

Unforgettable

By [Julie Gastler \(juliegastler@gmail.com\)](mailto:juliegastler@gmail.com)

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Summary: When Lois danced at her anniversary party, she never expected it to be the eye-opening experience it became. Now, Lois finds herself tasked with putting the pieces back together. Will Lois and Clark be able to unravel the truth, move past everything that has happened and reconstruct their lives?

Story Size: 110,408 words (614Kb as text)

Author's Notes: While the story starts later, it interrupts the flow at the beginning of Ultrawoman BEFORE the red kryptonite laser which, along with the rest of the following episodes, never happened. You might also find it helpful to note that our villain is responsible for any other time inconsistencies, not me.

Disclaimer: I do not own most of these characters and I borrowed them and some of their stories from the wonderful people who made the show. I also borrowed some song lyrics from the wonderful Nat King Cole (though some of the songs were originally written by others too). And I thank them all for allowing me to go on this crazy adventure. Any characters not from the show came out of my head and any resemblance to actual people is coincidental. I also edited some real places to fit my story better, in case you intend to be offended by that.

Special thanks to my family for putting up with me while I tried to write this in one month (plus all the extra time past that because it just wasn't done yet), my friends for having to constantly hear about it, and complete strangers that are now friends who had bits of advice when I asked questions (which was very often). A special thanks to Val for being indispensable. I have learned so much from you working through this story that I'm not sure I would have otherwise. Thank you so much for reading through it and telling me what worked and didn't. Thank you goes to Brianna who GED this monstrosity with a fine-toothed comb and found all the errors I couldn't see. And a huge thank you to Ina for helping me see it through to the end. You must realize I wouldn't be at this point if it weren't for your kindness, understanding, and encouragement when things got tough.

Part 1: "Oh what a tangled web we weave..." – Marmion (Walter Scott)

Chapter 1

January 20, 1996

Lois Lane walked into the center of the ballroom of the Lexor Hotel, surrounded by charming decorations, with a raised glass in her hand. They had recreated the night he proposed complete with paper lantern moons and smaller stars hung below the high ceiling, keeping it darkened like the night sky while casting a warm glow about the room. Potted trees and small sections of vines strung with lights were positioned liberally around the edges of the room, and smaller plants featuring little bouquets of twinkling lights to resemble lightning bugs were placed on tables. The scent of laurel permeating the large room brought every detail of that unbelievable night to life in her mind.

Family and friends who had gathered with them to celebrate began to quiet as all eyes turned to her. She was filled with a sense of solemn gratefulness that everyone was there to share in their

happiness. She smoothed her free hand down the side of her immaculate dress. The burgundy evening gown she chose was simply elegant and flowed gracefully as she walked, enhancing the ethereal feel of the whole occasion.

"Attention!" She held her glass up high and turned slowly to address the crowd. "Attention, everyone! I'd like to say a few words." She looked to the man she loved and smiled. "I want all of you to know that we are both so happy that you could join us on this wonderful occasion." She lowered her glass and continued, "These days, marriages come and go so quickly. People aren't always lucky enough to find their soul mates, the person they are meant to spend the rest of their life with, their perfect match." She paused for dramatic effect. "I, however, am not one of those people." Her smile widened, and a tear pooled in the corner of her eye as she fought to keep her voice calm despite the passion overflowing from her heart.

She thought about the ups and downs of their relationship, the difficult fights and his romantic gestures. He knew just what to do to keep her focused and grounded, what to say to make her feel like she was the only one that mattered. He was always there to rescue her from the dangerous situations she always seemed to find herself in. He'd surprise her with extravagant gifts from faraway places and expected nothing in return. He really was amazing.

And here he was standing with her, celebrating this occasion in style. He had insisted on a *grand soiree* with fancy dresses and fantastic decorations. Lois hadn't argued. She loved him and if this was what he wanted, then she would play along and enjoy herself.

As she crossed the room to her perfect match, she took a deep breath. He caught her outstretched hand and swung her around as if to dance. An "aw" went around the room. He gathered her close and kissed her temple. She placed a hand on his chest which he promptly covered with his free hand, lending his strength to her.

She collected her thoughts and continued, "Here we are at our second anniversary! I don't know why this lunkhead feels the need to throw such a big party for such a small milestone." The crowd collectively laughed as she rolled her eyes and shook her head, remembering the last month of endless planning and preparing as if it were their 25th anniversary. He had insisted, though, and his excitement was contagious. "While it feels like we've been married *forever*, it also feels like it was just yesterday."

"I am in complete agreement!" he said as he looked deeply into her eyes. "While I knew she could never say no to me," he paused as the crowd laughed again, "I never realized how happy marrying Lois would make me. You all have *no idea* what we've been through to get to this point."

She lowered her gaze to where her hand rested on his chest. Memories of their relationship passed through her mind. How she was surprised he wanted to date her. How difficult it was to get to know him. How she refused his proposal. How she finally accepted.

He gave her hand a tender squeeze. "She's right, you know. We are very glad you all made it here to recreate a wonderful event with us. It is because of all of you that we're even here today!"

"A kiss! A kiss!" one of the party guests cheered. Other guests joined in, and it was clear they would not give up until they had what they wanted.

Lois met his gaze head on and couldn't stop the smile that spread across her face even if she wanted to, which she definitely didn't. Anyone could see the genuine affection there in his eyes. As she leaned closer to him, he glanced at her lips and filled her with warm desire before he pressed his lips gently to hers.

"I love you, Lois," he murmured.

She kissed him again.

"I love you, too, Lex."

Clark Kent sat up in his bed with a jolt, the covers slipping from his chest, and shoved his fingers through his mussed hair. He couldn't remember the last time he had slept well. The darkened image of a face continued to haunt his dreams. Always the same unfamiliar face, sometimes mocking him, sometimes angry.

Rubbing his face with his hands, he took a deep breath and tried to distract himself from the lingering image. He needed to think of something else. Anything that might help him get back to sleep.

Looking to his left, he was surprised to find the other half of his bed empty.

A quick glance at the clock told him that he had only been asleep for about an hour. Clark threw off the covers and made his way to the kitchen.

Lana Lang was seated at the dining table, elbows propped up on the edge, forehead resting in her hands. Something was wrong.

She didn't acknowledge his presence, though she must have heard him. Her shoulders drooped forward, and she rubbed her hands down her face, leaving them on her chin. She always did that when something was bothering her. He grabbed the buttermilk from the fridge and a few glasses from the cabinet before taking a seat next to her, ready to take on whatever her troubles were.

"Who's Lois?" she asked without raising her head.

"Lois?" he asked, frowning. That was definitely not what he was expecting. Had Clark even told Lana about Lois Lane? "I worked with a Lois back when I was in Metropolis. I don't know anyone else by that name, so I assume that's who you are talking about. Why do you ask?"

"When was the last time you saw her?" She still didn't look up.

He leaned forward to see her face, but she turned her head away from his and brought her hand up to block his view. He had no choice but to follow along until she was ready to explain it.

"Probably two years ago. I worked with her at the Planet on a story or two." Clark didn't see the need to expand on the guilt that always came over him when he remembered his time in Metropolis. He poured a bit of buttermilk into each glass.

"Clark, I..." She swallowed. When she turned her eyes to him, they were filled with sadness and jealousy. Clark was shocked to see those emotions on her face. "Did you know you talk in your sleep?"

No, he definitely did *not* know that. Clark raised his eyebrows and waited for her to elaborate as he pushed one of the glasses to her. Taking a sip of his own, he wondered if maybe he'd been talking about that face. But then why would she be asking about Lois?

"It's been happening for a couple of weeks now," she began to explain. She got up and started pacing back and forth as much as a person could in the tiny kitchen. "You've been talking about her in your sleep. Like you know her... very well. Like you miss her." She stopped and turned to him as he took a sip of his buttermilk. "Like you are in *love* with her."

The sip of buttermilk he'd been drawing into his mouth suddenly went down the wrong direction, and Clark gasped for air as he tried to cough it up. The stinging in his windpipe persisted in spite of his attempts to dislodge it as his mind focused on that one word.

Love? Had he heard Lana right? *Love?* She thought he *loved* Lois? He was stunned by her observation. He didn't even think about Lois when he was awake! Every time it came up that he worked in Metropolis for a while, he felt such intense guilt that he had to find something to take his mind off of it. He didn't quite know how to handle that. Nothing else had ever made him feel so guilty. Maybe Lana was misconstruing his guilt as love.

"Lana, I don't love her," he said matter-of-factly. "In fact, whenever I think about her, or my short time in Metropolis, all I can see is how I let her and the Planet down." He shrugged his

shoulders. "I've never felt this much guilt over anything. You must have picked up on—"

"You said 'I love you, Lois,'" she interrupted, cutting short his attempt to explain with a wave of her arms. With an exasperated sigh, she went back to pacing the tiny kitchen.

Clark's eyebrows shot up. She couldn't be serious.

"Clark," she continued, her arms becoming involved in her bitter reproof of him, "I have known you my whole life. I thought you'd never lie to me—"

"And I *haven't*," he defended as he stood up from his seat.

"—but you haven't even told *me* you love me as much as you've said it to her *in your sleep*." Her voice cracked, and he could see the path a tear had taken down her cheek even as she continued to pace, her voice gradually rising higher and the frown on her face deepening as she rambled on. "You have to be lying! Night after night, you've talked to her like she's there. Sometimes I worry you see her when you're looking at me when you *are* awake."

Clark was speechless. How could this be? Guilt. That was it. He felt nothing but guilt when he thought about Lois. And that was *not* very often. They weren't even partners for very long — three, four days at most. She had told him what she thought about his mistake. He left knowing he'd never make it there. How could he be talking about her, to her, in his sleep?

"Don't act surprised," she spat, her words stinging. "Though as much as you seem to be in love with Lois, I can see why you wouldn't have noticed how upset it's making me..." she trailed off, bringing her hands up to wipe the tears from her face.

He grabbed her shoulders and turned her to face him. "Lana," he said with determination, "I have no explanation for what you're saying. And I *have* noticed you haven't quite been yourself for a while. In fact, I'm glad you've finally told me. But know this — I have never lied in my whole life. I don't love Lois. I love *you*."

She hung her head, clearly unconvinced. "I can't do this anymore. I can't listen to you talk about her, to her every night." She shrugged from his grasp and stepped back from him. "I'm going to stay at my place. When you are ready to be honest with me, let me know." With this, she turned and walked to pick up the duffel bag by the back door.

When had she packed a bag?

"Lana, wait!" he called after her, reaching his hand toward her. She paused in the doorway without turning around, and he begged, "Please, can we talk about this? I don't even remember saying anything. What else did I say?"

She looked over her shoulder with sadness in her eyes. "I'm sure it'll come to you." And with that, she left.

Perry White, Editor in Chief of the Daily Planet, sat at his large mahogany desk reviewing storyboards for the next edition. With a pen in hand, he took a slow deep breath, pausing in his work to rub his tired eyes. He'd been doing this job for more years than he was willing to admit and though it was occasionally the hardest job in the world, he wouldn't trade a minute of it for some easy button-pusher job.

There was one thing he would change, but he didn't often think about it. It was floating around in his mind tonight, however, after he was reminded of it. He'd received an invitation to Lois's anniversary celebration, but he couldn't bring himself to show up. He was glad she was happy with Lex Luthor, but something about it just didn't sit right with him.

She must have held him at least partially responsible for the fiasco that had ended her career at the Planet. It had been his fault on many counts, the least of which was his faulty character assessment abilities. He shouldn't have been fooled by that Midwest sincerity. He should have known he couldn't trust a hack from Nowheresville. But his heart had made him believe in the kid and give him a chance. And it hadn't taken long for him to realize

his mistake and to lose his prized reporter.

She had left the Daily Planet to work as a reporter for LNN immediately following the whole debacle, and he had gradually lost touch with her. His shock at receiving an invitation to her wedding had fizzled slowly over time as happenings in the town took precedence over his personal life. Even now, he couldn't recall the reason he hadn't been able to make it.

Surprised that she sent him an invitation to her anniversary party, he considered going before guilt made him feel like he just wouldn't really be welcome there. The last time he'd seen Lois in person had been several months ago and purely coincidental.

The door opened, and Jimmy Olsen walked in, shaking his head while looking at the pad of paper he was carrying and tapping a pencil in the middle of his writing.

"Chief," he began, "I think there's more to this medical malpractice case... But you won't believe what I think is going on."

Jimmy's a good kid, Perry thought, in contrast to Clark Kent. Jimmy had been in the right place when Clark had left the Planet. It all had happened so fast. The story wasn't written yet, and Jimmy had stepped up and proven his worth by filling in and doing an excellent job of it too. *Much better than Clark was even capable of*. Since then, Jimmy had only been improving, demonstrating he was the right man for the job.

This fraud case was a weird one, though, and Perry wasn't sure it was worth the time. A couple of months ago, a small set of patients filed medical malpractice lawsuits against one health care facility. Their complaints centered around one issue: healthcare fraud. Seven claims came in over a couple of days indicating that a doctor there, whom they weren't at liberty to identify, performed unnecessary procedures on the patients.

All the claims were roughly the same. They were filed by a family member, not the patient. Each patient had denied having been to the doctor for *any* kind of treatment. No records were found that the patients in question had even been admitted to the treatment facility. Furthermore, no physical evidence existed on the patient to suggest any kind of procedure had been done, and none of the hospital staff even remembered the patients in question being in the hospital.

The only evidence was anecdotal from family members, with corroborating testimonies from employers about reasons for taking the day off and from colleagues that the family members had spoken to about the patient going to the doctor's treatment facility. The cases never even made it to trial due to the fact that the only evidence could have been easily fabricated.

Jimmy had spoken with the family members, and they all had similar stories to tell, though, none of the patients had gone to the facility for the same ailment. The procedures the patients were calling into question were supposed to fix the ailments the patients claimed never to have had in the first place. Because the patient was reported to not have the ailment, the facility's defense was that the procedure had apparently happened since the patient no longer suffered from it. The only thing they had in common was that all of the patients in question reported having memory problems after visiting the facility. It was a continuous cycle of shifting the blame from one party to another as each new piece of evidence told another side of the story.

Perry thought the most intriguing thing about it was the fact that since the first seven cases came up, and were subsequently shot down, eleven more claims had been filed over the past month, fitting the same story as the previous ones. The sheer number of claims at this point was beginning to raise suspicion. But still there remained a lack of evidence.

"What won't I believe?" Perry didn't look up. He was a master at multitasking, and it was easier to set reporters straight when they had bad ideas if he wasn't looking into their faces. He always kept his head down just in case.

"The guys at the lab were able to clear up that image of our informant and the unknown person of interest..." Jimmy's friend, Jack, had been following one of the doctors from the facility in question on occasion, doing some light surveillance, and snapped a picture of what appeared to be a suspicious exchange of *something*.

Perry realized that Jimmy had stopped and was waiting for Perry to look up at him.

"Lex Luthor," Jimmy said, his voice filled with intrigue.

Surprise pulled Perry's eyebrows up. Lex Luthor was a kind, caring, generous humanitarian that worked tirelessly to make Metropolis a better place. Knowing that Lois was married to the guy gave Perry some peace of mind. He trusted Luthor to protect her and provide for her. But he'd thought Kent would be good for her, and he'd been wrong about that.

He shook his head, dismissing his concern. There was no way that Lois would put up with this if she knew about it. And there was no way that Lois, the best damn investigative reporter the Daily Planet had ever seen, would be married to a man involved in criminal activity and remain unaware of it.

"You're right, I don't believe it," he said as he shifted his attention back to the story boards.

Chapter 2

Lois's breath caught, surprised when Lex suddenly began spinning her away from him. She recognized the strains of a familiar waltz encompassing them as he spun her back into his arms. *Unchained Melody*. It was the same song they had first danced to at their wedding. The small orchestra had begun playing during their short speech, but she was so caught up in her emotions that she didn't register it until now. She smiled as she came back to him.

"Dance with me," he pleaded.

Lois merely widened her smile at him in answer. A nearby waiter took her glass, and away they went to begin with ease the beautiful steps they'd been practicing. She never expected Lex to suggest professional dancing lessons. She had known some sophisticated dances before marrying him and considered herself competent despite her lack of outlets to use her skills but blissfully conceded when he explained that it was merely an opportunity to spend more time with her. Romantic gestures and excuses to spend time with one another were his style and she loved that about him.

The passionate dances they practiced did indeed bring them closer. They swayed and turned to the music as the crowd watched, Lois's dress flaring out gorgeously as they spun. Lex briefly glanced about the room before his attention landed back on her.

"Have I told you how beautiful you look tonight?" Lex asked. She could feel the warmth from his hand on her back as he pressed her closer to himself.

"Yes," she responded with a coy smile, "but you can say it again."

He tightened his hold on her, put his mouth inches from her ear, and said in a low husky voice meant only for her to hear, "You look beautiful tonight." He then spun her way from him.

She let out a quick breath followed by a short laugh. She smiled back at him as she thought of something different to say in return before she got back to him. Handsome just wasn't the word she wanted. "You look ... quite dashing yourself," she said as she came back to him.

"Dashing?" He chuckled and tossed his head back. "That sounds so ... old fashioned, but I love it." He gave her hand a squeeze and spun her slowly around in front of him, trailing his hand around her middle.

"But," he started as he brought them to a halt and pulled her even closer, his hand splayed across her back. His eyes took in her face before settling on her eyes. "Not as much as I love you."

She stared at his face with a small smile on her lips, feeling his eyes bore into her.

"I will *never* stop loving you," he said with quiet intensity that filled her with tenderness.

"I know." She smiled at him. "I love you, too."

He kissed her there in the middle of the dance floor. A gentle, lingering kiss. His kisses were often so passionate, as if he needed to prove something with them. She knew even without them that he loved her more than life itself.

A cheer from the crowd reminded her they were on display. He pulled back and looked deeply into her eyes, and she thought about how lucky she was to have someone who cherished her as he did. Lois viewed herself as an independent, proficient, and assertive person, but she surprisingly liked being cherished this way.

They began to sway with the music once more, swirling about the room as other couples finally joined in. As they clung to each other amidst the dancing crowd, she thought back to the day of his proposal, how strange the circumstances were and how romantic it had been.

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November 11, 1994

She'd been investigating a jewelry store theft the day before. It was an anomaly as there was absolutely no evidence at the scene other than the missing diamonds. The only possible clue was a picture caught by an ATM machine across the street of a person who showed a remarkable resemblance to Superman. Lois's interactions with Superman were generally brief, and his behavior was always detached and a bit aloof, but she just couldn't imagine him misusing his powers in such a brazen way.

That morning, Superman had met with her in a strange apartment that must have belonged to one of his accomplices, which she assumed he must have had. She was there because he had invited her; and, when she spoke with him over the phone, she'd heard something along the lines of desperation in his voice.

He had insisted that she arrive alone, but Lois notified Lex of her plans. They agreed that she would go to see what he wanted but that Lex would wait outside just in case. And she was thankful she had brought Lex with her. As soon as she arrived, she had this chilly feeling that something was not as it seemed. Superman was seated on the couch in the living room of this unfamiliar place.

"Lois, please have a seat," Superman said without looking at her, gesturing to the spot next to him on the couch. "I need your help." He kept his eyes on something behind her. He seemed conflicted, like he didn't really appreciate needing anyone's help. How could she blame him for that? He had superpowers. He probably didn't have a frame of understanding what it was like to not be able to do something on his own.

"What exactly do you need from me?" Lois asked hesitantly.

"I was the one who robbed the jewelry store," he said unceremoniously. "But I didn't want to. I was tricked into it. Someone is blackmailing me." He finally looked at her then, and she could tell there was more. She felt cold in his icy stare.

"What do you need from me?" she asked again. She couldn't explain why she was filled with these chilling impressions of this celebrated superhero, but she found that she was afraid of the answer that was coming.

