimmy. Just like all the wounds inflicted these past weeks. We'll get through this, somehow, and everything will be just like it used to be, and things will be better then. Okay?"

"Then..." I had to stop and clear my throat, had to look away, had to hide my own wounds just as CK had been hiding his. "Then you're not leaving?"

A flicker of warmth washed through Clark, and he placed a hand on my shoulder. "I'm not going anywhere, Jimmy. You can't get rid of me that easily."

His hand was gone almost before I had a chance to register it, but I still felt warmed, as if his warmth was like the sun's, enough to bathe the rest of us in a gentle glow. His words faded away as quickly as anyone's, but I could still hear them inside me, could still feel them relaxing the tension I'd only distantly realized was coiled within me. His gaze moved from me to the phone, but I knew that if I needed him, he'd look at me again, just like always. Lois had let me be her friend, but CK was the first person who'd actively worked to befriend *me*, the one person who always believed in me, sometimes—most of the time, in fact—more than I believed in myself.

And he was staying.

He wasn't abandoning me like Dad had. Wasn't moving on to a warmer place and a better job like Mom had. Wasn't letting me

go when our careers were no longer tied together like Jack and most of the people at the Daily Planet had. He was staying, and that was enough to let me sink back into my seat and take a sip of my lukewarm coffee, realizing with a soft pang that Perry had flavored it exactly the way I liked it. I hadn't even realized the Chief knew how I took my coffee.

Clark sank down onto the couch, put his hand on the phone... then paused. Looked up at me, something incredibly vulnerable in his expression. "Jimmy...I'd really appreciate it if you didn't mention any of this to Lois."

"What?" I liked to think of myself as someone with at least average intelligence, but I always felt slightly slow when it came to CK or Lois, always just a step behind them, always a little bit in the dark. It was just that both of their minds seemed to leap forward incomprehensibly, making connections that no other person would ever make, coming to solid conclusions based on only snippets of information and guesswork. Occasionally, my inability to keep up with them depressed me; usually, it just made me respect and admire them even more.

"Don't tell her about..." Clark lifted his hands wordlessly, then self-consciously bundled them back into his lap. "Like the Chief said—she's having to come to terms with a lot about Luthor. She doesn't need anything more to think about or worry over or feel guilt about. So...don't tell her."

"I think she'd want to know," I said quietly, neutrally. Usually, I just accepted whatever either Lois or Clark told me after they'd completed one of their mental leaps, but this time I wasn't sure CK was right. Lois *needed* to know things, anything, everything—it was all but a compulsion—and the more facts she gathered, the more in control she felt, the more confident she was in moving forward, the more she understood the whole of the situation.

But CK was looking at me so pleadingly, something almost like panic edging his expression, and his voice broke as he begged me. "Please, Jimmy. Please. She's going through more than enough right now; with all that, she doesn't need to deal with...with *me*, too."

I studied him for a moment, searching in vain for those quiet moments I saw so often, that picture I would select as the perfect photograph to accompany this moment should it be turned into an article. Searched for that quiet, unspoken truth...but I couldn't find it. Because the truth was that you didn't have to look in dark corners or quiet moments for CK's truths. You just had to look at *him*. Because his secret wasn't a secret at all; it was almost like a fact of life, as inherent and basic as the rotation of the earth or the status of the Daily Planet as the best newspaper in the world.

Everyone knew that Clark Kent loved Lois Lane.

But I wondered how many people knew that Lois Lane loved Clark Kent in return.

That was a secret better kept even though she didn't hide it very well. In fact, I would guess that even Clark himself didn't know that particular secret, no matter how obvious it was when you knew what to look for.

But I wasn't a photographer anymore, and there was no article being written about Lois Lane's heart, and this wasn't a secret I needed to show the world. So I nodded to his request, and I said, "Sure, CK. If that's what you want," and I turned back to my coffee and let him call his parents and tell them he was fine in a worn and weak voice that belied his words. They were obviously worried, I could tell by the way Clark had to repeat his assurance several times, but then, they were probably even better at seeing through his hopeful façade than I was, at reading the utter weariness he tried so miserably to hide, at knowing just how *not fine* he really was.

A flicker at the edge of my vision alerted me to the fact that Lois was emerging from the bedroom. Her hair was wet, the ends dripping onto the sweater Clark had given her, its gray folds engulfing her so that she seemed to be clothed in a cloud of

depression, of mourning, of sadness. Her eyes, dark and glistening with more than just reflected light, were fixed on Clark even though he hadn't seen her, even though he was still telling his parents he loved them and would visit soon and yes, he'd explain better when he saw them.

Perry and Clark had both told me Lois was close to breaking, and I had seen her tears and complicity at Lex Tower, but it was only now, only staring up at the fragility no longer lurking behind her busy-reporter mask but exposed and out in the open for all to see—only now did I realize just how hurt Lois was. I had felt bad for her when she hugged Clark and hidden her face from the sight of her fiancé's suicide, but now, seeing how she couldn't turn away from Clark, seeing how she looked at him so desperately, as if afraid he would vanish should she look away—only now did I feel like patting her on the shoulder or even daring to hug her, anything just to ensure that she didn't fly into a million shattered pieces.

The click the phone made when CK hung it up sounded incredibly loud in the silence of the apartment. The inaudible impact made when he looked up and unerringly met Lois's eyes—as if they were two magnets that could not be repelled—dwarfed that sound and resounded in my head like the echo of a gunshot. There was enough contained within their weighted glances to fill a thousand newspapers, but I averted my eyes because these stories, these headlines, these truths, were not mine to peruse, were not meant to be sold on street corners; they were private, intimate, confined to a world comprised solely of Lois and Clark.

"I...I should get cleaned up." Clark stood, the phone rattling as his hand was torn from it before he'd fully let go. He didn't look dirty—he never did, come to think of it—but knowing that he'd been gone, possibly held against his will, certainly beaten... well, I didn't blame him in the least for wanting to wash away the feel of helplessness and hatred and terror.

"Clark..." But Lois said nothing more, and his name from her lips didn't seem, in this one instance, to be enough to keep him there.

With only a slight shake of his head, his gaze fell to the floor, and he slipped into the bedroom, taking the long way around either to give Lois room or to give himself a bit of distance—I wasn't sure which it was, and maybe he didn't either. Certainly Lois seemed to take it for the latter. I wished, very badly, that I could take the sight before me and freeze it in black and white and put it in a frame and show it to Clark. Surely if he saw how disconsolate, how *bereft*, she looked when he left, he'd have been able to see the secret she was hiding from him.

But I had no camera and wouldn't have had the heart to take the picture even if I had. So Clark disappeared behind the brick partition, shutting himself further away behind a solid door, and Lois wandered to the couch, as light and wispy as if she were a feather drifting in the wind.

"Coffee?" I asked even though the coffee Perry had poured had long since gone cold.

"What?" She looked up at me, studied me for a moment as if she were trying to place me, and then she dredged up a wan smile for me from somewhere deep inside her. "Oh. Thanks, Jimmy. I mean, no thanks. I don't want any coffee." In a normal situation, she would have continued, probably going on about the time of day or the optimum place to get coffee or something else that made no sense to anyone else but was somehow connected in her mind to cold coffee in the afternoon. But this wasn't a normal situation, so she trailed into silence, and her eyes fell away from mine as if I had been granted my earlier wish and been belatedly bestowed invisibility.

"Can I get you anything else?" I offered, unwilling to see her shut herself away behind the walls that had become just a bit less thick in the months since she'd been partnered with CK. After all, he could slip behind her walls without any effort, almost without

even alarming her, but the rest of us weren't so lucky. And I liked being able to talk to Lois, being able to sometimes get a smile out of her, being able to see a bit more of her than the driven reporter.

Not that the driven reporter part of her was very visible at the moment.

"I'm good." Lois paused, as if replaying her own words and really listening to them. Then her face crumpled and she hunched in on herself, her forehead coming to rest on her knees. "Actually, I'm not good, Jimmy."

A spurt of panic bled through me. I wanted to help her, wanted to be her friend, but...well, Lois Lane was a little bit intimidating, a little larger-than-life, a little hard to live up to, and I didn't want to mess this up. Maybe, in thinking I could comfort her, I had bitten off just a bit more than I could chew.

"It'll be all right, Lois," I said, then winced to hear the inanity of my own reply. Saying it didn't make it so—though Lois hadn't always acted as if she believed that particular fact—and I felt stupid making a reassurance that sounded so blatantly untrue.