"They want you dead," he said quickly. "I have to kill Lois Lane." The unemotional way he said this left her feeling like he couldn't possibly be the same superhero who regularly saved the lives of anyone in dire circumstances.

Lois opened her mouth to say something, though what she would say she didn't know. What do you say to Superman when he says he needs to kill you? She was saved from having to answer when the door of the apartment flew open, and Lex stormed in.

Lex looked enraged. "How dare you!" he spat at Superman. "You are supposed to stand for truth and justice. That you would

even consider this is despicable."

Superman dropped his head into his hands. "I know! I know! I just couldn't see another way," he sobbed.

Lex seemed to feel some sense of relief at Superman's remorse. His look softened and he shook his head.

"Please, Luthor. Help me! I don't know what to do,"

Superman begged as he reached toward Lex with his right hand. "Surely you can help me."

Lex looked at Superman as a person would look upon excrement on their shoe. Lois knew Superman was invincible, the only way for this to work out was for Lex to help Superman figure out a way to thwart the blackmailers.

"I'll help," he conceded, "on the condition that you acknowledge the fact that you needed help. We can't have your head getting any bigger than it already is."

"Anything," Superman spewed desperately. He was practically groveling, and Lois couldn't help but feel sorry for him.

"Your super breath is cold, yes? Cold enough to cryogenically freeze a person?" Lois choked out a cough when he said this, drawing Lex's attention away from Superman momentarily. The look he gave her indicated that he understood the risk, and even so, thought this was a viable solution. She shook her head in both confusion and refusal. Lex proceeded with his terrible idea, "And your heat vision, it can be dispersed or is it always a beam?"

"I can spread it over a small area," Superman said, not seeming to follow what Lex was getting at.

But Lois understood. It made sense now – Superman could freeze her and then thaw her later. When Lex looked to her to gauge her response, she gave the slightest of nods. He turned back to Superman.

"You will freeze Lois. You will take me with you to meet up with your adversary and hide me until the time is right. I will help you bring him to justice, and then you will revive Lois." He spoke confidently as though he was sure this plan would be successful. His willingness to stand up to this unmatched superhero was impressive.

Lex came to her and looked into her eyes. "I have no doubt I'll see you soon," he said, a mixture of emotions coloring his tone.

"I know," she breathed out slowly.

"Close your eyes," Lex softly instructed.

When she did, he put his hand to her cheek, and she turned to press her cheek more firmly against it, her eyes coming open as realization sank in. She knew he would do anything for her.

"Close your eyes," he repeated.

She did as he said even though she was nervous, but as the cold swept over her, she felt like she was simply falling asleep. She heard someone calling.

"Don't you die on me," she heard Lex say. "Lois, now come on, don't give up."

She tried to respond, but her entire body felt as though something dense was laid upon her.

"Come on. Breathe, Lois, breathe," Lex begged. She felt something resting on her chest and finally managed to draw a breath. She began coughing as he cradled her in his arms and whispered soothing words in her ear.

"I heard you calling," she struggled to say. "I heard you calling."

They could have been there forever in that embrace for she had no idea how long it lasted.

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Later that evening, they had a simple yet romantic dinner that evening and went for a walk in the part afterward. Lois was still feeling a little rattled from her brush with death at the hands of Superman. She couldn't imagine what would have happened if Lex hadn't shown up when he did.

As they walked down the pea-gravel path, Lois shivered. "You chilly?" Lex asked as he put his arm around her shoulder.

"No," Lois replied. That shiver was related more to her harrowing experiences earlier that day than the cooling temperatures of the evening air as a storm approached. She reached up to lace her fingers with his.

"Lois, I've been thinking," Lex began tentatively.

"Me too," Lois put in. She had been doing a lot of thinking since her clinical death a few hours beforehand.

"What about?" he asked with sincere curiosity.

"You first," she insisted. Whatever she'd been thinking about could wait.

"Okay," he said with a smile as he lowered his head. He paused for a moment, composing himself before speaking. "Sometimes... you think you're immortal." He watched his feet as they walked. "You start to think that the people around you are, too. And it just takes a second to realize how... wrong you are... about everything."

They stopped there in the middle of the walkway, and Lex turned Lois to face him.

"Listen," Lex began, looking Lois straight in the eye. "What I'm trying to say, Lois, is I almost lost you and I... feel... ashamed." He looked to his left and sighed.

Lois leaned to her right to be able to look into his face, trying to bring his attention back to her. What was bothering him so?

"Ashamed? Why?" she asked as she searched his eyes.

"I kept pushing you away even when I promised I'd stop." He looked directly into her eyes. "If you died without ever knowing why, I'd never be able to forgive myself. Because I love you."

Lois smiled at this profession and reached to run her fingers through his hair and caress his face. She could tell he had more to say and held in her response until he was finished. He took her hand and led her to the fountain they had neared while walking and asked her to sit.

A flash of lightning brightened their surroundings, and a crack of thunder rent through the air. She looked up as the impending storm broke free.

Lex lifted his face to the falling rain and with exasperation in his voice declared, "Come on! Give me a break!"

"You want to go back?" Lois asked while ducking her head to avoid getting rain in her eyes.

Lex looked back at her with fierce determination. "If the earth opened up at my feet, I wouldn't move until I'd said this." Without averting his eyes, Lex knelt in front of Lois and took her hand in his.

Lois saw what was coming, and her heart beat rapidly in her chest. Was she ready to hear these words again? She hadn't been ready the first time. Was she ready to answer them now?

"Lois," Lex began, rain dripping from his hair into his face, "will you marry me?"

Lois sucked in a breath as Lex brought out an intricate, beautifully designed diamond engagement ring.

"Yes," she heard herself say.

###

Lex had initially seemed like a cold, untouchable bigwig who only surrounded himself with people he could use as stepping stones in his pursuit of greatness. Everything she knew told her he was a power hungry, devil-may-care business man. And as a reporter she wanted to know the man behind the exterior. Was there someone else in there waiting to be discovered? Was it just an act?

She'd met him and then dated him, and he was romantic and caring and... surprisingly thoughtful. Now, she was married to him. And he was very different than the façade he presented to the world. He was sincere and caring and had a knack for being in the right place at the right time to rescue her, just like that day.

Applause picked up around the room as the dance ended, and they left the floor, making their way to a group of Lex's friends. Scott Ferguson, a good friend of Lex's who also happened to be her camera man at LNN on his recommendation, came up to them with a mischievous smile on his face. She was glad to see him this way. His sister had passed away just the week before, and he had been distraught.

"Lex, would you mind terribly if I danced with your beautiful wife?" Scott asked, his expression looking worried for just a moment. "That is, if it's okay with you, Lois."

She gave a nod and considered that worried look. Lex acted the possessive husband, and Lois enjoyed feeling protected and wanted, but he couldn't be offended by her dancing with Scott. Lex and Scott had a history together. He was certainly not a stranger. Why then did Scott have that questioning look on his face?

"Only if you promise to bring her right back to me," Lex allowed with a smile. He gave Lois a quick kiss on the cheek and released her hand.

Chapter 3

Clark walked out onto the back patio of the small house he had rented. It was unusually pleasant tonight after a warm front pushed northward yesterday. Everyone from Columbia claimed that the weather in Missouri was like this – snowing one day, sunny and warm the next, but Clark had traveled to too many places to have never heard that one before.

He sank down into the hammock strung between the posts of the pergola. As he threaded his fingers behind his head and reclined, he stared into the black night sky. Only a few stars were visible from where they lived inside the small city.

Metropolis had even fewer stars in the sky.

After working at the Daily Planet for a while, Clark had decided he couldn't take the pressure the big city newsroom put on a person. He longed to return to his relaxed lifestyle in the country in Kansas. So he did. Only it wasn't that simple...

When he came back to Smallville, his hometown, his parents had encouraged him to settle for something in between, pushing him to get a new job. If Clark didn't know they wanted him to be successful, he would have assumed they were just trying to get rid of him.

He traveled around for a while, working at small town papers in a few places, writing a story here or there. None were very good, and he moved on when the paper he worked for found out just how big of a blunder he was responsible for at the Planet.

When he finally made it home a few months ago, his parents even went so far as to help him find a job this time. Jonathan Kent knew some guys from his high school days who had moved to Columbia and, like Clark, were interested in journalism. They had made it and were working with the local paper there, the News Tribune. Jonathan put the word out that Clark was looking, and the position was brought to his attention.

"You'll never be able to cut it in the big city if you don't work your way up," his dad advised. "Start with something easier. Columbia is a nice town that's not too big but growing fast. Give it a try for a while and when that gets to be too easy, try Metropolis again."

Clark had never felt so worthless and lost but agreed to try it. Before leaving, he spent a few days in Smallville, trying to refocus and let go, but he just couldn't. No matter what he did, the guilt that had plagued him since leaving Metropolis wouldn't loosen its hold on him. That's when he ran into Lana.

###

November 21, 1995

"Clark?" an unsure voice shouted from across the street as he was walking to ease his mind one afternoon. When he turned, he saw Lana standing on the other side of the street, waving furiously

in his direction. He smiled, and she exclaimed, "Clark! It is you!" She ran to him and swung her arms around his neck.

Lana had been Clark's friend since high school. She knew him better than anyone else. They had even dated. He was always careful to keep people at a distance, but he'd let Lana get closer than anyone other than his parents. He was shy and not very sure of himself. But Lana made him feel like he mattered.

He reveled in knowing that someone still cared enough about him to make an effort to speak to him but was reluctant to believe that it would last.

"Lana," he said, pushing her away gently. "How are you?"

"Great! You?" she asked with a huge smile on her face.

"I'm okay," he said half-heartedly, watching her smile falter. "I heard you're going off to grad school." A dinner time chat with his mother always revealed all the local gossip. Including that Lana wasn't dating anyone and was about to leave town to continue her education.

"I am." She smiled a big, genuine smile directed right at Clark. It thawed him the tiniest bit. "Can I walk with you?"

"Sure, but I'm not headed anywhere in particular." He held out his elbow for her to take and when she did, her fingers clutched his arm tenderly.

"That's okay," she said with a twinkle in her eye. "I'm just glad to see you. We can go anywhere you want." She waved her hand as if she really would follow him anywhere.

They began walking down the street, and Clark felt nervous, though he didn't understand why. He hadn't dated anyone else for that length of time back in high school, but he never viewed her as his girlfriend. He was sure, however, that Lana had thought of him as her boyfriend. When they went their separate ways after graduating, he lost touch with her... except for what his mother told him. Lana seemed content to just walk with him, but the silence between them felt awkward. Like it meant more than it did. He quickly searched for something to say. "So, what are you up to these days?" he asked with as much interest as he could manage.

"Not too much," she began, "just visiting family while I'm here." She paused but seemed to have more to say. Clark waited as she used her fingers to brush back the hair that the wind had gotten caught under her chin. "Actually, I'm leaving in just a few days. I've been accepted to a grad program in a journalism school." Her subdued tone gave him the impression that she wasn't quite as excited about that as she was to see Clark.

"That's great. Where at?" he asked as they turned the corner and made their way from the main street onto a less busy road that would eventually lead them to a small park near the center of town.

"Columbia, Missouri," she replied. "So not too far off."

"Columbia? Really?" he questioned. His mother usually kept him fully abreast of Lana's every movement. She would have known. But she never said anything about Columbia. Was this merely a slip of memory, or was there something more to it?

"Yeah," she confirmed. She looked up at him with a frown on her face. "Why? You don't think it's a good idea?"

"No," Clark quickly reassured her. "It's just that I'm going there, too." It was completely possible that his mother had everything to do with this particular 'friend' of his dad's that just 'happened' to have a job for Clark...

Hearing this news, Lana's face lit up, quickly transforming her frown into a smile. "You're kidding! Are you in the journalism school too?"

"No," Clark immediately refuted. "No advanced degrees for me. I'm ready to get in the thick of things... I think." Lana didn't seem to notice the hesitancy in Clark's voice. As much as he was trying to hide it, his low confidence was so all-encompassing that small, self-deprecating statements would slip out occasionally.

"That's cool. Maybe we can get together once we are both there." No, she hadn't noticed. Her attention was focused on a

very artful display of flowers in front of the house they passed. She reached for a petal on a flower as they continued walking. "So, you will be working at the paper there?"

"Yeah," he admitted. "My dad hooked me up with some friend of his there." He didn't like admitting that he hadn't found the job himself, but he felt like he could tell her anything. And if something was going to push her away, he'd rather it happen now and not later.

"That's great," she replied, looking at him now. "What will you be doing?"

"Reporter, city government. Dad thinks it's a good place for me," he added.

"You don't sound so convinced." Her eyes seemed to see right through him. Maybe he'd said too much. He wasn't ready to let her go just yet.

"Well—" he started. She pulled him to a stop and stepped in front of him. They were nearly to the park, which would grant them more privacy than the sidewalk in front of someone's house.

"In fact," Lana continued, "you don't really seem like yourself." She crossed her arms in front of her and gave him one of those 'tell me the truth' looks.

"Is that so?" He wanted to avoid this topic of conversation.

"Yes!" she insisted. "The Clark I know is confident and happy and outgoing. You—" She gestured to him with her right arm—"seem down and... not confident at all." The way she emphasized the last word gave the impression she was getting a little fed up with it.

"Well..." Clark started again but couldn't quite think of what to say or how to explain what made him feel this way.

"What happened Clark?" Lana asked quietly. Maybe she finally realized he didn't want to talk in that spot because she grabbed his elbow again and pulled him toward the park. "The last I knew, you went to Metropolis to be a reporter there."

"That was a long time ago," he commented. Two years really, but it hadn't lasted that long.

"Maybe." As they reached the entrance to the park, she slowed their pace and laced her fingers together around the arm she held. Clark was surprised by how awkward it felt when they had walked like this dozens of times in high school. "When did you leave Metropolis?" she interrupted his woolgathering.

"Shortly after I got there." She was getting closer to the truth, and he knew it. It was only a matter of time.

"Why?" Such a simple question. Her tone lacked disappointment now, but that would soon change.

"I screwed up," he admitted. The end of his friendship with Lana loomed even closer.

"How?" Her tone didn't change with this question. But she did stop him again, this time in a small alcove in the trees of the park. She turned Clark to face her again and waited with such a patient look on her face that he knew she'd be hurt by what he was about to admit.

"I made some bad choices and was swayed by someone involved in a story I was working on," Clark blurted out quickly. It would be better to rip the band-aid off in one go.

"Surely it wasn't all that bad," Lana softly reassured him, brushing off his bad choices. She must not have understood what he was saying.

"It was," he argued, his anger at himself furrowing his brow. "People died... because of me." He hung his head.

She didn't say anything. He didn't need to look up to see the disappointment on her face. He knew exactly what it would look like.

"Look," he said as he started to turn away, "I have to go, I'll see you around."

"Clark," she said gently as she grabbed his arm again. "Wait. Tell me more about it."

"I—I don't think so." This was too much. Why didn't she just

let him go?

"Later?" she asked. "You really seem like you need a friend. Have dinner with me. My house? I'll cook." Her request sounded so sweet, and he could tell from her expression she genuinely cared.

"I don't know..." he said, evading her question as well as the look on her face.

"Come on," she encouraged. "It will do you some good to talk about it." She squeezed his arm, moved into his line of sight, and tilted her head so that he saw her eyebrows lift and her eyes soften, silently pleading with him to comply. He could feel his resolve melting.

"I don't know..." he repeated. Clark was beginning to think that if she had stayed after his admission, maybe she wouldn't run from him.

"Well, come for dinner then," she instructed. "And don't tell me about it."

He hesitated a moment and watched disappointment flicker across her face. He couldn't say no to her and be the cause of that disappointment. "Okay," he relented. Surely, he could have dinner with her. Maybe she wouldn't ask more questions about what had happened.

###

After worrying the entire afternoon, Clark arrived at Lana's house. He knocked on the door despite his misgivings and waited for a response.

A very cheery-eyed Lana answered the door. "Hey Clark!" She took his outstretched hand and, instead of shaking it, used it to steady herself as she stood up on her toes and kissed his cheek. "I made your favorite: bourbon beef tenderloin with a potato galette and shaved asparagus."

"Thanks, Lana," he said as sincerely as possible, following her into her apartment. "You didn't have to do that." And he wished he hadn't made her think he liked it. But he couldn't confess to lying to her the first time she had made dinner for him. He would just have to endure it.

She shrugged as he followed her into the dining room of her modest apartment. "I wanted to. You seem so... dejected, I had to do something."

It was how he felt. "Thanks, I think."

"You're welcome," she said matter-of-factly. She motioned to the seat at the head of the table. "Here, have a seat," she suggested and then sat in the seat to his right.

Once seated, Clark looked over the beautifully laid table. He complimented the food, they said grace, and then they began eating over small talk. It was only a little awkward to Clark, but from the way Lana carried on, he didn't think she felt awkward at all. A lull in the conversation and a significant look from Lana warned him that something was coming.

"So, I'm hoping—" she started. He didn't know what she was hoping, but he needed to set some boundaries to protect her.

"Lana," he interrupted, "I don't think we should meet up in Columbia." He found himself unable to look at her again, not wanting to see the disappointment. Disappointment was all he ever brought anyone. Didn't she see that?

"What? Why not?" He could hear the frown in her voice. Confusion was probably written all over her face, but he didn't look at her to see it.

"I'm..." Clark wasn't sure how to explain this. He tried again, "They'll turn you away because you're hanging out with me."

"They will not," she immediately argued.

"Yes, they will," he countered as he finally looked up. The single raised eyebrow and doubt in her eyes explained why she hadn't sounded angry yet. She didn't believe what he was saying.

"Then you have to tell me what happened," she shot back with determination. "Because I just can't imagine it being your fault." She set her fork down, leaned back in her chair, and crossed her

arms over her chest.

He knew that look.

"Fine," he once again relented.

As he disclosed what had happened, explaining as briefly as possible what had gone so wrong in Metropolis, Lana sat patiently, nodding and frowning at appropriate times. When he finished, Clark remained seated, fidgeting, while Lana seemed to be taking it in.

Finally, she leaned forward with her elbows on the table and nonchalantly said, "Well, I think you are making more out of this than is really there."

Would she ever respond to any of this in a way he expected? "But I kept getting booted from my job after they found out about it."

"Then stop hiding it," she said simply and leaned back in her chair, her arms relaxed on the table now.

"What?" he asked, returning her challenging expression with one of disbelief.

"Be up front," she explained. "Let them know your side of the story. Explain it so they understand what happened. You know deep down that he didn't die because of you. Yet you've done a fantastic job of convincing yourself he did, and I don't have a clue why."

He leaned back in the chair and looked at her for a moment. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly as he thought about her point.

As if she could read his mind, she suddenly smirked. "You know I'm right."

Clark couldn't stop the small amount of relief he was feeling from showing on his face in the form of a smile taking over the corners of his mouth.

"And I'd appreciate it if you would let me decide for myself whether you are worth spending time with," she added. She sat forward, reached for his hand, and gave it a squeeze.

Her response was so inconsistent with what he had been expecting that he found himself nearly overcome with gratitude. "Okay." He squeezed her hand in return and looked to her.

"Thank you," he said.

Lana quickly leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. "You are welcome."

"I love you," Clark blurted, surprising even himself. At Lana's small gasp he tried to cover up, "You know... like a..."

"Like...?" she prompted. Her eyes were wide and expectant. He wished he could take it back but realized it wasn't entirely false and maybe he could admit that.

"I don't know..." he said, frustrated at his own ineptness at expressing his feelings. "You just... matter... a lot. I... I need you."

While it clearly wasn't what she hoped to hear, she smiled sincerely and squeezed his hand again. "It's nice to be needed."

"Is it?" he said as he looked down at their hands, unable to imagine the feeling.

"I need you, too," Lana admitted with a smile. "I didn't like the idea of being all alone in Columbia, but I'm glad I'll have someone there now."