But at least it had the benefit of reminding Lois that I was there. She looked at me, and though she didn't babble at a hundred miles a minute—in fact, she spoke slowly, mulling over each word before speaking it, something she'd never done before—the intensity behind her voice was the same.

"Is he okay, Jimmy?"

The question left me pinned to my seat, still the same chair I'd been occupying since first accepting Perry's coffee. I wanted to shift with my discomfort, but CK had begged me not to tell her the truth...and Lois was begging me to tell her that same truth. This wasn't something office gofers usually ran into...but friends did.

"What do you mean?" I asked, a delaying tactic as I desperately tried to think of a way to let Lois in on a confidence I couldn't break.

"I mean..." Lois lifted a trembling hand to wave around at the apartment around us—the files scattered across the counters, the official records piled in corners, the videotapes Jack had made stacked near the VHS, proof of our investigation of Luthor. "Obviously, you know a lot more about...everything...than I do. Please tell me he's okay."

I was silent, debating my reply. Technically, I could tell her that Clark was fine since she had point-blank asked me to; it would answer her request and keep CK's secret. But I hesitated in taking the easy way out.

Both Perry and CK seemed afraid that Lois was too fragile to endure the full scope of our situation, but I wasn't sure I agreed with them. I had never known Lois to be weak or insufficient or lacking in any way. Fragile as she obviously was at the moment, I had no doubt that if we were to tell her everything—Clark's physical state, whatever mysterious secret he and Perry had been discussing, the full details of all we had discovered about Luthor—well, I was sure that it would only make her stronger. She'd get mad, naturally, but that was kind of the way Lois Lane worked. The madder she got, the better she became. A righteously angry Lois Lane was better to have on your side than the entire United States military.

"I know I hurt him." Lois's voice was small, soft, more remorseful than I'd ever heard from her before, and I would have attacked a hundred Barbara Trevinos to keep Lois from ever sounding like that again. "I know I...made some bad decisions. But...please, Jimmy, if he's going to leave, just tell me."

"He's not going to leave," I told her with certainty, glad I could put her mind at ease on at least this fear. "He told me he wasn't. He's staying."

Her dark lashes glistened with moisture as they fluttered closed over her eyes, her quiet sigh stirring the wet, curling tendrils of hair hanging near her cheek.

"He wouldn't leave you," I added, as close as I could come to telling her just how much CK had endured for her. "He's a good

guy.”

Lois smiled a mirthless smile. “I know that, Jimmy, trust me.”

“No,” I said, and wondered where I had acquired the courage necessary to contradict Lois Lane.

Even in her vulnerable state, she obviously wasn’t expecting my reply, and she met my gaze with an arched brow. For the first time, she finally reminded me of the reporter I’d known for the past three years.

“I think you know he’s a good *person*,” I explained quietly, gesturing in the general direction of the bathroom and Clark Kent. “But I don’t know that you’ve realized yet that he’s a good *man*.”

It was a tiny distinction, yet staggering for all it conveyed. I wasn’t that worried, though. I knew I wasn’t as experienced as Perry and I didn’t have a direct line to Lois’s heart like CK, but I had seen her in her unguarded moments, had heard her in shadowed corners, had witnessed those picture-perfect freeze-frames, and in none of those had frailty been the truth revealed. Only strength, hidden behind impetuosity sometimes, masked behind cynicism on an almost daily basis, overtaken by anger quite often...but there nonetheless. I had unwavering faith that Lois had strength enough to equal Superman’s.

And if she ever realized that herself...well then, maybe, just maybe, she’d finally be able to realize that CK was a man as well as her friend and partner.

Maybe.

Maybe not.

I knew miracles didn’t happen everyday, but then...this was Metropolis and we had a superhero flying in the skies above our streets, so maybe miracles did happen everyday.

Anyway, I had said everything I knew to say—and more than I would have thought I’d ever dare to say—and Lois was biting her lip in thought, her brow creased, and all that was left to do was to watch and see. See if Lois could find her courage, enough to reach out to Clark; see if CK could find the confidence needed to step fully into Lois’s sight. Enough to see if I could gather my family and home around me once again, a family made up of friends instead of blood relatives and a home made up of newspaper ink and cramped desks rather than a bedroom and kitchen and attic and basement.

Restless, tired of the silence that had been dogging us since Luthor’s dive off his balcony, I stood and collected the mostly unused coffee mugs, carried them to the sink, washed them up. Occasionally, I’d dart sidelong glances at Lois, and each time, I’d catch her looking around CK’s apartment as if she’d never seen it before, studying each item, each picture, each knickknack, all without moving from her hunched position at the edge of Clark’s couch.