And Clark wouldn't be completely alone in this new city either. Maybe that had been why things didn't go so well in Metropolis. Maybe this would be different.

###

And it had been. He followed Lana's advice and was honest with his new editor about what had happened in Metropolis. And she was right – the editor in chief didn't see it in the same way Clark had been convincing himself that he would. He finally felt a bit of reprieve from the state of depression he seemed to be stuck in.

Once they moved to Columbia, things progressed quickly with Lana. She came over a few nights after they arrived, complained

that she couldn't sleep because her roommates were playing loud music, and asked to spend the night. She slept on the couch with her blankets and pillows that she brought with her. A few nights later she came back and after watching a movie together, they fell asleep in Clark's bed. And then she began to stay every night.

Clark had stopped them every time anything intimate started to happen. He found himself very nervous about being too close to Lana in that way, not quite like when he was in high school. There was something he couldn't explain stopping him. It just didn't feel right. Still, they would snuggle up while sleeping, and Lana seemed to be okay with it. He did tell Lana he loved her but just wasn't ready for more until he'd worked through all this guilt he couldn't let go of.

He didn't feel like he could live without her right now... or ever. Maybe being alone had caused things to not work out in Metropolis.

But now things weren't going well again.
Lana had left.

How could Lana think he was in love with a woman he hadn't seen in two years? It just didn't make any sense. Sure, she popped into his mind occasionally, but it was *not* welcome or pleasant. In order to fix his relationship with Lana though, he was going to have to think about Lois. He needed to figure out why he was talking about her in his sleep. But all he could recall during his sleep was an ominous face he couldn't identify.

For the first time in a long time, Clark allowed himself to remember those awful days...

###

September 13, 1993

Clark stepped off the bus and set his things down. He took a deep breath and surveyed the city he intended to make his new home. He had a plan and the courage to see where it led him.

Clark's next stop was the *Daily Planet*, the newspaper he'd dreamed of working at ever since he first started helping at the *Smallville Gazette* as a runner in the small newsroom. He worked hard to learn the ways of a reporter, and now here he was. He hoped his letter of recommendation and a few sample stories would be enough to get him a job as a reporter at the *Daily Planet*.

He was led into the office of Perry White, Editor in Chief. A more intimidating man Clark had never met. Despite the brief glance in his direction, Clark saw the years of hard work written on his face and felt his stern eyes drill into him with practiced discernment.

Mr. White shuffled through some papers, not completely focusing on Clark yet. "So, you are Mr. ... uh—" he started.

"Kent. Clark Kent," Clark supplied.

"Ah yes, Kent." Mr. White thought for a moment before the recognition dawned on him. "Oh, Professor Carlton called me about you. Boy, I haven't seen him in I don't know..." he trailed off before he reached down to pick Clark's resume up off his desk. "Let's see here. Editor, *Smallville Press*. Where is that? That's...?" he asked.

"Kansas," Clark again supplied the answer.

Just then the phone rang. As Mr. White reached for it, he said with a brisk tone, "Oh, just a minute." He then spoke to the person on the other end. "Yes? ... Aw, tell him to keep his pants on. ... If Carlini's can't deliver on time, just find a place who can!" He slammed the phone down and took a deep breath. Focusing back on Clark he asked, "Can you believe I had to buy a blood pressure monitor last week?"

"Paava leaves," Clark suggested.

"I beg your pardon?" Mr. White asked, not understanding what that had to do with anything.

"The Ulongu tribe in New Guinea eat paava leaves to reduce stress," Clark explained. He spent a bit of time traveling, preparing for what he wanted to do with his life. He continued the

explanation, "It puts them in a meditative state. Maybe you should try it."

"Ah, well, I see you've done some traveling," Mr. White commented. His raised eyebrows and half smile communicated his skepticism.

"Well, this is my first trip to Metropolis," Clark said with a sheepish grin. He didn't like tooting his own horn and quickly changed the subject. "I have some samples of my work." Clark pulled out his portfolio and handed it to the waiting editor.

"Ah, good, good. Let's take a look." Mr. White perused the papers as Clark sat back. "The... *Borneo Gazette*." Clark could hear the doubt in the editor's voice as he read the headline aloud. "Mating Rituals of the Knob-Tailed Gecko?"

Mr. White did not sound impressed.

Clark felt his hopes and dreams slipping away. Maybe his dad was right. He should have made a back-up plan.

"Kent, I'm sure that these are fascinating stories. But you see, son, this is the *Daily Planet*. We're the greatest newspaper in the whole world. Now, our people are dedicated servants of the fourth estate, who routinely handle matters of international significance—" Mr. White's monologue was interrupted by someone opening the door without knocking.

"Alright, Chief, I fixed the horn on your golf cart," the young man said, wiping his hands on a rag after setting some object down on the desk.

"Not now, Jimmy," Mr. White cut in.

"The tone's still off..." Jimmy continued, oblivious to the disruption he was causing.

"Jimmy!" Mr. White said more sternly. "Not now." Jimmy realized his mistake and left as Mr. White continued. "Now as... uh... as I was saying. You just can't walk in here with this kind of—" Again he was interrupted by someone opening the door without knocking.

This time a woman came in clearly determined to be heard. Her words came quickly while she paid little attention to anything other than what she said and the man she addressed. Clark immediately felt embarrassed that she was walking in on what was obviously a rejection by the direction Mr. White's talk was going.

"Chief, I think there's a story here, and we should have this guy checked out. You know the crazy one from this morning? He was an engineer at EPRAD and—" She spoke a mile-a-minute. She would have kept going if Mr. White hadn't cut in, raising his hand.

"Now Lois, can't you see I'm in the middle of something here?" He brought her attention to the other person in the room as Clark's heart stopped, and the blood drained from his face.

"Oh," she acknowledged, her nose wrinkled into a sneer.

Clark couldn't knock the feeling that he just didn't measure up. He felt so undeserving of even being in this doomed interview.

"Lois Lane, Clark Kent," Mr. White introduced them.

"Nice to meet you," she quickly mumbled as if she didn't want anything to do with him before continuing her line of reasoning. "Anyway, he worked on the messenger—"

"Wait," Mr. White cut her off again. "Wait a minute, what happened to that mood piece I gave you about the razing of that old theater on forty-second street?"

"I wasn't in the mood." She shrugged. "Perry, this is big. I'll need some help."

"You weren't in the mood," Mr. White said to no one in particular. He seemed to ponder her point. "Now look Lois, you've always had a nose for news, so I'll give you this one. Take Kent here."

Clark's heart leapt. Was Mr. White offering him a job instead of firing him? Lois looked him up and down with a frown on her face, measuring his worth. She barely kept her eye roll to herself before turning back to Mr. White.

"No," she said, her nose crinkling even more after catching a

whiff of his inadequacies. “He’s a hack from Nowheresville. I need someone who can actually help,” she emphasized, stealing another look at him with disdain dripping from her sneer. Clark fought to conceal the flinch from her scathing words and pointed glance that cut through him. He had never felt so low. How could one person have so much of an effect on him?

“I know I lack experience,” he heard himself say to them both, “but I’m a good writer and a hard worker, and I have plenty of experience doing research.”

“See?” Mr. White agreed, turning his attention back to his work. “I’m sure he’ll be the perfect person for the job. He’s yours. Do whatever you like with him.”

She harrumphed, but a commotion at the window caught her attention, and she seemed to completely forget about him.

“I – I gotta go, Chief. I’ll catch up with you later.” She turned and rushed to the door but stopped in the threshold to turn to him. “Kent, be at my desk in ten minutes,” she ordered.

He didn’t have time to acknowledge the command before she was gone. He turned back to Mr. White, who had a mischievous grin on his face as he looked at his papers one more.

“Thank you, sir,” Clark said. “I appreciate you giving me this chance to prove myself.”

“Yeah,” he acknowledged, not looking up. “Oh and in between doing whatever Lois tells you, I want you to take that theater razing story.”

“Certainly, sir.” Clark nodded and got up to leave the office, ready to work himself to the bone and prove he could hack it in this town.

“And Kent?” he said, leveling him with a glare. “Don’t let me down.”

###

Don’t let me down.

Perry White’s words hung in the cool evening air as he remembered with despair his time at the Daily Planet.

Clark shook his head, closing his eyes. He *had* let Mr. White down. He’d let *himself* down. Working at the Daily Planet had been his biggest dream, and it had proven to be impossible.

Everything Lois thought about him turned out to be true. He hadn’t been willing to admit it then. He was willing to admit it now. And that was why there was no way that Clark was in love with Lois. None whatsoever. She only made him feel lowly and unworthy. She had looked at him with disdain and disappointment before they’d even worked together.

Of course, Lois was right in the end. This was the part he hadn’t wanted to tell Lana, the part that made him look unreliable, dishonest, and disgraceful. Even so, he allowed the reverie to continue.

###

September 13, 1993

Lois had only just begun working on the story that morning when a bedraggled man pushed his way into the newsroom, attempting to give a packet of papers to Lois. His claim that the messenger would explode caught her attention, and her stubborn persuasiveness allowed her to win Mr. White over on investigating it further for a story.

The messenger launch was scheduled for the following day. Lois, being the hard-nosed investigator that she was, went straight to the source, dragging Clark along with her. They made their way to EPRAD with the intention of speaking with someone in charge and asking about this report the estranged Dr. Samuel Platt had told her about.

“I’ll ask the questions,” Lois spat as they walked quickly to the entrance. She wasn’t watching where she was walking while digging in her purse for her press badge.

“Yes, Ma’am,” Clark acknowledged.

She caught her foot on a crack in the sidewalk, and Clark instinctively reached out to grab her elbow. She jerked her arm

away from him as if his touch had hurt her.

“Don’t help me!” she practically yelled.

“Sorry,” he quickly apologized, making a mental note that Lois was not comfortable with unwanted help.

She didn’t say anything more. She found her badge and made her way to the entrance. The guard posted there pointed them in the direction of the office where someone would be able to help them. Here, her best efforts were stymied. All they were able to get was that Samuel Platt was in fact fired for behavior in violation of their safety protocols.

That afternoon, Lois charged Clark with organizing the papers that she was given that morning by Dr. Platt, but he wasn’t able to make sense of any of them. Clark didn’t really feel like he was doing much to help. He just followed Lois wherever she went like a puppy. He finished his first day of work feeling like a let-down, like he was in over his head. Maybe the next day would be better.

The following morning, the launch of the Messenger began on schedule as the newsroom watched. Tragedy struck when, at the last minute, fires broke out and the whole spacecraft exploded in a tower of flames, killing the crew aboard. Was Dr. Platt right?

Lois’s reaction to the scene was one of anger and resolve. The next place she dragged Clark to was the home of Dr. Samuel Platt. His home was not much of a home but more like an abandoned warehouse, cluttered and disorganized. While Lois asked a few introductory questions, Dr. Platt shuffled around, pulling pieces of paper from random places and throwing out vague answers. Lois then asked him about the report he supposedly sent to a Dr. Baines, head of the Messenger project at EPRAD.

“Do you have a copy of the report?” she asked while Clark stood helplessly in the background.

“What kind of scientist would I be if I didn’t keep copies of my reports?” he responded without stopping his strange behavior.

Clark wondered what kind of scientist could live in such clutter. Everything Dr. Platt said sounded like the ravings of a mad man. He claimed to have been drugged by the people at EPRAD, and that was why he was so scattered brained, but Clark wasn’t so sure that was it. Why would such a notable company drug an employee? Clark really didn’t understand any of this and was considerably worried that Lois was barking up the wrong tree. Mr. White had said she was the ‘best damned investigative reporter,’ but Clark was beginning to have his doubts.

Later that afternoon, they received a box full of papers from Dr. Platt. Lois added the task of going through them to Clark’s list of things to do. Yet again, he was unsuccessful at understanding what he was looking at. Lois hadn’t even tried understanding the reports and decided they should try speaking to someone at EPRAD again.

This time when they arrived, Dr. Antoinette Baines was willing to speak to them. Lois and Clark followed the guard in and were led into Dr. Baines’s office as evidenced by the name on the door. It was a large office given that Dr. Baines was the head of the project. One entire wall was lined with filing cabinets, and stacks of papers were scattered on the table in an open part of the room. Lois took a seat in the chair facing the desk, reached into her satchel, and dug around for something.

Clark took the seat next to her and scanned the office. On the desk, he noticed a picture of a young woman with a small child and picked it up for a closer look. He assumed the woman was Dr. Baines. The child had the same blond hair and bright smile and resembled the woman enough to be a relative of some sort, but Clark wasn’t sure which.

“My brother,” a voice stated from behind. Clark turned around to see Dr. Baines standing in the doorway with a clipboard in one hand and the other hand in the pocket of her baby blue lab coat. Lois pulled a pad of paper out of her bag and set her bag down forcibly, casting a warning glare at Clark.

Was Lois trying to intimidate him? He turned back to the picture, trying his best to ignore her. “He looks very happy,” Clark noted, nodding to the picture.

“He was,” Dr. Baines said sadly as she walked toward her desk, set her things down, and then stepped next to the chair Clark sat in.

Clark immediately caught the past tense and frowned. “What was his name?” he asked. He heard Lois clear her throat but continued ignoring her. Dr. Baines would be more willing to talk to them if she felt some connection to them.

“Fletcher,” she said with a sad smile. “He died a few years ago.” She briefly looked at the picture and then walked around her desk to sit in her comfortable captain’s chair. “He’s my inspiration.”

“Inspiration?” Clark inquired, noting the irritated eye roll he saw in his peripheral vision indicating Lois’s great displeasure. Thankfully, she didn’t seem to want to interrupt him right now. She was probably just jealous that Dr. Baines would talk to him, a ‘hack from Nowheresville,’ as she so eloquently put it.

“Yes,” she answered. “His condition was one that we are planning to study on the Prometheus Space Station.” She leaned forward in her chair and clasped her hands on her desk. “He didn’t make it long enough to see the results of our efforts, but there are plenty of others just like him that we will be able to save one day.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Lois cut in with feigned sympathy, likely trying to take control of the conversation. “Dr. Baines, what can you tell us about the sabotage? What is EPRAD doing to protect the colonists going up on the next launch?”

Dr. Baines looked up at her, as if only just now realizing Lois was in the office. “I... I’d like to tell you more about the sabotage, but first, I need to know that you will be protecting your source.”

“Yes,” Lois eagerly assured her. “We always protect our sources at the Daily Planet.”

Dr. Baines sat up straighter and appeared to think about whether she could take Lois at her word.

“It’s okay, Dr. Baines. You can trust us,” Clark put in.

Lois scooted to the edge of her seat, hungry for the information. “Do you know more about the sabotage Dr. Platt was talking about?” Lois asked directly.

“I do,” Dr. Baines said hesitantly, “but I can’t risk it getting back that I was the person who leaked the information.”

“Of course,” Clark said earnestly, trying to reassure Dr. Baines.

Lois looked at him then with an expression that screamed, ‘This isn’t fair, I’m supposed to be doing all the talking.’ But he ignored her and held eye contact for as long as Dr. Baines would allow.

Clark could see Dr. Baines considering this a moment before nodding and continuing.

“Dr. Platt is responsible for the sabotage,” Dr. Baines admitted, relief relaxing her features. “He filed a report saying that cooling devices were necessary for the function of the spacecraft with forged evidence. The change was made, and that is why the spacecraft blew up.”

“Do you have a copy of this report?” Lois immediately asked.

“Yes,” Dr. Baines opened a drawer in her desk and pulled out a large ring of keys. She got up and walked to one of the many filing cabinets and opened the drawer on the bottom in the leftmost cabinet. Lois enthusiastically turned to watch Dr. Baines retrieve a manila envelope and walk back to them, handing the folder directly to Lois. “It’s all there.”

“Why are you giving this to us?” Lois asked, a look of confused disbelief on her face.

“Because the next launch is in danger...” Dr. Baines opened her mouth but didn’t speak. Instead, she looked toward the window. After taking a deep breath, she continued, “Platt is

blackmailing me, trying to pin this on me instead.” She turned sorrowful eyes to Clark who read her distress in them. This was a cry for help.

“I see,” said Lois with a smirk on her face. “And you expect us to believe—”

“Thank you, Dr. Baines. We better be going,” Clark interrupted before Lois could say the most skeptical thing imaginable. “We’ll take a look into this file. Thank you.” He quickly stood up, shoving the chair he was sitting in backward. Lois reluctantly stood when he reached for her arm and pulled her up. “We’ll let you know if we have any questions about anything.”

“You’re welcome,” Dr. Baines said, finding his eyes. Clark was sure she was sending him a secret message with her facial expression, except he wasn’t sure what it was.

As they walked out to the sidewalk to call for a cab, Lois slapped Clark’s shoulder with the folder she was holding. “You idiot,” she berated. “She was lying and if we’d stayed in there long enough, I could have gotten her to admit it.”

“I think she’s telling the truth,” Clark argued. They reached the sidewalk and turned to face each other.

“Really?” she sneered, lifting her eyebrows expectantly. “And you know this because... why?”

“I can’t say,” Clark admitted. “Her eyes weren’t lying.”

“Lying eyes,” Lois mocked. She snorted and shook her head.

“You’ve got to be kidding me. Her eyes were lying through their lashes, and I can see she pulled the wool over yours.” She stabbed him in the chest with her finger. “And I’ll show you once we’ve gone through this forgery of a report.” She turned to look down the street and whistled for a cab.

“What makes you think it’s a forgery?” Clark asked. A cab pulled up in front of them, and he opened the door for Lois to get in.

“Because that was too easy,” she said. She lowered herself into the car before he climbed in beside her.

Her crossed legs and arms screamed that she was in no mood to discuss it. Clark chose not to say anything. Not agreeing with Lois wouldn’t go over very well. And perhaps the document they’d received would shed light on the truth.

Back at the planet, they sat shuffling through the papers that Dr. Platt had given them along with the report that Dr. Baines had just put in their hands. As Clark read over them, he heard Lois grumble something about forgery again. He looked up to see an irritated expression on her face.

“This is ridiculous,” she said as she abruptly stood up, slamming the papers down on her desk. She grabbed her coat from the back of her chair and slid one arm in. “I’m going for some lunch.” She didn’t even look at him as she briskly walked toward the elevator doors, putting her coat on the rest of the way. He watched as she stepped into the elevator on the left, letting out an exasperated grunt.

As the doors closed in front of her, the elevator on the right opened. Dr. Baines stepped out and immediately made eye contact with him as she twisted her fingers together in front of her. He stood from his chair and walked to meet her.

“Can I speak with you?” she asked. “Somewhere private?” she clarified as she looked nervously around the busy newsroom.

“Sure, we can go in there,” Clark responded, pointing toward the conference room. He followed her in and closed the door behind him. “What is it, Dr. Baines?”

“Antoinette, please,” she said, then seated herself in one of the chairs at the conference table and looked at her hands resting in her lap.

“Antoinette,” he repeated as he propped himself on the smaller table along the wall.

“I figured Lois wouldn’t believe the report I gave her,” she started. She looked up to meet his eyes, and he noted the slight redness around hers. “She thinks I’m in on it, doesn’t she?” she

asked.

"She does," Clark confirmed, "but I don't." He pulled the chair next to her out and sat down.

She smiled at him, shyly. "I brought this." She pulled an envelope out of her purse and presented it to him. "It's the original report documenting the need for heating devices."

Clark took it from her and turned it over to open it. "Why wasn't it with the rest of the papers you gave us?"

"I... hid it," she confided. "When Platt started blackmailing me, I felt like I needed something... just in case." She hung her head and shook it. He felt sorry for her. Having to deal with the uncertainty and fear of coercion would be difficult to cope with.

"Thank you," he said, "for bringing this to me." He pulled the paper from the envelope and began scanning it.

"Don't tell Lois I gave it to you. Please?" she pleaded. "Tell her someone else sent it to you."

He considered it and then nodded. "I will. You seem quite upset about all this."

"I... am," she revealed. "I tried to stand up to him at first. This project means so much to me. I don't want to see it ruined. But I..." her words trailed off, and she closed her eyes as a single tear slid down her cheek.

"It's okay. I'll protect you," he assured her, placing his hand on her knee. "Lois doesn't need to know where this came from."

"Thank you," she said and smiled up at him. "I have to go." She stood quickly and all but ran to the elevator.

He watched her leave as he made his way back to the table he and Lois had been working at. He strategically placed the envelope where Lois would see it and went back to looking through the papers as he waited for Lois to return from her lunch. He hadn't made much progress before she stomped back to the table and roughly set her things down.

"Well?" she demanded.

"I'm sorry," he apologized, "this just doesn't make much sense." He looked at the envelope then at her. "This came for you while you were gone," he said, indicating the envelope Antoinette had delivered.

He watched as she opened the envelope and read over the document. Her eyes grew wide, and her mouth opened in surprise. "Clark, did you read this?" she said excitedly.

"No," he denied, busying himself with the papers closest to him. "What is it?"

"It's the other half." She looked up at him with shock on her face. "You were right, Baines was telling the truth." She showed him the document, and he barely looked at it. "This is the report showing the need for heating devices. Dr. Platt authorized cooling devices. He went against the report."

Clark smiled inwardly, satisfied that he was able to get Lois to see his side of things without having to argue. Lois immediately went to work writing up their findings. She wrote the entire story, not allowing him much input. Mr. White was impressed, and the story printed in the next edition. Even though Clark had only helped on the story, he finally felt like he'd accomplished something important.

But then things went completely wrong. The next thing Clark knew, they were being subjected to hours of questioning by the police regarding the death of Dr. Platt. An investigation by a special task force at the police department had found the opposite of what they'd reported and later found Dr. Platt dead, apparently killed. They wanted to hold Lois liable for printing false information.

Clark's world was crumbling around him. The treatment he and Lois had received from their colleagues and Mr. White was nearly unbearable. He felt like he had single-handedly ruined her career as well as his own. The only thing he could think to do was to take all the blame upon himself and agree to quit his job at the Planet. It would never be enough to undo what had happened, but

he knew it was for the best. The next time he saw Lois was when he collected his things from his desk.

As he walked past her desk toward the exit, she turned her head away, glancing over her shoulder, obviously trying not to look at him. He was ashamed of himself but paused next to her desk. "For what it's worth," he started, knowing she really didn't care what he had to say, "I'm sorry... about... everything." His paltry apology would never be enough.

She shook her head and breathed out. "Worthless," she spat at him. "I never want to see you again."

###

And yet Lana said he was talking to this woman, telling her he loved her. Clark shook his head in confusion. Failing so miserably had permanently affected Clark. Maybe he'd never been a great reporter, but that incident proved that investigative journalism was something he would never be able to do. He'd done okay these last two months with Lana encouraging him, but before that, he kept screwing up other stories wherever he went. That was really why he kept getting fired.

How he wished he could talk to Lana about this, to understand what things he'd said in his sleep. The things she described just didn't match what he was thinking, what he remembered. But Lana had made it clear she didn't want to or couldn't help him figure this out. He felt stuck. If only Lana would just tell him what he'd been saying in his sleep.

Chapter 4

Lois and Scott made their way to the dance floor, the first lines of *Unforgettable* wafting around the room. Nat King Cole. She smiled up at Scott, who, at six feet, towered over her. He had recently developed a Nat King Cole fascination, around the same time he started wearing a treble clef around his wrist. His new interest was enough that he was constantly singing songs around her. She asked him about it the other day and was touched to hear that he did it in memory of his sister.

"It's been a fantastic evening, Lois. Something this enchanting could only come from the mind of a woman. You really outdid yourself," Scott complimented, smiling at her.

"It was nothing. You know Lex, I had plenty of assistants to take care of most of it for me. But I do like telling other people what to do." Lois smiled smugly. In reality, she would happily boss anyone around, but she preferred the do-it-yourself approach in many circumstances. "And you. You seem to be feeling better lately. I'm glad to see it."

"Yes, thank you." She saw the grief flit across his eyes and dissipate. "But I don't want to bring down your evening. Tell me. Where did the idea for the decorations come from?" he asked, looking around.

The dance floor was off to the edge of the large room, surrounded by vines and twinkling lights. Speckles of light moved in waves around the floor. Between the dance floor and the rest of the ballroom was a replica of the fountain that had served as a backdrop for Lex's proposal. The lights danced on the surface of the water, making the entire room sparkle.

"It was Lex's idea." Lois looked around at the decorations then, admiring the effect they had on the room. It felt cozy, safe. "He wanted to recreate the night we got engaged."

"It must have been an outside affair because I feel like we're dancing under the stars." Scott swung his arm in a small arc gesturing to the room.

Her smile bloomed even brighter. "That is exactly what I was going for! And yes. We went for a walk under the stars at night and found ourselves in the park. It was very romantic, even when it started raining." Lois smiled at the memory of the engagement.

He nodded toward one of the decorations and began, "Your paper lanterns make me think of a song." He let out a small chuckle.

“Nat King Cole again?” she asked, smiling. “What song?”
 Scott pulled Lois closer and leaned in as they continued dancing. He took a deep breath before he began singing softly, “*It is only a paper moon...*”

Lois knit her brow as a strange sensation came over her. Her field of vision clouded, and she felt like she was falling. She tried to make sense of what she was feeling, gripping Scott for support. The song sounded so familiar and brought to mind images she couldn’t quite make out.

Scott continued serenading her. “*Hangin’ over a cardboard sea.*”

As Lois’s eyebrows deepened their frown, she shook her head to clear it. She stumbled the next steps of the dance. Scott caught her and held her hand firmly, keeping them both moving with his other arm around her waist.

“Lois, stay with me,” he instructed, suddenly serious. She saw him glance around and then focus on her eyes. “I’ve got you. Keep dancing,” he said as if her life depended on it.

What was happening? She felt sick to her stomach and images of a man flashed before her eyes. She caught glimpses of the night Lex proposed again, but this time the face of the person expressing all those heartfelt emotions was someone else. Someone familiar. It only took her a moment to recall the name.

Clark Kent.

###

May 21, 1995

“You chilly?” Clark asked as he put his arm around her shoulder.

“No,” Lois replied. That shiver was related more to her harrowing experiences earlier that day than the cooling temperatures of the evening air as a storm approached. She reached up to lace her fingers with his, feeling his warmth course through her.

“Lois, I’ve been thinking,” Clark began tentatively.

“Me too,” Lois put in. She had made some astounding realizations and had been thinking at length about them.

“What about?” he asked with genuine interest.

“You first,” she insisted. Would he tell her on his own?

“Okay,” Clark said with a smile as he lowered his head. He paused for a moment, composing himself before speaking.

“Sometimes... you think you’re immortal.” He watched his feet as they walked. “You start to think that the people around you are too. And it just takes a second to realize how... wrong you are... about everything.”

They stopped there in the middle of the walkway, and Clark turned Lois to face him.

“Listen,” Clark began, looking Lois straight in the eye. “What I’m trying to say, Lois, is I almost lost you and I... feel... ashamed.” He looked to his left and sighed.

Lois leaned to her right to be able to look into his face, trying to bring his attention back to her. What was bothering him so?

“Ashamed? Why?” she asked as she searched his eyes.

“I kept pushing you away even when I promised I’d stop.” Clark looked directly into her eyes. “If you died without ever knowing why, I’d never be able to forgive myself. Because I love you.”

Lois smiled at this profession and reached to run her fingers through his hair and caress his face. She could tell he had more to say and held in her response until he was finished. Tell me, she pleaded silently. He took her hand and led her to the fountain they had neared while walking and asked her to sit.

A flash of lightning brightened their surroundings, and a crack of thunder rent through the air. She looked up as the impending storm broke free.

Clark lifted his face to the falling rain and with exasperation in his voice declared, “Come on! Give me a break!”

She laughed at the irony of the situation. “You want to go

back?” Lois asked while ducking her head to avoid getting rain in her eyes.

Clark looked back at her with fierce determination. “If the earth opened up at my feet, I wouldn’t move until I’d said this.” Without averting his eyes, Clark knelt in front of Lois and took her hand in his.

Lois saw what was coming, and her heart beat rapidly in her chest. Was she ready to hear these words? Was she ready to answer them? Would he share his secret first?

“Lois,” Clark began, rain dripping from his hair into his face, “will you marry me?”

Lois sucked in a breath as Clark brought out an intricate, beautifully designed diamond engagement ring.

###

Confusion was all Lois could feel. Clark, the man who had ruined her career, was asking her to marry him? This made no sense. Lex was the one who had proposed, wasn’t he? She was just thinking about it moments ago as Lex twirled her around the dance floor. Now it felt like the dance floor was falling out from beneath her feet. Why would Clark be invading this memory? And what secret was he hiding?

“Let them come,” she heard Scott say. He was still holding her firmly and moving about the dance floor. “It will take some time to remember everything. You might...”

The fog crowded her vision further, and she didn’t hear the rest of his sentence as another vision overwhelmed her.

###

September 13, 1993

Lois had only just begun working on the story that morning when a bedraggled man pushed his way into the newsroom, attempting to give a packet of papers to Lois. Before she could put any pieces together, the launch time approached, and the Messenger exploded just as he’d predicted.

When she asked Perry for a task force, he gave her Clark Kent, an unseasoned reporter who was new to the Daily Planet. And while she complained, she was forced to allow it and asserted herself as the leader of this pairing. But he proved himself useful. He trusted her intuition and was willing to work. His response to her suggestion that they stay late at the Planet that night to work on the story was a simple, “I am all yours.”

She could see the possibilities he was considering in his eyes, but after everything she’d worked for and been through, it wasn’t a risk she was willing to take. She even had to correct him later that evening after he’d brought some amazing Chinese food for them to share. “Don’t fall for me, farm boy,” she warned him. “I don’t have time for it.”

Once they were on the verge of proving that sabotage had caused the destruction of the Messenger, they went to speak to Dr. Platt, only to find something amiss. Clark was protective as they discovered his dead body, then supportive and comforting while they waited for the police to arrive. He even called out a cop who had been tastelessly making fun of the situation.

“The man’s name was Samuel Platt,” he said, poking his finger into the cop’s chest. “He was brilliant, a scientist, and someone who cared about others. Under the circumstances, I don’t believe that kind of humor is appropriate.” She watched in awe as he expressed authentic sorrow.

“Sorry, buddy,” the cop apologized, adequately chastised. “Really, I’m sorry.”

As the cop walked away, Lois approached Clark. “Are you ok?” she asked, looking into his face to see for herself.

His mannerism exuded regret as if he took what had happened personally. “We should have known,” he insisted, blaming himself. “We should have protected him.” Did he realize he wasn’t at fault here?

“How?” she asked.

He shook his head. “I don’t know,” he admitted, “but we

should have done something.”

Lois studied his face for a moment, surprised by his anger and remorse. She could see he needed help focusing on what mattered, and she would lead him. “Look, Clark, all we can do now is try and prove him right. We have a lot of work to do.” She glanced down at her watch. “It’s only five thirty. Why don’t we try and get a few hours of sleep and I’ll come by for you about nine? Okay?”

She left him then, hoping some time away from the story would allow him to pull himself together. She needed her new partner to help prove that Dr. Platt was right, that the messenger was deliberately sabotaged.

###

But Clark was nothing but an irresponsible, untrustworthy reporter who put her in the worst position of her career. Wasn’t he? Hadn’t he given her information that was incorrect? Didn’t he ruin her career at the Planet? She had started working at LNN as a result of needing a new career.

Two different scenarios of the same event now existed in her memories. What was happening to her mind? *Remember*, Scott had said. Was she remembering something?

Her head felt like a jumbled mess, and she wasn’t sure what to believe. She tried to look around and focus on the faces in the room but found she couldn’t see any of them clearly. Were they even real? She turned her head back to Scott who wore a relaxed smile and appeared to be saying something.

“...glad it worked. I’m sorry, but you can’t...” She heard the relief filling his voice that drifted away as another – where they memories? – flooded her vision.

###

September 22, 1993

She had snuck onto the Messenger space shuttle to be part of the story instead of merely reporting it from the sidelines in her ever-present quest for acclamation. Once buckled in and ready for the launch, she heard a faint beeping that didn’t fit with anything else. She unbuckled herself to investigate, concerned that no one else seemed to notice it. Finding the source of the sound revealed a small box with a countdown timer with less than a minute remaining.

“Oh, my God. It’s a bomb!” Lois exclaimed, her voice growing louder. “It’s a bomb! Someone, help! It’s a bomb!” The shuttle shook as the engines ignited, and she ran to a window to see if she could find someone, anyone to help. “Help!”

Thinking she’d have to do something to get the attention of someone, she looked around the small area she was in and found a pair of pliers. She made her way quickly to some exposed wires, knowing that an incorrect reading on any of their consoles in mission control would tip them off. She hacked at a few wires, sparks flying.

She heard the announcement of suspending the countdown. They’d received her plea.

But the timer continued to count down.

She stood there, looking at the bomb, wondering if there was anything she could do stop it and thinking about how being part of this story just might kill her. She’d been too tenacious this time. Too ambitious. Too foolhardy. And it would be over soon.

21 seconds.

Just then a man in a strange, brightly colored costume walked into the room, looking determined, and found the bomb. Unable to process what she was seeing, she merely stepped out of the way and watched in astonishment as he inspected the bomb.

“He–Hey! Get away from that!” she warned. He popped the device open and pulled at the pieces. “What kind of lunatic are you? That’s a bomb!” He took one of the pieces and put it in his mouth as she stared in shock, her mouth agape.

Immediately, a small explosion sounded from his chest, and he let out a belch and pounded on his chest. “Excuse me,” he said politely and smiled genuinely.

“What the hell are you?” she asked in disbelief.

He didn’t answer the question but smiled instead, as if he wasn’t sure how to answer the simple question. As they stared at each other; the rest of the crew and passengers gathered and stood in an equal state of awe. He spoke with confidence and explained that he was ‘a friend’ before he proved it by lifting the shuttle into orbit and returning her to the Planet.

He held her gently as they flew, his cape billowing in the breeze that passed them. He held her as if it was nothing to him but with such care to ensure she was both safe and comfortable. The prolonged closeness induced sensations in her that she couldn’t explain, and she was mesmerized by the sheer unlikeliness of all that had just happened.

When they landed in the newsroom, he looked deep into her eyes as if he knew more about her than she knew about him. She searched his face, looking for any sense of recognition. She saw all those characteristics she had felt as she was flying in his arms – care, gentleness, concern. She could see he had what must be the purest heart any person could ever have. She didn’t want him to leave.

“I– I think considering the fact I saw you first, you owe me an exclusive,” she said as quickly as her mind was able to form words. An interview would undoubtedly guarantee more time with him.

“Is that the rule?” he asked, smiling. She was thoroughly distracted by his smile. It blazed, the corners angling in mischief. She couldn’t see anything else.

“Well, no, but I’d appreciate it very much,” she replied honestly, returning his smile.

He gave a sort of half laugh as he turned to fly away. She stood there, stunned.

“Wait!” she suddenly called. “How do I find you?”

“I’ll be around,” he said. And with that he flew away.

“Did you find out what the ‘S’ stands for?” Cat Grant asked as she ran up to Lois.

“Super...” Lois said breathlessly. “Superman!” she named him.

###

That fluttery infatuated feeling emerged inside her, and she knew that this was the real Superman. He was not the distant, unemotional... unreal superhero that she had despised for some unknown reason. Now she recalled all the small things, endearing looks, and expressive mannerisms. He had treated her like she was someone special.

What was happening? Scott had said she would *remember* everything. But what was she remembering? Stories she’d read, dreams... actual events?

“Lois?” she heard Scott say. But all she could do was shake her head as she struggled to gain some control over her thoughts. But the foggy feeling only increased.

She was unsuccessful, and this time she saw Clark down on one knee proposing again. A bizarre mix of excitement and trepidation coursed through her as she gave in to the memory.

###

May 21, 1995

Clark looked back at her with fierce determination in his eyes. “If the earth opened up at my feet, I wouldn’t move until I’d said this.” Without averting his eyes, Clark knelt in front of Lois and took her hand in his.

Lois saw what was coming, and her heart beat rapidly in her chest. Was she ready to hear these words? Was she ready to answer them? Would he share his secret first?

“Lois,” Clark began, rain dripping from his hair into his face, “will you marry me?”

Lois sucked in a breath as Clark brought out an intricate, beautifully designed diamond engagement ring.

She smiled as she looked back at his face. “Who’s asking?”

she countered. “Clark Kent?” She pulled his glasses off. “Or Superman?”

###

Superman? Her mind reeled. Clark was Superman? Clark was asking her to marry him?

Her vision was almost completely clouded now. She tried to reconcile all that she thought she knew with these ... memories?

She was married to Lex, celebrating an anniversary with him. But she *remembered* something else? Clark had proposed to her in the same manner, and she *knew* he was Superman. She wanted to ask questions, to understand, but she couldn't even form even one coherent question to ask.

“The worst will be over soon.” Scott was still there. And he understood, she realized.

Before she was able to think on that more, she was whisked away into another memory.

###

May 21, 1995

Lois stood in the newsroom of the Daily Planet, scanning several documents that had just printed, when Clark was notified of a phone call and stepped away. She continued to peruse the document in her hand and looked up to see fear come over his features. As he pulled the phone away from his ear, she could see in his stance that the phone call was related to what they were working on.

“That was him.” The look he gave her was filled with dread as he set the phone down, and it was all the confirmation she needed. “It was Jason, wasn't it?”

Clark shook his head the slightest bit. “Lois don't—”

“What'd he say to you?” she interrupted, refusing to let him push her away now. She was in this with him. He closed his mouth with a pleading look on his face. “Clark, what'd he say?” she demanded.

He looked around the room gravely as if contemplating what to do and then clasped her shoulders, leading her to the conference room. He released her as they entered and pulled the door closed behind him.

“He wants...” he began, shoving one hand in his pocket, “you dead... in thirty minutes...” He looked to the floor. “Or he's going to kill my parents.”

She released the breath she'd been holding, and he looked up at her face as she looked away and turned toward the table. They had been rash, pressing too hard, and now she would be asked to pay the price. “It's Nigel, we got to close.” She moved closer to the table and fidgeted with the papers still in her hand.

“Lois, I want you to get out of town, get on a plane, get as far away—” Clark began his desperate attempt to keep her safe, sputtering the words out without pausing between sentences.

But her attention was elsewhere as she considered their options. A thought struck her, and she interrupted him, “No.” She put her hand on his chest to get his attention as he continued pleading with her. “No,” she repeated more firmly.

“Lois, please.” She could see the trepidation in his eyes and knew what she must do.

“No,” she said again, making eye contact with him. “I have an idea.”

“Lois, please,” he begged.

She was filled with a sense of confidence as she forged ahead regardless. “I want you to tell Superman to meet me at my apartment as soon as possible.” She reached for his shoulders and pulled herself up to him.

“Lois—” he started to say, but she silenced him, kissing him squarely on the mouth and pushing her body against his, doing her utmost to infuse him with her confidence. As she pulled away, she looked into his befuddled eyes.

“Everything's going to be alright,” she assured him. And with that she left.

She knew it would only take moments for her to get to her apartment and talk with Superman. This was important to Clark, and she had no doubt that Superman would be there before she was. She was right.

As soon as she opened her door, he stepped in through the open window, and she closed the door.

“Superman,” she pleaded, “I need you to freeze me.”

“Freeze you?” Superman questioned, his voice full of disbelief.