Finally, just as I set the last mug upside down on the rack to air-dry, I heard the bathroom door open. A moment later, Clark emerged from his bedroom, dressed in loose pants and a long-sleeved t-shirt that hid the scars on his arms. His glasses gleamed in the sunlight streaming through his windows, and he had his hands in his pockets, probably trying to hide the burns adorning his palms. Absently, I wondered what he’d do about them when Henderson got around to seeing him, how he’d explain the scars after they’d healed, what he’d say if Lois called him on them.

Almost tentatively, her hands twisting together in her lap, Lois looked up at Clark. He gazed down at her, and swallowed, a muscle ticking in his jaw. Neither one said a word. Neither one moved, turning the moment into a frozen tableau, as if they were posing for my absent camera. Trapped in their orbit, I couldn’t move either, afraid even to breathe.

Clark shifted, suddenly looking much less confident than he had with me. It was amazing to me that Lois had never seemed to notice that CK acted differently with her than he did with anyone else. “Lois, I—”

“Clark, I didn’t!” Lois stared up at him, caught between imploring and uncertain, an unusual combination that was unfamiliar on her features, and yet beautiful, judging by Clark’s struck expression. “At the wedding, I...the archbishop asked, and I...I couldn’t. So instead of *I do*, I...I-I *didn’t*.”

I looked away from the raw emotion exposed on Clark’s face, saw Lois’s answering expression of overwhelming feeling, closed my eyes and then opened them again, unable to really look away from the byplay before me, unable to pretend I wasn’t fully invested in whatever happened.

“Well...” Clark pulled a hand from his pocket and held it out as if looking for something to hold onto, a way to regain his balance, as if his world had been knocked suddenly off-kilter. Or maybe, I thought with a flare of hope, it had been righted. “I said I wouldn’t come to your wedding, but I did end up coming.” He paused, took a deep breath, then met her gaze full-on. “I guess we were both a little messed up, huh?”

Relief shuddered through Lois, her gaze fixed on him. “Yeah, I guess.” Her agreement was little more than a breath, but it was enough for Clark. A smile touched his lips. It was small, granted, tiny and wavering and still with a trace of hurt lingering along the edges of it, but it was real, which was so much better than the fake ones he’d given the Chief and me.

Lois blinked away tears and shifted. “Clark, I’m s—”

“No, Lois.” Faster than I would have guessed he could move with his injuries, Clark was sitting beside her, pulling her into his sure embrace, hugging her to himself, cradling her head against his shoulder. “Shh, Lois. No more, okay? No apologies, no recriminations, let’s just...let’s just be *us*, okay?”

If Lois said anything, I didn’t hear it, but the way she threaded her arms around him, the way she sank into his embrace, the way she closed her eyes to savor the moment...it was answer enough.

And I grinned, then, because I knew my family, my world, was back again. It might change a bit, might grow, but then, I would too, and the very fact that we were here proved that Luthor couldn’t beat us. Couldn’t beat them. Because Clark might hold Lois a bit more wistfully, a bit looser and less carefree than he had before, and Lois might touch Clark as wonderingly as if she’d never before took note of what it all entailed, but I knew—the truth I’d been searching for? It was right here, in this moment, in this instant, in this freeze-frame that was picture-perfect right before me.

The black and white photograph to immortalize this story wasn’t the image of Luthor falling or of Clark hurting or of Lois crying. It wasn’t even the shot of them clinging to each other outside Lex Tower like drowning victims grasping tight hold of a life-jacket. No, the perfect picture that made the others pale in comparison was *this* snapshot, this photo of a moment stolen from time, this image of Lois and Clark back together again.

I had been cast in the role of observer, of an occasionally participating audience, but that was okay—more than okay. Because I felt privileged just being able to see a story like this play out in front of me, influencing and touching my life as it doubtless would others. A story of friendship and love and forgiveness and acceptance and maybe a hundred other things that I might not ever fully understand but that would affect me and make me into a better person, maybe one more able to love as freely and unconditionally as Clark or one as courageous as Lois, daring to grab hold of hope even though it seemed an impossible chance.

It was, in all respects, the story of a lifetime.

And I...I was its photographer.

THE END