“Yes,” she confirmed. She began pacing her living room, even though she felt a bizarre sense of calm. “Like cryogenics. You know, people who fall into frozen lakes and they get revived? You could freeze me with your breath.” She began walking toward Superman. “Fast. I've seen you do it a hundred times.” She stopped a few feet in front of him and met his eyes. “And then I would look like I was dead, and you could take my body—”

“Lois!” he interrupted, shaking his head. “Do you have any idea how dangerous that is? You could have arterial ruptures, permanent brain damage...” He released a heavy breath, then continued, eyes locked to hers, “Lois, you could die.”

A niggling of doubt tried to worm its way in, but she pressed on, determined to help. “Yes, I could die,” she acknowledged. She took a seat on the couch. “But Clark's parents will die unless we help them.” She looked up and saw the hesitation on his face. How could she make him understand how important this was? He sat down, angling himself toward her. “Please, Superman,” she pleaded. “You haven't seen him. You don't know what he's going through. He needs me! And I have never needed you more than I do right now. You just can't turn me down. You can't.”

Superman released a breath and closed his eyes. She met his eyes when they opened and dared him to say no.

“Alright,” he finally agreed. Then, he stood up slowly.

As the realization of what was about to happen sank in, she stood up and released a shaky breath. There was one more thing she needed to say, just in case. “If... anything happens,” she breathed, “tell Clark that I love him.”

Superman's eyes seemed to see something in her, but what, she couldn't say. “He knows. But I'll tell him. Close your eyes,” he instructed.

She did. She heard him release another breath and felt his finger slip under her hair at her ear. He pressed his palm against her cheek and a glaring truth seared her skin as she reached for that suddenly familiar hand. Was that why he'd looked at her that way moments before, when she confessed her love of... him?

Her eyes flew open to find a face she knew intimately, and she was shocked at the revelation. “The way you just touched me,” she whispered.

He stepped back, this time with a look of knowing on his face. “Close your eyes,” he instructed again. And she did so, knowing that... Clark... would keep her safe.

###

She instantly recalled everything about that moment, the turning point when she knew Clark was Superman. The smell of his hand. The warmth it lent her. The heat in his eyes. The sound of his grateful voice. Grateful, though grateful didn't quite capture what he must have felt at realizing that she would do this for him without even having to be asked.

And yet, Lex was now in so many of these memories. He was invading, changing them into something ... repulsive.

Her memories of things from the past two and a half years now seemed to be in bits and pieces, as if her mind, her memories had been run through a blender. She wondered if she had even remembered everything. What else could be missing?

The fog covering her vision cleared just enough that she could see Scott. How much time had passed? He continued to dance with her, a lifeline between this ridiculous flood of memories that contradicted all that she had believed and the reality around her.

He had somehow... unlocked it all... on purpose? What did he know?

She opened her mouth to ask but was engulfed once more.

###

November 20, 1995

They stood alone just inside the closed entry hall, preparing to go outside and address the crowd that had come to see him off. Lois felt a mixture of emotions. She was confident he would return and wanted to believe that everything would be just fine, yet her heart ached knowing that he would be away from her and that she would be powerless to help him if anything happened. His hands rested on her shoulders as she stood inches in front of him with her hands on his chest, memorizing their last moments together.

"I'll miss you," she said quietly as she leaned her head forward to rest on his chin.

"I know," he whispered. He moved his arms to encircle her and touched his lips the top of her head.

"I wish I knew how long you'd be gone. That would make this so much easier." She threaded her arms around him and turned her head and laid her ear on his chest. As close as she was, she felt so very far away, needing to be closer, to hold on and never let go.

"I know," he said, squeezing her tightly.

She looked up to see his face and the tears in his eyes matched the anguish in her heart. How would she manage without him? She knew it was necessary. This was something he had to do. She had encouraged him when he wasn't sure. Reminded him of why he needed to do this. Put his needs above her own.

"Lois, I will never stop thinking about you." His eyes remained transfixed on hers. "You will be what keeps me going, what keeps me grounded... what pulls me home." He leaned in then, slowly savoring this last moment together.

She tilted her face up to his, holding his eyes, and brought her arms around to put her hands on his face. He pulled her in as close as possible. One arm wrapped around her waist, the other rested on the back of her neck, trapping her to him passionately, pressing them against each other; their eyes locked.

"I love you, Lois," he breathed.

"Clark—"

He prevented her from saying anything more with a kiss so full of passion that there could be no questioning where his heart lay. She poured her own heart into the kiss as well. She could stay here forever in his arms, safe and secure.

But no, he was leaving her. What had she been thinking to insist he go? She choked on her breath, suddenly bereft, and a muffled sob split them apart.

"What if you can't get back?" she asked, terrified, her fears and worries taking over. "Clark, I—"

"No, Lois." He shook his head and quelled her fears with his courage. "Don't think like that. I will be back, and we'll live out the rest of our lives, together, you as my wife and me as your husband. We'll start a family. And grow old together." He looked into her eyes as he said this, and she could see it. All of it.

The images were beautiful. She never thought this kind of life would ever be something she wanted — a home, a family. But with Clark, she wanted it all. And she knew it would be so.

"I have to be going now," he broke in, cutting through the images.

"Please," she begged. She turned her face downward and closed her eyes, willing circumstances to be different. "Just a few more minutes."

His finger brought her chin upward, and she found herself falling into his deep, brown eyes. "Anything," he said and pressed his mouth to hers once more. She felt herself being lifted from the floor. He was everything to her, and she loved him so deeply. She wondered how it could have ever taken her so long to realize just how important he was.

As he pulled himself away from her, she could see the anguish it caused him to do so and closed her eyes at the sorrow on his face. He squeezed her hands in his and slowly released them. She heard the door open and applause filtered in from outside. She opened her eyes just in time to see him turn away from her and step toward the door.

Tears sprung free from her eyes, and a small sob escaped her. She could run and stop him... But no one could know, and the open door was a barrier that prevented her from going to him once more. She stood there, watching in slow motion as he walked away from her. He stopped and turned to look at her and mouthed the words 'I love you' once more. She nodded and wrapped her arms around herself, suddenly aware of the cold in his absence. The door closed, and she dropped to her knees, weeping.

###

Clark.

He was gone.

She could feel the impressive sense of loss even though she couldn't recall why he had left. And now, she found herself trapped in a tangled mess. He wouldn't be able to save her.

She felt a tear slide down her cheek.

The mist lifted and allowed her to finally focus on Scott's face. She saw him smile softly as he whispered, "Clark Kent didn't leave, Lois."

A lump formed in her throat. Could he possibly know what she'd just seen in her mind? Did he know? "What?" was all she was able to croak out.

"He is alive and... well," he verified, continually swaying with the music. She recalled then that they were still on the dance floor, the sounds of the bridging instrumental in the middle of *Unforgettable* finally registering in her ears. Had it really only been a minute or so?

The words of the song began again and doused her in irony. She had forgotten... everything. Her heart raced, and her breathing was shallow.

"Can I see him?" she asked breathlessly.

"No," he said with a sorrowful look in his eyes. She began to feel queasy, and it became difficult to hold herself upright. "Lois, you can't let anyone know you've remembered," he advised. "You have to stick with how things are now." At her defeated look, he smiled. "Just until we figure out how to fix it all."

"Who... who...?" Lois started to ask, her thoughts still muddled. She tried again, "How...?" She shook her head and finally settled for, "What happened?"

"Lex."

His one-word answer was more than enough explanation and not enough at the same time. The man who claimed to love her, who had been sharing his life with her, who was here reveling in their marriage, had warped her perception of reality. His conduct and demeanor had been so genuine. But Clark belonged in those memories. She was sure of it.

"He reprogrammed your memory," Scott continued. "Yours and Clark's. And anyone else's he needed to so that he could get what he wanted."

Her mind caught some of the words of the song they were dancing to. '*Unforgettable, in every way...*' The music lent an eerie feel to her unraveling memory. She swallowed in an effort to stem her rising discomfort.

"Perry and Jimmy?" she wondered aloud, glancing at Scott again.

"Almost everyone in the US," he admitted. Scott's eyes revealed his concern, but he kept a light smile on his face as if none of this was happening. He was her friend, an ally, she had no doubt about that either.

She shook her head, trying to comprehend the magnitude of all that she'd just learned.

"How?" she finally managed to ask.

"I can't answer that now, but you are fully aware of just how bad this situation really is. Do you still remember all the... false things?"

She slowly nodded. So many conflicting memories floated in and out of focus. Some that included Clark would skirt past and then shift to feature Lex and then back to Clark again. Superman looking lovingly into her eyes before acting completely aloof and detached, then sweeping her off her feet. She felt nauseous.

"You must keep up the act," Scott instructed. The grave look on his face told Lois that there was likely more at stake than she realized just now, causing her to wonder just how dangerous the situation could be.

"I will," she whispered, swallowing to contain the disgusting feeling of foreboding that threatened to overwhelm her.

Scott slowly led her back to Lex just before the song ended, grasping her arm to support her as she wobbled. Had all that really happened in a matter of minutes? It felt like days had gone by as her world had shifted. Suddenly Lois was worried she wouldn't be able to do this. Who could she turn to? She felt so alone and helpless.

"Act like your head hurts," Scott quickly whispered to her as they neared Lex.

"Not a problem," she whispered back. Placing her fingers on her right temple and rubbing slowly, she closed her eyes as Scott guided her.

"Lex, it seems as though Lois has developed a headache," he said with genuine concern in his voice. "I think she might need to go home."

Scott passed her hand to Lex who took it with such gentleness that Lois started. Her eyes opened, and she hoped he couldn't see the uncertainty she felt. Who was this *husband* of hers?

Lex's eyes looked so genuinely concerned. "Lois, are you alright?" he asked, the concern also evident in his furrowed brow and gentle tone.

"I— I'm okay," she stuttered. Would Lex see through her? "I think all the preparing for this party took more out of me than I realized." She laughed half-heartedly. "I just need to lie down for a bit."

Lex reached out to set his glass down and then grasped her other hand. "I'll take you home right now, then."

His touch felt suddenly foreign. "Oh, no, Lex," she countered. She needed some time to collect herself, figure out what was real and not real, how to act in what seemed like a parallel universe. "I couldn't take you away from this. One of us should stay." She forced a small smile to reassure him, hoping her obvious nausea would cover any indication that she was terrified of what would happen.

"She's right Lex, we can't have both guests of honor leave the party early. I'd be happy to see her home for you," Scott offered.

"Well." Lex paused for a moment to consider this. "I suppose I could stay... if you are sure you are alright." He squeezed her hands again and the confusion threatened to overwhelm her once more.

"I'll be fine," she said, inclining her head to avoid his eyes. She lightly squeezed his fingers to reassure him.

"Alright." Lex gave her a sympathetic smile and kissed her forehead where she'd been rubbing it.

His touch to her temple brought up memories of intimacy that she knew without a doubt were true, and the intense feeling of guilt overwhelmed her to the point that she knew she would lose her dinner if she didn't leave soon. She pulled her hands from Lex's and rushed for the doorway, hearing his last bit of instructions to Scott. "Take our car, Scott. She'll be the most comfortable in it for the ride home," he said. "And stay with her until I return."

Just outside the doorway, she emptied the contents of her stomach into the terra cotta planter of a ficus tree that was brought

in for the occasion. She felt horrible both physically and emotionally. How had this happened? Was she the most despicable woman having an affair with another...? Would she find Clark? Would he forgive her for this?

As she stood there leaning on the wall with her head angled upward and her eyes closed, considering whether her stomach had any more to rid itself of, Scott came up next to her and placed a damp napkin in her hand. She wondered again what role Scott played in this muddled predicament. He was on her side, she knew, if he had intended to release those memories tonight and tell her that some evil plan was underfoot. But was he really whom he claimed to be?

"The car will meet us at the side door, down this hall," Scott said, gesturing away from the main exit and the possibility of questions and stares.

As soon as they exited the building, the cool, crisp winter air restored some of her composure, but she knew it would be some time before any of this made sense. Scott helped her into the seat before getting into the car himself and they headed... home?

Part 2 – "...when first we practice to deceive." – Marmion (Walter Scott)

Chapter 5

September 15, 1995

Lex was patient. It was a gift to have such a high level of patience. One of Lex's other talents was character assessment. His instincts told him that this Mayzik had something very valuable to offer him. Lex had been planning this conversation for some time. Calculated networking and persuasion had led up to this moment. Today Lex would discover something that would alter the course of his life. He could feel it in his bones.

Rightly so, he had been limited to few and far between interactions with fellow inmates of the prison. Not because he was violent, but because the justice system would be foolish to believe it couldn't be swayed by a mastermind like Lex Luthor. Naturally, though, he had managed to finagle things to suit his needs and finally found not just one guard who would orchestrate a meeting between them, but two.

Carl Buchner, the guard assigned to supervise Lex's comings and goings most days as well as this one, led him to the common room and released him. A look crossed between them, and Lex turned his attention to the other door across the room that Jason Mayzik had just come through. Carl would be gone for two hours, giving him ample time to get what he needed from Mayzik. Lex gave a discreet nod to Travis Knapp, the other guard doing his bidding.

Lex had lost everything.

His fortune was gone.

The disenchanted Lois Lane held nothing but pity for him.

His status in the city he had called his own had been taken over by his arch nemesis.

All his time in prison thus far had been spent stewing in his hatred of their beloved super-powered *refugee*. The alien had stolen everything from him and reduced him to nothing but a common convict, forced to spend his time behind bars when he should be the one in control. He hadn't even been lucky enough to bypass his fate, his chance thwarted by the quick actions of the oh-so-virtuous Superman.

But now he'd been afforded a second chance – an opportunity to get back what was rightfully his. And he would do so with the aid of Jason Mayzik, a jeweler's son sent to prison for stealing from his own father and blackmailing Superman. How fortunate for Lex that his long-avoided imprisonment resulted in an opportunity to associate with a man after his own heart. Lex had heard of Mayzik's intense hatred of Superman and was immediately tempted to learn more. His unflinching ingenuity

produced this break in his bad luck to pursue an acquaintance with as much privacy as two inmates in a medium security prison could ever hope for.

"Mayzik," Lex greeted. "How is your time in confinement going?" Lex gestured to a couple of arm chairs facing an empty table near the edge of the large main room.

"Lex Luthor," Mayzik said, seeming only mildly startled at the meeting. Lex smiled inwardly as he watched Mayzik's defenses go up immediately. They sat in the chairs Lex had indicated. The side view that these seats afforded Lex was one he preferred. "I'd say it is going better now. It is a pleasure to meet such a famous criminal."

"Criminal?" Lex allowed the mild offense he felt to show. "That term has such bad connotations. Surely there is something better."

"Yes, well," Mayzik eluded answering. "I've always admired your *ambitions* in life... and sought them for myself."

"You flatter me, Mayzik," Lex said flatly. "Let's cut to the chase then, shall we?"

"Certainly." Mayzik relaxed back into the chair and waited as if he had the upper hand.

"I understand you and I share a keen hatred of a particular superhero that likes to run around in tights and a cape," Lex began.

"You'd be right on that account," Mayzik acknowledged.

"I'd love to know more about how you managed to blackmail Superman, and successfully, as it's told to me."

"I'm sure you would." He smiled as if he held the world in his hands. "I've been thinking about the offer your... man... disclosed to me." Was that surprise Lex saw? Was Mayzik *surprised* that even in prison Lex Luthor would have people to do his bidding? Or was it the offer that surprised him?

"And was it to your liking?" Lex inquired.

Mayzik seemed to think about it for a moment before a grin teased the corners of his mouth. "Actually, I'm not sure it's adequate."

Lex was absolutely certain it was entirely adequate. Even so, he was only mildly offended by this. After all, Mayzik was essentially a child, young and inexperienced. His father died before adequately training him in the art of successful business dealings. *Patience*, thought Lex.

"And what would be required to make it adequate?"

"Double." Mayzik nonchalantly examined his fingernails.

"You must have quite the morsel of information."

"Obviously," Mayzik sneered. "I assure you it is well worth the expense."

"I'm sure."

"Look, if you don't care to hear what I know, I'm sure I can find someone else—"

"That," Lex interrupted, holding up his hand, "won't be necessary. I agree to your terms." He conceded for now, knowing full well that if he didn't get what he wanted, he would find another way to get his money's worth. "Just be aware that I do not put up with being let down."

"Excellent. And you *won't* be disappointed."

"Good then. Shall we proceed?" Lex was running low on patience.

"Blackmailing Superman was actually quite easy," Mayzik began. "You merely need to know the right pieces of information."

"Naturally. And that would be...?" Lex pressed.

"I was blessed with a hoarder for a father, you know. Took forever to go through all his junk after he died. One day I came upon this ratty old book. I can't explain what caused me to give it a second glance, but I did. Read it cover to cover, actually. It was a wealth of information – predictions, all of them true."

Lex waited patiently, intrigued.

"It was like reading Nostradamus but specifically about

Metropolis and its inhabitants... including Superman."

"Do you still have this book?" Lex asked.

"Sadly, no," Mayzik said with a shake of his head. "That blockhead Superman destroyed it."

"How, then, am I to believe what you are about to tell me?"

Information was one thing, but unsubstantiated information was an entirely different beast. Mayzik could make up anything, and while eventually Lex would know, he would rather not have his assets compromised while he awaited verification.

"Early on, after the appearance of Superman, you were in possession of a... device. I don't need to mention how you came to be in possession of this thing. It was a globe actually, of the planet Krypton."

Lex's eyebrows rose and when Mayzik turned to see him, he gave a half smile and continued.

"This globe would occasionally glow, and an image would appear to whomever was holding it, sharing information about Kal-El, which even you realized was Superman. Kal-El's planet exploded shortly after he was born. You were quite surprised to learn that his parents sent him to Earth as a baby. Did you know these images were viewed by both you and Superman? The globe was... is... somehow connected to him."

"This... was in your book?" Lex asked in disbelief.

"Is there another way I could know that?" Mayzik went back to investigating his fingernails.

"Didn't Nigel St. John work with you to blackmail Superman?" Lex considered it possible that his former trusted associate may have given that bit of information to Mayzik, since he was there. He would like to think better of his confidante, but after all, Nigel did double-cross him in the end.

"Funny thing, your *man-servant*," Mayzik began, setting his hands down on his knees. "Despite his double-crossing of you recently, back then he still behaved like a loyal puppy. I couldn't get him to tell me anything."

"I'm glad to hear it." It appeared that Lex had no choice but to believe him, for now. But more importantly, this would also mean that the next bit of information Lex would leach from Mayzik would likely be true as well, provided he wasn't lying about Nigel. "So, your information is accurate?"

"Every last bit. It was how my father was able to become so rich. He merely invested based on what was in the book. He was *not* the hardworking type he showed everybody."

"I see. So, something from this book prompted you to blackmail Superman?"

"Nah, he was just a means to an end. I figured I could rid the world of Superman and Lois Lane as well as steal my father's fortune. I just let Superman know what information I had, and he was *so* willing to keep it hidden."

Lex quickly worked to mask his indignation at hearing that Mayzik was after Lois as well. It was looking like Mayzik would see much less than double his original offer.

"I see. And some of this information was rather important?"

Lex asked hastily. This conversation was taking much longer than he would have liked, the unnecessary banter grating on his nerves.

"Oh, it was the kind of stuff a celebrity would never want printed."

Lex cocked an eyebrow and waited.

"Nothing like illegal behavior or an embarrassing illness... but a secret identity," Mayzik said slowly. "Connection. Relatives, so to speak. Possible hostages, as it were."

"You mean to tell me that Superman masquerades among the masses as a normal person?" Lex could hardly contain his excitement at what he was hearing. Mayzik knew Superman's secret identity!

"Yes, and you won't be surprised to hear who!" The twinkle in Mayzik's eyes was exhilarating, like a toddler ready to spill the beans on a surprise. "Or maybe you will be! Either way... it's too

bad Superman destroyed the book, or I'd tell everyone. You are the only one in a position to believe me, with the sordid history the two of you share..."

Only excessive experience on this end of a business deal would allow Lex to so easily mask his intense fascination. He merely lifted his eyebrows and waited for the anticipated bit of gossip.

"Clark Kent." The way Mayzik enunciated each part of the name emphasized the immense significance of what he was saying.

Lex mulled the name around, assimilating it with what he knew about Superman and Clark Kent. Suddenly, all the pieces fit together. Kent was so obviously never present when Superman was. Superman was equally never present when Kent was. The obsequious reporter that had taken his place, *his place*, in Lois's heart did have similar features to his only worthy adversary. He imagined the meek Kent removing his disguise and assuming a different demeanor.

Superman had been hiding in plain sight.

How stupid everyone was to be fooled by a pair of glasses.

Then another thought dawned on him.

Lois.

She and Kent were dating. He'd noted that when he returned from the dead. While she still had an eye for the super hero, she seemed to be ogling the simple man just as much, if not more. Thanks to Carl, he was aware that the two were now an item, practically engaged. Did she know? She must have for she was no fool. How long had she known and how did she find out?

Lex felt his upper lip curling in rage at being so easily fooled and fought to maintain his composure by taking a slow breath. It would not do to allow Mayzik to see how his information had affected him. Recalling that Mayzik had unwittingly given up the goods before receiving his due, he smiled.

"Well, that is quite fascinating," Lex replied, nodding in thanks. "You'll find your reward as per our original agreement waiting in the manner discussed."

"What?!" Mayzik said irately, shocked at the possibility of being outwitted, Lex suspected. "You agreed to double."

"Yes, and when I can verify your information, you will see the rest." A manipulative smile spread on Lex's face.

Mayzik grimaced but then sat back, defeated. "I suppose I have no choice at this point," he said.

"If only your father had been alive longer. He might have been able to teach you some of his business skills," Lex mocked. "It's been a pleasure doing business with you." With that, he nodded to Knapp.

As Knapp came and collected Mayzik, leading him away, Lex remained in his chair for a few minutes longer, meditating over what he'd just learned.

Clark Kent is Superman.

Knowing that Kent had somehow won Lois's heart made Lex sick to his stomach. He hated to be bested, even more so when it didn't make sense – Kent had *nothing* to offer Lois. It was salt to an open wound to learn that his arch enemy was one and the same. That charlatan had stolen *everything* from Lex. His remaining time in prison would not be wasted but instead would be rather valuable. He would use all of his time planning a new and miserable existence for *both* of his enemies.

September 25, 1995

It was a brilliant plan. As soon as he thought of it, he knew that it would not only be successful, but it would also provide him with an infallible way to ensure that Lois Lane would be his and his enemy Clark Kent, a.k.a Superman, would suffer a miserable existence for the rest of his pathetic life. Eager to begin laying the foundation for such an ingenious strategy, he first found the right people to participate.

Carl had become Lex's trusted assistant out of necessity, replacing those who had previously held the position. It was only coincidentally that Carl became one of Lex's full-time guards, but Lex welcomed it as soon as he realized just how easily Carl was manipulated. In a short time, Lex was able to coax him into doing his bidding. Lex was doubly pleased with how well he was able to do the things requested of him, as if he had missed his calling in becoming a prison guard when he clearly was destined for a life of immorality. If only Lex had met Carl before being incarcerated.

In the time since the fateful conversation with Mayzik, Lex used Carl to assemble a team of evildoers with the necessary skills to complete his agenda. Carl began scheduling meetings for him as soon as was reasonable so that no one would be the wiser. In addition to reviewing notes from Carl on those with the innate evil and know-how to be capable of accomplishing what he wanted, Lex began working on how he, and anyone else he needed, would be released from prison. Lex's first opportunity to test Carl's ability to choose accomplices came in the form of a meeting with another inmate who, like Mayzik, had something to offer Lex.

"He's a genius," Carl told him days before. "So persuasive that he convinced a board of directors that his research was ethical when it was probably the most unethical proposal yet."

Jay Hightower was a neurologist and a researcher. He was also gifted with engineering skills and was apparently highly persuasive. Despite that influence, Hightower, too, found himself in the same medium security prison as Lex. And this was the perfect opportunity for Lex to pick his brain and recruit him into his masterful plan.

Lex sat waiting for the arrival of his next appointment, scheduled in the same manner as his first. Lex mulled over his ideas, thankful that his memory was razor sharp and the need to write things down to keep track of them was nonexistent. The opening of the other door grabbed his attention.

A tall, thin man walked into the room, carrying himself with confidence, and sat in the chair next to Lex, propping his feet up on the table in front of them. Intelligence exuded from his pores, and Lex realized that Hightower was much younger than he was expecting. Yet Carl insisted that this would be the guy to get things done. This meeting would certainly serve as a test of Carl's abilities as much as Hightower's.

"Dr. Hightower," Lex greeted him. "It's a pleasure to meet you." Lex extended his hand.

Hightower grasped his hand and gave it a firm shake. "Likewise," he said with a smile. "Buchner says that you need someone to... invent something for you."

Lex was impressed by the handshake and furthermore by the young man's eagerness to get to the point. This conversation would go much better than the one with Mayzik. A smile spread across his face.

"Yes, well, I believe I've already invented it, but I lack certain skills to actually turn it into a reality," Lex began.

"Well, your offer was a little unclear to me." He turned his head to look at Lex before asking, "Will you also be supplying the materials, or will I have to procure those myself out of what you intend to pay me?"

"Everything will be provided," Lex answered. "It will be similar in nature to working at a research facility. You will submit requests for approval, verifying their necessity. And, so long as you are making adequate progress, everything you wish will be granted."

Hightower maintained eye contact with Lex for a moment, his brows drawn, assessing, before he nodded his agreement. "Tell me what you want."

Lex took a page from Hightower's book and got right to it. "I want a machine that can erase select memories, change others, and implant new ones into any number of people." He watched Hightower's eyes widened as he said this and held his gaze.

Hightower turned to face forward again as his facial expression changed repeatedly until he said, “Alright...”

“Can you do it?” Lex asked.

“Yes...” Hightower confirmed slowly.

The hesitation in Hightower’s voice was unconvincing. “How difficult is it to replace memories?” Lex asked.

Hightower’s changing emotions seemed to settle into confidence in the end, and he turned his body to face Lex, placing his knee on the chair. “It isn’t difficult to remove them,” he began, illustrating with his hands, “but putting something in its place is...” Lex lifted an eyebrow and waited for Hightower to continue. Hightower shifted in his seat to face forward again. “So far, there have always been... unusual side effects due to the methods used.” He waved his hand in the air as he said, “I’d have to come up with something entirely new.”

Lex nodded. “Yes, this procedure must be permanent and unnoticeable—”

“I was working on that before I was... detained,” Hightower cut in.

“Excellent,” Lex said honestly. “I also require you to come up with a way to use this device on a... substantial audience.”

“How substantial?” asked Hightower, peeking at Lex.

“Everyone we can reach,” Lex stated bluntly.

“Excuse me?” Hightower’s eyes went wide again.

“It must also be customizable depending on the person its used on,” Lex added.

“Let me see if I get what you’re saying. You want to pick and choose the memories that various people keep, lose, or have changed?”

Lex nodded. Perhaps Carl had exaggerated the usefulness of this *Dr. Hightower*. He couldn’t risk giving the job to someone who doubted the possibility of completing the task.

Hightower frowned at him. “Luthor, this is a large task, *huge*. I don’t even know how much time or money that would take. Are you in a position to wait if needed, to increase the budget as well?”

Lex would have rolled his eyes if he weren’t as experienced. Instead, he simply met Hightower with a direct stare. “Of course. Can you do it?”

Hightower sat back in his chair and propped his feet back up on the table. “Absolutely,” he said with a tone that finally convinced Lex he had found his man. “I’ll need assistants and a place to work. How exactly do you plan on getting me out of here?”

“Done,” Lex stated with authority. “And, leave that to me. The less you know the better.” Lex shifted in his chair to be able to extend his hand to seal the deal.

“Okay,” Hightower said, shaking Lex’s hand again. He moved to stand and asked, “Are we done then?”

“Yes,” Lex said as he also stood. “I’ll not be seeing you again, mind you. When you believe you’ve achieved the goal I’ve set for you, contact Carl. He will be waiting to hear from you.”

“You got it. Thank you, Mr. Luthor. It’s been a pleasure.” Hightower gave a slight nod of his head before turning to the door where Knapp stood waiting to escort him back.

With a satisfied sigh, Lex walked to the window that overlooked a courtyard below. Character assessment was indeed his greatest gift. In the short time he spoke with Hightower, he could tell that this idea of his was something that even Hightower found alluring. And that would provide additional motivation beyond anything Lex could offer him.

Lex lowered his head and peeked over his shoulder at Carl who stood at the door through which they would leave. He gave a slight nod of approval and laughed internally at the man’s inability to hide his sense of relief. Carl and Hightower had passed their first tests. Confidence in his plan solidified and, without hesitation, he moved on to the next step.

September 29, 1995

A beep from the computer at his lab station jarred Scott Ferguson, a research assistant at S.T.A.R. Labs, back to reality, indicating that it had finally completed the hours of analysis it had been working on. Wiping his bleary eyes and setting his book down on the table, he sat forward and squinted at the screen, trying to make sense of the data he saw there. Then, his grey-green eyes widened.

Scott had been working this boring job for almost two years, and only now was it about to get exciting. It was a nice job, but only about twenty percent of the time was it interesting and fun. The other eighty percent of the time was filled with meetings, paperwork, and endless hours of waiting for some part to come in or a specialist to arrive to fix something only one person in the world even knew existed. His favorite part of that eighty percent was that he could surf the internet or read a good book as he sat waiting on something.

But today would fall into the twenty percent.

While this was close to the kind of job he’d always wanted, he certainly hadn’t come by it in any sort of traditional manner. His run-of-the-mill childhood was uneventful at best. His family was just like any other – his father, a laborer in a factory that manufactured pieces that would eventually be assembled into refrigerators, his mother, a traditional stay-at-home mom, himself and his younger sister.

He would have worked in the same factory as his father if it hadn’t been for an aptitude test he’d taken in high school. He didn’t quite have the intelligence to be an engineer, but the test pointed him in the direction of nuclear technician. After he graduated high school with the rest of his peers without any particular honors, he began a vocational program to become a nuclear operator.

His path had changed, however, when his father died unexpectedly, leaving Scott to take care of his mother, whose recent injury in a car accident kept her from being able to work, and his sister, who was not even in high school yet. He could no longer justify going halfway across the country for an entry level job. And with no prospects in the vicinity of Metropolis, he worked part time positions where he could get them, all unrelated to his particular skill set. None of the positions he held paid enough and desperation soon led him in an altogether different direction.

He had just picked up another part time job as a cashier at a gas station just down the street from his apartment. He had started chatting with one of the other employees, John, who made pizzas in the evenings. Ever in a good mood, ready to joke about anything, it lifted Scott’s spirits to be able to hang out with him.

A few weeks into the job, John had made an attempt to further break the ice. “I know what it’s like to be working paycheck to paycheck,” he’d said. “Struggling, hoping to make ends meet. I can take you to meet someone who can help.” And the next thing Scott knew, he had been convinced to meet John’s other boss, the man responsible for John’s seemingly perpetual good mood.

Nothing could have prepared him for that first introduction. The building where they had met looked like a perfectly upstanding place complete with potted plants and secretaries manning the front desk. Mr. Jones was a charismatic salesman who presented the job opportunity in the best of light and easily won Scott over with the benefits and pay that promised him an easy means to take care of his mother and sister.

It wasn’t until later that Scott even realized just exactly what he was being asked to do. The tasks had been small and benign at first – deliver this item to this address, pick this package up and hand it to that person – but they became progressively more suspect in nature – prevent this person from arriving, cut that cable – but he was always paid well for everything he did. Well enough

that he was able to keep one part time job for appearances and relax knowing that his family would have everything they needed.

After many years of doing someone else's dirty work, an associate of Lex Luthor's approached him with a proposal to take on a new position. The job was simple, he would work as a lab technician and do whatever the scientists he worked with told him to. And if anything regarding Superman ever crossed his path, he was to share that information with Luthor. The thought of doing something more in line with what he'd envisioned as a kid appealed to him, and Scott took him up on the offer almost immediately.

Unfortunately for Luthor, during that first year, nothing came up. And then Luthor died. It was lucky that Scott was able to keep his job. If only Luthor had stuck around longer. During that second year, not only had Superman gone blind, but then the lab next to his installed a vault to house kryptonite! When Lex Luthor managed to come back from the dead, his position picked right back up, and he'd told Luthor about the kryptonite and the research they were doing with it – trying to stop it from affecting Superman. He continued in the position with a very generous increase in pay despite Luthor's capture.

But now, this! *This* would be an interesting bit of information to share with Luthor. It could even spell a nice bonus on his part.

The S.T.A.R. Labs Astronomy team had been tracking a large object moving through space around a red star, in another solar system like ours. Only the orbit of this object was as if it had been rocketed from its original motion. It revolved around that red sun in a strange and very elliptical path. Too big to be a comet or asteroid, the astronomers ran tests to determine what it was.

Scott was running the emission spectra analysis this morning. The results he now saw were incredible. Right there in the middle of the graph was the precise set of blips signifying the presence of kryptonite in this object.

Which meant it was somehow related to Superman.

Scott shoved hard against the floor, pushing his rolling lab stool the ten feet to his desk where he grabbed his phone. He pressed a single button on the phone and was immediately connected with Carl Buchner, Luthor's newest right-hand man.

"Carl, I've got something for Luthor," he nearly yelled into the phone with his level of excitement so high. He started tapping his pencil on the table, listening.

His brow furrowed. "What? No, I can't leave right now—" He stopped mid-sentence. "Oh... I see." He stood up from his stool, pacing. "Um... Okay, I'll be there in fifteen."

He set the phone back in its cradle and scribbled a quick note to his supervisor. He set the note on the other desk in the room and grabbed his jacket from the hat stand next to the door. With a quick glance back at the computer screen across the room, he left, closing the door behind him.

Fifteen minutes later, Scott walked up to the door of St. Dominic's Catholic Church on the corner of Bessolo Blvd and Trumbull. It stood with its bell tower at the intersection's corner, and its west facing entrances on either side of the huge stained-glass window were composed of geometric shapes and flowers. Scott shook his head at the audacity of Luthor's use of a place of God as a meeting location for what were surely sinful acts.

He knocked on the heavy door and waited. Carl answered it, and together they went inside. A small narthex fronted the main sanctuary, separated by a beautiful tiled archway. They didn't enter the sanctuary but instead went through a heavy door at the south end that led them down a spiral staircase, as if entering a dungeon.

"Glad you could make it," Carl interrupted his thoughts as they descended the stairs. "We're reducing your hours at S.T.A.R. Labs so you can work here part time. Hamilton understands the nature of your family emergency, and you'll be coming here half days to take care of your dad."

"Considering my dad died when I was twenty-one, that will be weird," Scott laughed.

"Did I say dad? I meant stepdad," Carl said, laughing as well.

"Of course..." Scott shook his head.

They reached the bottom of the staircase and stopped in front of another heavy door. Carl pulled a set of keys out of his pocket and inserted a very old looking one into the equally old looking key hole. The door groaned in protest as it opened. Carl extended his hand as he said, "Please, come this way and allow me to introduce to you your stepdad."

Scott smirked. "Ha."

The room they entered didn't match the door or the rest of the church in the least. No more intricately designed stained glass or expertly carved wooden features existed. This room was stark and sterile feeling. Storage cabinets and countertops lined every wall separated by fume hoods spaced around the room. On the opposite side from where they'd entered, a few doors stood closed. A mixture of large work tables and smaller desks were sprinkled about the center of the room. It reminded Scott of some of the science labs he'd seen in college catalogs, and he was excited even more by the proposition of doing something related to his skill set.

But the music.

Scott recognized the song only because it had been in a rerun of some old show his sister was watching just the other day. Nat King Cole was the singer, but he didn't know what the name of the song was. It wasn't bad music, but it was much louder than Scott thought necessary. One of the doors opened and a man, who Carl must have referred to as his stepdad, walked in.

"Oh, sorry," he said, startled. "Let me turn that down." He reached for a knob on an antique radio that stood out in the room now that Scott had noticed it. "Hi," he greeted, extending his hand. "Dr. Jay Hightower."

Jay Hightower was a tall, thin man dressed in what appeared to be something of the business casual nature underneath his spotless white lab coat. He looked much too young to be running a job like this. In addition, Scott couldn't see why a person like Hightower would be listening to Nat King Cole. Wasn't that kind of music more popular with the older, more retired crowd?

"Hello." Scott shook the proffered hand. "I'm Scott. Looks like I'll be working for you for a while."

"Great," Jay said, obviously pleased. "What are your qualifications?"

"What do you need my qualifications to be?" Scott shot back, raising his eyebrows playfully. Having no idea what he was here to do in the first place, he wasn't sure what qualifications would be relevant.

"Funny," Jay quipped, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Look, I have to go," said Carl, turning for the door. "I'll catch up with you guys every now and then for updates." He shut the door, and Scott heard the key turn in the lock.

"Did he just lock us in here?" Scott asked as he quickly turned toward Jay.

"No, that's just to keep people from coming in." Jay took a step toward one of the desks and pulled a key from its top drawer. Handing it to Scott, he said, "I hope I don't have to tell you not to lose it."

Scott shook his head. "So, what do you need me to do?" he asked, slipping the key into his pocket as he looked around at the materials and equipment strewn about the tables.

"Are you any good at electronics?" Jay cocked his head toward a table covered in circuit parts and soldering equipment.

"Pretty good." Scott walked to the table and began picking through the things on it. This would have been his second choice had he not gotten into the nuclear operator program. He'd put in a lot of practice in school on his own time just because he loved it so much.

"If I give you a schematic, can you build it?" Jay asked.

“Oh yeah,” he replied confidently. This was beginning to look better than his job at S.T.A.R. Labs.

“Great. Schematics are over there, materials are over there, and you can work at this workstation here.” Jay gestured to these locations as he spoke while simultaneously making his way to yet another table covered in papers. “I hope you don’t mind the music. It helps me focus.”

“Not a problem.” Scott picked up one of the schematics from the table Jay indicated and took it to the work station. “Is this Nat King Cole?” he asked.

“Yep,” Jay answered simply.

Scott began picking over the circuit pieces scattered over the table, organizing them. “You know, I always thought electronics is where I should have gone,” he said trying to make conversation.

“That’s nice.”

“What are you a doctor of?” Scott tried again.

“Neurology.”

Jay leaned over his papers and began scribbling on one of them. Scott took the hint, and they worked in silence for a time. The schematic he was working on was crudely drawn but easy enough to follow. Lacking expert knowledge, he couldn’t tell what it was or what it did. It didn’t resemble any of the ones he’d worked on in the vocational program. All the pieces he needed were there at the table, and he soldered away, Nat King Cole blaring in the background. Maybe he’d bring headphones to listen to his own music tomorrow.

Or ear plugs.

“How’d you get interested in this kind of music?” Scott asked as he finished the last connection on the circuit. “Seems a bit... old... for you.”

“My grandparents.” Jay was scrawling quickly with one hand while flipping through a stack of papers with the other. “I don’t think I ever went anywhere with my grandfather without Nat playing in the car.”

Scott stood up and crossed to the table Jay was working at. He couldn’t tell from the mess of diagrams, calculations, and nearly illegible handwriting what he was looking at. He also knew it didn’t matter. Luthor wanted him working here and paid him well to do it without question.

“My little sister likes that kind of music, though I have no idea why.” A little over ten years younger than Scott, his sister was sweet and innocent. He didn’t dare tell her who he worked for or what he really did for a living. Scott shook his head to focus on the task at hand. “Here’s your first circuit board. Where should I put it?”

“Over there is fine,” Jay said, indicating a large cabinet that had its doors hanging open. “You should be happy your sister has such fine taste in high quality music,” he added with a smile.

Scott placed the circuit he’d just finished on a shelf in the large cabinet with several other circuits that were already finished. “I just don’t know where she got it from,” he said, thinking about how this was going to be a boring job if they didn’t find anything interesting to talk about.

Chapter 6

October 13, 1995

After Carl deposited Lex at the appropriate window in the visiting area of the prison, Lex watched him continue to the edge of the room to stand watch. A quick glance revealed a petite woman with long brown hair and metal-rimmed glasses seated on the other side of the window who appeared to be irritated about something. She sat drumming her fingers loud enough to be heard through the window on a tiny spiral-bound pad of paper. Lex hid his amusement and gave her a quick nod, which she returned, and made himself comfortable in the seat before picking up the handset linked to the one already waiting in her hand.

Dr. Florence Montgomery began her career working for the

mysterious Bureau 39, an agency that, according to the information Lex had gathered, was wary of a certain alien superhero. The agency hired her as a materials scientist though her degree in biophysics would have suggested another position. Additionally, after the dismantling of Bureau 39, she had gone to work for the police department as a weapons expert.

“You’ll like this one,” Carl said as they reviewed notes last week. “That Bureau 39 hand selected her. I didn’t even get half of the first sentence out before she agreed. I thought she’d start cheering the more I talked. She’s... enthusiastic, to say the least.”

That she had eagerly accepted the invitation to meet with Luthor before he’d even finished explaining what it was all about filled Lex with excitement as well, and he looked forward to this meeting. Since it couldn’t be held privately while also taking place in the visiting area of the prison, they’d worked out a code beforehand that would allow them to speak freely.

Her eagerness was so great that she immediately began talking before the receiver reached his ear. “Mr. Luthor,” she began. “I was under the impression this meeting was supposed to start at nine forty-five. It is now nine fifty-three. I hate being made to wait.”

“My apologies,” he said sincerely, understanding the irritation he first observed when he arrived. “I have little control over the schedule here.”

She pursed her lips and took a deep breath. “Very well,” she continued. “Let’s get this over with. I understand you need someone to figure out how to adjust your furnace’s function.” She tipped her head downward to peer at him over her glasses.

Lex was taken aback by her straightforward manner and entertained by her expert use of the code at the same time. He smiled and answered slowly, “Yes, that’s—”

“Is this to be permanent or temporary?” she asked, interrupting him, clearly impatient and ready to begin.

So rarely was Lex in a position to be interrupted, he wasn’t immediately sure how to handle it. “Well,” he began again, “I’d prefer that to be an option—”

“Temporary then,” she declared, interrupting him again, “but controlled by you.” She looked down at her pad and scribbled furiously.

“Yes,” Lex confirmed, trying not to let his own impatience with her unsophisticated behavior show. “Now, Dr. Montgomery—”

“Flo, please,” she interrupted once more, not looking up from her pad as her pencil moved erratically around on the page.

“Flo,” he repeated.

Before he could recall what he had been about to say, her head popped up with a grin on her face. “Now, I’ve developed a plan to disable all of the functions, I just need to know what kind of filters I’ll have access to.”

Lex stared in shock, and his mouth fell open. Yes, Carl may have outdone himself with this one. Enthusiastic was an insufficient description of her. “Come again?”

She rolled her eyes, clearly annoyed. “Red? Green? Both?” she clarified, speaking more slowly.

“I’m sorry, I—” he tried but was interrupted yet again.

“Red filters affect the furnace’s... thermostat,” she stated, making hand gestures Lex didn’t understand. “Green filters affect the furnace’s... motor.”

He had to take a minute to consider what she could possibly mean by these references. She was using the code and obviously had it so well memorized that she sounded like an expert. Filters were kryptonite, and he knew of the red and green varieties. He nodded when at last it made sense. “Yes, I know—” was all he could get out this time.

“I know a lot of things,” she broke in.

“I’m sure you do.” It was becoming increasingly difficult to conceal his displeasure with her mannerisms.

“You ran some tests on furnaces when they first arrived,” she prattled on. “You managed to contain them in a cage made of filters. And for some reason they didn’t kill you when they had the chance... multiple times, what a fake.” She rolled her eyes again, but Lex wasn’t sure why.

He was fascinated by her ability to so easily insert the code. Lex was also stunned by all the information about himself he’d just heard and very much intrigued by this strange woman’s knowledge. “How do you know all of that?” he asked calmly. Social situations were clearly not her forte, but he could tell she was a wealth of information and ability.

“Like I said, I know things.” She shrugged and averted her eyes as if she’d realized she’d done something she shouldn’t have.

“I see.” Lex continued to look at her.

She quickly got over whatever she had been feeling or thinking and turned back to him. “My current plan requires both. Can you get them?”

The corners of Lex’s mouth angled upward slightly. He was impressed that she’d come up with this plan so fast and would do whatever it took to get what she needed. “I’m certain that won’t be a—”

“Then I can’t do it.” She pushed back into her chair suddenly, tossing her pencil down and drumming her fingers loudly again.

Lex closed his eyes to keep from rolling them. This infuriating scientist would push him to his limits. “Flo,” he said with as much patience as he could muster. “If you’ll stop interrupting me and allow me to finish, I’m sure we’ll be able to work this out.”

She blushed then and reached to tuck her hair behind her ear. “Right, sorry,” she apologized, “Lowell wasn’t allowed to accompany me. He usually keeps me in check.”

“I’m sorry he wasn’t able to join you.” Lex would have to make sure whoever *Lowell* was had a permanent spot beside her at all future meetings. “But as I was saying, you shall have whatever you need.”

Her face lit up like a child’s on Christmas morning. Lex couldn’t help but smile at her. “Ooh,” she squealed, “Excellent! If you have nothing else then, I’ll go get started.” She reached to put her pad in her bag.

“Wait just a minute,” he stopped her. “I need to tell you who to contact to get set up. And are we agreed on the price?”

“Right, yes!” she blurted. “The price is fine. I’m just so excited. I’ve been waiting for an opportunity like this one; furnaces can’t be trusted, and I’m glad someone who understands that finally wants to do something about it.” She pulled her pad of paper back out.

“Yes, well if you knew half of what I know—” he began.

“I know *more* than half,” she eyed him, making him feel scrutinized. “I gather you have just a bit more information about furnaces than I do.” She raised her eyebrows and waited expectantly.

“Ah. Well, we’ll have to clear that up soon,” he said with a smile. “Your contact person is Carl, he will get you whatever you require,” he said with a wave of his hand.

“Fantastic. Can I go now?” she said without pausing.

“Yes, thank you, Flo. I look forward to hearing about your progress on disabling furnaces.” He smiled at her as she quickly picked up her things and all but ran from the room. Lex finally relaxed in the chair, feeling very satisfied with the result of that meeting, and made a second note to ensure that *Lowell* accompanied Flo next time.

October 26, 1995

Nearly a month of listening to Nat King Cole blaring through his mind for several hours every day had gone by. It was starting to grow on Scott. He was surprised that they weren’t all about love, as all the ones he’d ever heard were; some were about friends, some about places. But often, they had a good beat and

were catchy. He was able to recognize most of them now, but occasionally Jay would put on a new one.

Jay still didn’t say much unless he was talking about Nat King Cole... or Scott’s sister. Scott regretted mentioning her that first day, but, at the same time, he was glad they had at least something they could talk about. The days in the lab were not so boring when a conversation could be had now and then.

Scott approached Jay with the latest circuitry he’d completed. He handed the piece to Jay for inspection. “I hope you don’t mind. My sister is going to stop by later,” he mentioned as Jay turned the circuit board over in his hands. “I have to drive her to our aunt’s house in Metrodale later, so I told her to meet me here.”

“In the basement of a church?” Jay side-eyed him as he tossed the circuit board onto a pile of other circuit pieces before going back to his own task, which Scott couldn’t identify. “What’d you tell her we were doing?” he asked.

“I didn’t,” Scott clarified. “She just knows I’m working for you and thinks we’re doing something for a parishioner.”

Jay laughed. “Oh yeah, Lex Luthor goes to church here.” He continued to fiddle with the pieces. “Tell her we’re building a... superconducting flux inhibitor.”

“Okay, that sounds... like a bunch of technical jargon.” It could really be the name of what they were working on, but it certainly wouldn’t mean anything to his sister. “So, what exactly are we building?” he asked.

There were two separate, seemingly different devices that were slowly taking shape in this basement laboratory of theirs. One of them looked like a briefcase with a piece that was connected by a set of thin cords. The piece at one end of the cord was a pair of glasses with a small, contoured box at the end of one ear piece. Tiny electrodes protruded from three places and would make contact with the skin at the temples and between the eyes of whoever donned them.

Scott shook his head and chuckled every time he saw the other device they were working on. It looked like an outdated computer, possibly from the 1980’s, with a very large metal cabinet covered in rows of blinking multicolored lights that housed a satellite-dish-shaped *something*. The grey locker-looking box even had a large toggle switch on the side, like it was meant for a science fiction movie.

“I haven’t come up with a name for it yet.” Jay sat back from his work station, rubbing his chin. “It’s a device that transmutes episodic anamneses by bringing them back to the hippocampus for reconstruction. It then modifies the amygdala to associate calculated perceptions to the chosen recollection.” He said this as if it should have been obvious, though it was anything but.

Scott blinked. “Sorry, can you put that in layman’s terms?”

“It changes memories.” With that, Jay went back to fiddling with the pieces in front of him.

Why he couldn’t have said that in the first place, Scott didn’t know, but at least now he understood. “Ah. Whose memories are we changing?”

“Nearly everyone eventually.”

“Everyone?” Scott’s eyebrows shot up.

“But for starters, Superman and Lois Lane,” Jay said with an excited wiggle of his eyebrows.

“Superman?” Scott wasn’t surprised, really. It was common knowledge that Luthor viewed Superman as his own personal enemy. But Scott wasn’t sure Luthor had thought this through. “How is that even going to be possible?”

“They’ve assured me that what they’re doing to him will make him no more than human. I’m not in on that part of the gig. Some Dr. Montgomery has that job.”

“Montgomery,” Scott huffed. “Sounds like a stuffy old British guy...”

“I know.” Jay laughed. “But Carl says there isn’t anyone who could do that job better than her.”

Scott caught the use of the feminine pronoun. “Oh, my apologies, a stuffy old British gal,” he corrected. “So, what’s she going to do?”

“I have no idea.” Jay shrugged. “But he’s supposed to be completely incapacitated.”

“Can’t wait to see that,” Scott said in a tone that was both excited and skeptical.

“Me either.”

“So, one of these is for Superman and one for regular people?” Scott asked, gesturing to the two devices in front of them.

Jay shook his head. “Levels of changes.” Pointing at the large one first, then the small one, he explained, “This thing here will work on many people at the same time but can’t change as much. This one here only works on one person at a time, but the changes we can make are limitless.”

“Any idea what we are changing them to?” he asked.

“Not yet. But I’m thinking about having some fun with it and adding some Nat King Cole to the mix.”

“You would.” Scott shook his head. That didn’t surprise him at all.

A knock at the door put an end to their discussion. “That’ll be my sister,” Scott said as he went to pick up his things.

“Bring her in,” Jay insisted, motioning toward the door. “I’d like to meet this Nat King Cole fan you’re related to.”

Scott went to the door and unlocked it with his copy of the key, motioning for his sister to come in. Though close in age to Jay, he assumed, she definitely didn’t behave like he did. Scott was sure it should be obvious why he felt so protective of her. She stood small in frame, obviously shy, but had blue eyes that sparkled.

Their aunt was taking her to some formal event Scott hadn’t really paid attention to but recalled as he took in the fancy dress she had donned for the event. It was a knee-length flowy thing of dark blue with a neckline that seemed to be designed to frame the treble clef necklace dangling from a delicate sterling silver chain. Her brown hair was swept up, completing the look, which brought something to Jay’s eyes that Scott both recognized and didn’t like.

“Samantha,” he began the introduction, “this is…” Except he wasn’t sure what Jay wanted to divulge.

“Justice,” the doctor supplied. A pseudonym, of course.

Justice stood from his table and took the few short steps to meet them. Reaching out his hand he added, “It’s nice to meet you, Samantha.” Scott rolled his eyes. For a moment, Scott wondered if this kid was going to turn debonair on him and kiss his sister’s hand.

“Nice to meet you, too, Justice,” Samantha greeted, shaking Jay’s hand and meeting his gaze head on. “You can call me Sam.” Scott lifted his eyebrows at the strange look in her eyes and the unexpected confidence in her voice.

November 2, 1995

Lex entered the large conference room with a folder under his arm, determination in his mind, and satisfaction on his face. Having been released from prison on parole just days ago, he found that his newly gained freedom unchained his excitement and aroused in him new levels of tenacity. His release had been a feat in itself that Carl had pulled off famously with a few very well-placed bribes and threats. It was only a matter of time before he would begin taking what was rightfully his and putting to rest anything that stood in his way.

The purpose of this meeting was to assess the current state of his scheme. He glanced around the room as he made his way to the head of the large table, the only furniture in the room except for a very thin and long high table that graced one side of the room and sat below a huge window overlooking the east end of Metropolis.

Lex quickly observed the meeting’s attendants. While the table

could seat twenty, only four chairs near the head of the table were occupied. Immediately to the left of the head of the table, Jay Hightower sat tapping a pencil on what appeared to be a dilapidated spiral notebook. Lex did not recognize the man seated beside him and assumed it must be his assistant, Scott Ferguson, who sat with his hands in his lap and a look of awe on his face that Lex appreciated. Opposite Ferguson sat Florence Montgomery with a laptop open in front of her, energetically clicking away at the keys. A person he assumed must be the Lowell whom she couldn’t function without was seated beside her. Lowell, a very average looking man with dark hair and dark eyes, sat motionless with a blank stare directed out of the window opposite him.

Carl followed Lex into the room carrying a large, plastic file storage box and closed the door behind him before filling the empty seat to the right of the head of the table and setting the file box on the floor next to Lex’s chair. Lex looked around the table, nodding at his guests as he seated himself and opened his folder. He quickly perused the notes he had made previously before looking up and smiling.

“First,” Lex began, getting down to business, “I’d like to apprise you of the new title. For communication purposes, henceforth this project will be known as Project Calibration.” He looked up and around the room and received nods from everyone. Lex continued, “Dr. Hightower, enlighten me as to the status of your task.” He steepled his fingers in front of him and waited.

“Both devices are finished,” Jay answered, “and we began testing yesterday.”

“Excellent,” Lex complimented with a lift of his brows. “And you believe you’ve worked all the kinks out? No side effects?” This was an important part of this entire scheme. He couldn’t have anyone aware of what had taken place. The transition must be seamless and his infiltration ironclad.

“None yet, sir.” Hightower’s unwavering eye contact filled Lex with confidence. “But we’ll need a few more weeks of testing.”

He allowed a smile and a nod before pausing briefly to collect his thoughts and organize his papers. “Flo,” he began, using the name she insisted on at their last meeting. She looked up to meet his face but did not stop her rough typing. “Tell me how your assignment progresses.”

“Nearly done, sir.” She finally stopped typing, giving a welcomed reprieve from her incessant clicking. “My research was correct. Mixing the green and red filters has exactly the right effect.” Lex was confused for the briefest of moments before recalling the code they’d used before. “And it doesn’t take much to work. Large amounts of green filters are lethal and painful, but small amounts weaken enough. Red filters alleviate any other side effects. We’ll need more green filters for the take down and initial procedure.”

“You shall have it,” Lex promised with a nod. Thoughts of ‘the take down’, as she put it, made him giddy with anticipation.

Her eyes lit up and a smile stretched across her face. “Fantastic!” She beamed, exuding confidence. Then she started loudly drumming her fingers on the table, and her face changed to a frown. “There is one necessary item still on order and once that comes in we’ll be ready.”

“What piece would that be?” he questioned, jotting down a few notes.

“The pen,” she stated. She went back to clicking at the keys. Lex made a concerted effort to stem his rising irritation as Lowell very discreetly reached over and gently nudged her elbow. She very obviously stifled a sigh before adding, “It should be in day after tomorrow.”

Lex lifted an eyebrow. This woman was absolutely terrible at picking up on social cues. So caught up in whatever she was doing and thinking, she paid no attention to those around her to even notice them. Lowell, who continued in his motionless staring into

the distance, did seem to serve a purpose. Lex inwardly laughed at the ridiculousness of it all as he looked back at his notes.

“Excuse me,” Ferguson said as he leaned forward with his hand up slightly.

“Yes?”

“Have you considered the need to change records?” Ferguson leaned back in his chair with a skeptical look on his face. “People will eventually put things together if there is evidence to suggest something they remember isn’t true.” Ferguson must have seen the look in Lex’s eyes for he shrank in on himself. “Of course. You’ve already considered that.”

A nod was all Lex needed to give. He had built his life on power and influence. He lost his power once before, and it wouldn’t happen again. He certainly didn’t get to where he was today by making missteps in anything. Of course, he knew what still needed to be done. A few months in prison gives a person plenty of time to mull over the details, considering every flaw and finding solutions. That meeting had been scheduled for later this afternoon, the first available meeting time for Anna Seville, an enigma in the technology world.

He turned to Flo and Lowell. “Flo, thank you for coming, you may go now,” he said quickly and specifically.

She smiled, closed her laptop, and left in a rush of petite nervousness.

“Mr. Ferguson,” he began, turning to face the man, “I owe you thanks. That discovery you shared with me provides the perfect opportunity to begin Project Calibration, and I thank you for that. It is a beautifully elaborate and believable cover story.” It was the truth. Lex had considered other scenarios, but none of them had that bit of reality, that zing that would clench his win.

Ferguson’s mouth opened slightly but no words came out, he only nodded. Lex smiled at the effect he had on the man. Even though Ferguson had worked for Lex for more than two years, they’d never met until now. But it was clear that Ferguson was a valuable employee, and Lex would consider him for other tasks as the need arose.

“You have been reassigned at S.T.A.R. Labs. The switch was effortless, given your role in the research. You’ll begin working with a Dr. Bernard Klein on the discovery of Superman’s home world. You will also assist Superman in preparing for his *trip*.”

Ferguson’s eyebrows lifted. “Will I still be working with Jay part time?”

“Yes, but your duties at S.T.A.R. Labs come first.” Lex tapped a stack of papers on the table top to straighten them.

“Certainly, sir,” Scot acknowledged, smiling, “I knew you’d be pleased.”

“And Hightower, this box,” Lex motioned to the large, plastic file box that Carl had brought in, “contains the information for the memory changes as well as some further instructions for you.”

Hightower simply nodded as he took hold of the box and made his way out of the conference room with Ferguson.

Lex stood up to leave and took a deep breath, filling his lungs with a sense of accomplishment. The clock was ticking. It was only a matter of time before he would have the life that he was meant to have.

Chapter 7

November 6, 1995

“And no one has noticed?” Scott asked as he sat at a computer in the laboratory hidden under the church. He scrolled through the data files, looking for anything that indicated a problem. Since the meeting they had with Luthor a few days ago, they’d continued running tests as he had requested. Jay was handling all of that and leaving mountains of data for Scott to sift through.

“Not yet.” Across the room, Jay worked at another computer. “Um... I think we need to modify circuit 26A. This doesn’t look right.” Scott heard Jay moving around behind him and then set a

box of circuit pieces next to him. Jay leaned over a piece of paper nearby and scribbled for a moment before handing over a crudely drawn schematic.

“How many more tests?” Scott took the paper and box and began piecing it together.

“Just a few,” Jay answered, sitting back down at the computer he’d been working on. “There are two scenarios I haven’t tested yet. One, replacing particularly traumatic memories, and two, replacing very long strands of memories. I’ve got a kid I’m rewriting the story of now. Going back a couple of years, replacing the memories and putting him in a new place.”

“Someone’s going to notice that,” Scott pointed out. His conscience didn’t like this part of his job. Not that everything he’d done the past few years of his life was much better, but this was an innocent kid. There had to be a line somewhere.

“No, he’s a homeless runaway, been on the streets for years now.”

Scott breathed a small sigh of relief. “So, you’re helping him.” He smirked. “I didn’t know you had it in you.”

Jay rolled his eyes. “Keep that in mind when I ask this next thing.” Jay made his way to stand behind Scott, watching him work for a moment before asking, “Mind if I ask your sister out?”

“Uh...” Scott would be lying if he said he didn’t see that coming. The looks they’d exchanged two weeks ago and the difference he saw in his sister since then was obvious enough. Did he want his sister dating someone like Jay? Jay was smart at least and doing well for himself. Even with a sketchy background, he’d be able to support her. But he was getting ahead of himself, Jay just wanted to ask his sister out. Did he mind? “No?”

“Good,” Jay said as he clapped his hand on Scott’s shoulder, “because I’ve already met up with her twice, and I got wind of this great little piano bar that is doing a Nat King Cole tribute tonight and I thought, since she’s a fan too, that she might like to go with me.”

Scott’s mouth opened in shock. They’d already seen each other? Why ask, then? He shook his head. His sister was not a child by any stretch of the imagination, but she’d always be his *little* sister. Still, Jay seemed to be genuinely excited about this. “She’d... probably like that.” That much was true. “What time will you have her home?”

Jay laughed. “Does she have a curfew?”

“Er... no,” Scott said, realizing what that had sounded like. “We just have... a thing in the morning...”

“It’s okay, *Mr. Ferguson*, I’ll bring her back before midnight.” Jay stood up straight with his hands clasped behind his back, nodding, as if he were a silly high school kid.

“See that you do.” Scott glared, but the goofy look on Jay’s face cracked his resolve, and he laughed. He tossed the completed circuit to Jay. “Here’s your circuit.”

November 10, 1995

Scott accompanied Dr. Klein out of the elevator and onto the newsroom floor. Someone young and boisterous greeted Dr. Klein with a handshake, and they engaged in small talk that Scott didn’t pay any attention to. Instead, he made himself busy scanning the newsroom. He found one of his targets at a desk on the other side of the room.

Lois Lane was seated at the desk, shuffling some papers. She took a sip of something that must have been offensive and then poured whatever it was into a very dead plant perched on the corner of what he could only assume was her desk. His eyes roamed the room again and spotted Clark Kent, leaning back in his chair at a desk facing hers, his speculative eyes locked onto her as he stroked his chin.

Scott checked to make sure that Dr. Klein was still involved in his conversation with the kid. It sounded like they were discussing the intricacies of the internet, and Scott was glad to have the

opportunity to merely observe Lane and Kent before he would be present for the impending conversation. His job at this appointment was to sell the story that Dr. Klein so easily believed to Lane and Kent.

When he turned back to the newsroom below, he saw Kent determinedly walking toward Lane, but as he approached, he seemed to lose his confidence. He leaned closer to her and said something that caused her to smile. She stood up and gathered her things as she responded to whatever he said. He made some sort of gesture that made Lane – and Scott – stop completely.

Was that a *flying* gesture?

Scott suppressed an amused laugh. Did he make these kinds of gestures regularly? If he did, Scott was sure it would be easy for anyone paying attention to figure out the man's secret. They even shared the same face and hair, among other things.

The kid, whom Dr. Klein had introduced as Jimmy, led them around the edge of the newsroom toward the conference room. Once inside, Dr. Klein set his papers down on the table and began pacing. Scott went to the window and looked out at the goings on in the newsroom.

Scott rolled his eyes as he caught sight of Lane and Kent in what could only be described as a tender embrace. Clark Kent seemed like a... goober. How on Earth did he catch someone like Lois Lane? Of course, he *was* Superman. This was ridiculous... and Scott was a little jealous.

He saw Jimmy approach them and clear his throat. Thank goodness he interrupted when he did. They had almost had a chance to kiss, and from the way they're eyes locked, Scott was sure they were about to. Kent rolled his eyes. Then, after Jimmy said something and pointed the folder he held in his hand in Scott's direction, he looked directly at him. Jimmy walked off, no doubt to do something for someone and, to Scott's relief, they finally released their embrace. Kent took her hand and whispered something in her ear before leading Lane to the conference room.

"What can we do for you, Dr. Klein," Kent asked as they entered and closed the door behind them. Lane took a seat at the large table, and Kent propped himself on the smaller shelf against the wall, leaving Dr. Klein to pace between them. Scott stood near the window he'd been looking through, and they seemed oblivious to his presence.

"Forgive me for interrupting," he began. Dr. Klein stopped his pacing to introduce him simply stating, "This is Scott. Lois. Clark." Scott was caught off guard by this and merely held up his hand to wave. "I was hoping you'd be able to help me contact Superman," Dr. Klein said with raised eyebrows.

"I can try," Clark said, confirming Scott's impression that the doctor did *not* know of the superhero's secret identity. Scott had wondered if Dr. Klein knew, but he'd merely told him that contacting these two reporters always got him in touch with Superman, so Scott played along. It was Scott's knowledge of that secret identity that brought him on this visit. His function was to ensure that things went according to the plan.

"What's up?" Lois asked.

"We think we found Krypton." Bernard Klein was not known for being subtle. Scott had learned this in a matter of days. Sometimes this was to everyone's advantage, and sometimes it threw everyone for a loop. This time, it was the second.

"Krypton?" Lois nearly choked out. She stood up from her seat and moved to Clark's side, threading her arm under his and around his back. He put his arm about her waist but kept his eyes on Dr. Klein, who had gone back to pacing back and forth in the small space.

"Mind you," he began, "it's no guarantee that it *is* Krypton, but the nature of the object is such that it fits with the description Superman gave us of what happened that made... him leave..." He stopped abruptly and turned quickly to face them, blurting out, "It has kryptonite in its composition." His hand flew to his mouth,

and he began chewing his fingernails and went back to pacing.

Lois and Clark exchanged a look before she asked, "When?" "Just a few weeks ago," Dr. Klein replied without any change in his pacing.

"What else can you tell us?" Lois asked, though her eyes were focused on Clark.

"Why are you telling us?" Clark asked.

Dr. Klein began speaking, accentuating his words with his free hand while still pacing. "Well, at first they weren't planning on telling Superman... or anyone for that matter. I told them they should at least tell him, but they said not until they were sure. They wanted more time, they said. I didn't think that was reasonable. I mean, if I'd lost my home and there was a possibility of finding it..." he trailed off, his pacing slowing down a bit. He stopped again, this time with a sorrowful look in his eyes.

"Is there more?" Clark asked quickly. Lois appeared to be holding her breath while listening to this exchange.

"Yes," Dr. Klein answered with a hopeful tone. "They are still collecting data and assimilating their information. The presence of kryptonite really got everyone excited. You should have seen it." He smiled then and went back to pacing again.

"I'm sure it was great," Clark finally said. He looked at Lois who lifted her eyebrows and shrugged. All this silent communication was cloying, and Scott looked away.

Scott silently chuckled at the doctor's anxiety as he watched the man wear a path in the floor. It was time to take matters into his own hands. "We think there may be life," Scott spoke up. Everyone turned to look at him. Scott waved a hand in Dr. Klein's direction before continuing, "I'm sorry, I didn't think he'd get to the point any time soon."

"*Life?*" Clark repeated, mouth dropping open. He let go of Lois and stepped closer to Dr. Klein.

"Yes!" Dr. Klein stated with a lift of his eyebrows. "Life! It's about 38.6 percent possible. Not fully understanding how Kryptonian physiology reacts to the red sun and how kryptonite affects them under those conditions, we couldn't be completely sure." Dr. Klein went straight to the table and sat, propping his elbows on the large table and placing his fingernails between his teeth. For a brilliant scientist, Dr. Klein certainly was juvenile in expressing his emotions. "It's not my department, mind you, it's Scott's. But they asked me to head the team because I've worked with Superman before."

"So, it *is* possible..." The shock on Clark's face spelled disbelief. But the inclusion of Dr. Klein in this plot was surely helping, that and the validity of the information. Dr. Klein had seen the data himself. Luthor was right – this was a very believable cover story.

"Scott, do you mind?" Dr. Klein looked up at him with pleading in his eyes. They'd discussed this before entering the Daily Planet. Scott was prepared with the details to explain what had happened.

"Not at all," Scott began. "Based on the information we have so far, it seemed that when Krypton exploded, only about half of the planet must have been demolished. It appears that the smaller chunks were blasted quickly away, mostly in the direction of the red sun based on the movement of the remaining mass. It's all conservation of momentum." Scott paused and could see in their faces that only Dr. Klein had any interest in hearing more about that.

He trudged on, "That remaining mass, a substantial piece of the planet, is now moving in a much more elliptical path around the same sun. It is still in that habitable zone but changing its distance from the sun drastically over the period of its year. Now that we've discovered water there as well, we've been able to confirm that it could support life. As long as the explosion that propelled it off its course wasn't too jarring to kill everyone on that part of the planet..." He let his words trail off.

Dr. Klein looked at him with a fascinated grin from his seat at the table, his hands fidgeting on top of his folders. Lois continued to lean on the shelf at the side of the room, contemplating this new information. And Clark stood motionless in the middle of the room, an unreadable expression on his face.

Had they bought it?

Clark was the first person to put words together. "What's next?" he asked simply.

"Superman has to go," Lois broke in. She stood up and walked to Clark.

While this was exactly the outcome Scott was hoping for, he was surprised it came from Lois, as was everyone else, judging by the confused looks they aimed at her.

"It would be a very risky thing," Dr. Klein pointed out, "for him to traipse halfway across the galaxy on a 38.6 percent likelihood of finding someone he may not even be related to. The flight alone will require more from him than he's ever had to give before. We're talking a trip *light-years* away. We don't even know how fast he can travel, but it *won't* be a quick trip. And who knows what he'll find there. Could be nothing."

Scott fought the urge to roll his eyes. Dr. Klein's tendency to run on and list out all the potential problems was not helping matters. Convenient when working on a million-dollar project with only one shot, but now it could potentially derail this part of the plan from working. But Scott was unsure of its effect because whatever Lois and Clark were discussing, they were doing it silently with their eyes.

"He'd likely need some amount of support," Dr. Klein continued. "Remember what happened with Nightfall? Our communication devices would certainly have limits... What if once he's far enough from our yellow sun he ends up... hungry?"

"Dr. Klein," Clark interrupted, "I'm sure he'll have plenty of time to think about these things."

"Actually, due to our current position within the solar system, Superman will have to make this choice within the next eleven days, or we'll lose the ability to use the..." The look Clark was aiming at Dr. Klein stopped him. "Right. Eleven days."

"Why don't we give you guys some time to talk about it," Scott said. "With Superman of course. And you can get back to us as soon as possible?"

"Yes, that would be great," Lois and Clark said at the same time.

Chapter 8

November 13, 1995

"Thank you for taking the time to meet with me, Miss Seville," Lex began. They were seated at the same overly large conference table from last week's meeting. He relished the feel of having such an enormous room to help intimidate others. But Miss Anna Seville didn't seem to be intimidated, and he appreciated that about her. "I hear you have the skills I need."

Lex thought there had been some mistake when she walked into the conference room with a wide smile and bobbing curls framing her face. He assumed she must be in the wrong place. Though tall, her thin stature and childlike features and mannerisms gave the impression that she was much younger. In fact, she looked like a high school cheerleader. Even her name seemed juvenile.

"You're welcome." She sent him a jovial smile as if she were in an entirely different kind of meeting than Lex. "I was told you need someone who can rewrite records."

"Yes," he confirmed, "and those records are numerous and protected through any number of security measures put in place."

She giggled then, catching him off guard. "Security measures make me laugh!" She waved her hand as if security measures were something everyone jokes about.

"That's... good to hear," Lex stuttered, quickly recovering.

"Carl will provide you with a list of what will need to be changed and where those records can be found. How much time will you need?" he asked with his eyebrows raised.

"Oh," she pondered, tapping her chin, "probably just a few hours."

"Really?" Lex said, raising his eyebrows in surprise. "That fast?"

"Mr. Luthor," she began, dipping her chin and speaking as if she were comforting a child, "It won't take long to write code to rewrite the records. And, let's be honest. I've already got code to get through almost all of the security systems out there." She began examining her long, polished fingernails.

"But the list of changes is *quite* extensive."

It was her turn to raise her eyebrows and ask a question, now running the meeting. "What format will you be giving me this list of changes?"

"Carl?" he called.

Carl, who had been perched on the table along the wall, stepped forward and picked up a large file box holding numerous hanging files each crammed with more than a few folders and set it on the table in front of Miss Seville.

"Printed?" She scrunched her face and looked at the box like it was filled with something putrid. "Is there a digital copy of all this?"

Lex turned to Carl who gave a quick nod. "I presume so."

Miss Seville smiled her overly nice smile again and clapped her hands together before placing them in her lap. "You'll have to give me copies of all the digital files. All of this can be done with code, much of which is already written. It's just a matter of organizing the code to do the right set of things," she explained like it was nothing.

It was all well and good, but he needed to make sure that she would be able to take care of everything. "How will you handle systems that are internal?"

"You mean offline?" She smirked. "I just need a connection."

"And how will you manage that?" Lex asked for clarification.

"Please," she said, waving his concerns away. "Have some faith in me, Mr. Luthor"

"Of course." And he did. There would be vast amounts of changes to make, but this strange character sitting before him struck him as the kind of person who would take care of it. That was really the purpose of this meeting, to assess her character and abilities. "I will contact you when the procedure needs to take place."

"I look forward to it." She winked at him as she stood up from the table, looked at the file box with blatant disgust, and sauntered from the room.

Lex laughed. This was the last piece of the puzzle. After months of plotting and planning, organizing and delegating, Lex was nearing the end of this miserable life that didn't truly belong to him. It belonged to someone else, a man who had been caught, demoralized, treated like a criminal. Not Lex. Lex was powerful and intelligent and would not suffer the consequences of other's actions any longer.

Soon he would truly have all he ever wanted.

Lois Lane.

November 15, 1995

"Wow." Scott stared at the computer screen, blinking. "That's fast."

Superman stood behind him, looking over Scott's shoulder at the screen. They were testing his speed in space to see just how fast Superman could travel. Since he had to remain at slower speeds within the atmosphere, he flew to the moon. Scott just couldn't believe how quickly he'd come back.

"I bet I can go even faster," Superman said with a playful tone. This part was fun for him, he had told Scott the other day. He'd

never done anything like this before – testing his limits. “How long will that make this trip?” he asked.

Scott punched several buttons on his computer keyboard before announcing, “Two and a half years there, two and a half years back, plus however much time you spend there...” Scott trailed off

“More than five years?” Superman didn’t sound pleased.

“Plus or minus,” Scott added, shrugging his shoulders.

“Well, I guess it could be worse.” The way Superman was always so positive was both good and bad. Scott appreciated that he was such a good guy, but at the same time, it made his job just a little harder. Knowing that this trip wasn’t actually taking place, he felt kind of bad for giving Superman the idea that Krypton might be out there...

Scott shook his head and changed the topic. “When was the last time you held your breath?” he asked. Right now, the goal was to figure out how much oxygen Superman would need to take with him. They’d just established how much time he would travel. This was the only other piece of information they needed.

“Yesterday, actually,” Superman turned and walked across the room to the table covered in equipment they were working on. “When I met with Lois and Clark, we tried it.”

“How’d that go?” Scott quirked a brow. It was so humorous to watch Superman pretend he was two people, always talking about his other self as if it were another person. Scott tried to imagine how Lois found out, and although he really wanted to know, he couldn’t ask and risk blowing his cover.

“We stopped after about thirty minutes,” Superman admitted before quickly adding, “But not because I felt like I needed a breath. Later that evening I spent several hours taking a breath every thirty minutes. It was fine.”

“No, I meant the conversation.” Scott chuckled.

“Well, Clark...” Superman shuffled a bit while sifting through the various items on the table in front of him. “He’s a little worried that it’s not worth it. I mean, if they were able to send me here, wouldn’t they be able to come here, too?”

The humanity in Superman’s response surprised Scott. “Why are you doing this if you’re so doubtful?”

Superman shrugged. “Well, Lois can be... pretty convincing.”

“Clark’s got it coming if he thinks he’ll wear the pants in that relationship,” Scott remarked flippantly.

Superman chuckled, and it surprised Scott. He hadn’t ever really thought about it, but he supposed there might be more to Superman. “He knows that,” Superman assured him. “But she’s got a point. She thinks I should see if any of my relatives might be out there. It would be nice to not think you’re the only one left of your... people.”

Scott never really considered what this trip might mean for Superman and surprised himself in realizing that assuming Superman would feel nothing about it was unreasonable. Scott hadn’t been aware of just how *human* Superman was. He shook these thoughts from his head. Becoming sympathetic to Superman would not serve him well.

“Just don’t find out you have a sister.” His attempt to change the conversation was met with a lift of a questioning eyebrow.

“Oh?” Superman wondered aloud. “Sounds like you speak from experience.”

Scott shook his head. “They are cute sometimes, and a pain in the butt the rest of the time,” he explained, though he didn’t know why. “Yeah, this one’s a bit younger than me and dating... one of my bosses. I just don’t like it.”

Superman nodded slowly as if he could possibly understand what it was like to have a sister dating someone he didn’t like. “What can you do?”

That was precisely what Scott had been wondering. He rolled his eyes. “I know right? Let’s get back to this here,” Scott redirected, pointing to the computer screen in front of him. “So,

thirty minutes?”

“Yeah,” verified Superman.

Scott pulled a pencil from behind his ear and jotted a few things down on the pad of paper next to him.

“Okay,” he started, running the numbers through his head while simultaneously writing them down. “So, two breaths an hour...87600 breaths over your trip... plus or minus. Average breath size... Oh, that was yesterday.” Scott shuffled through some papers before finding the figure he needed. “What was R? ... by 31.998... This is for liquid oxygen...” He paused and looked something up in a large book on the shelf above the computer screen, did one more calculation, and smiled at Superman. “Looks like you need about three liters.”

“Plus or minus?” Superman teased.

He had a sense of humor, too. How many people know about this Superman? “Yeah.” He laughed. “That won’t be too difficult to manage.”

“Not at all.”

Superman stepped away then and went to another table to view the equipment that was being prepared. Scott followed and, upon seeing Superman’s knit brows, reached for a stack of diagrams.

“Here’s what we’re building for you.” He laid the diagrams flat on the table and began pointing as he explained. “We’ve got space here for your air supply plus this snazzy piece of genius that you can use to refill it should you be in a place where you can.” Scott picked up the device and held it out to Superman. When Superman didn’t take it, he set it back down on the table and continued. “This will hold your food... if you can call it that... sustenance is all it really is, compact though, so you can take plenty of it for once you’re too far from our sun. Here’s a place for anything you might want to take... and this will house your communication system. Eventually it won’t work, but it will be nice to have on your way out, and you can give us a heads up on your way back.”

Superman had a brooding look on his face as he gave a quick not and turned away. “Sounds like everything’s been taken care of then,” he said before disappearing as quickly as he had arrived.

For a moment, Scott considered whether this was too much. Had he crossed that line he’d set for himself? But he had his family to think of, and they weren’t *killing* the hero, just relocating him. Scott swallowed his remorse and focused instead on what was left to be done.

Chapter 9

November 20, 1995

Lex stood at the window of the second-floor conference room of Son Kwan Industries, looking out at the edge of the harbor. From his present position, he would have a front-row view of today’s proceedings that were set to begin any moment on the dock directly below him. The sunlight peeked through the clouds, casting strange shadows and sparkling back up to meet Lex. In his current mood, he didn’t feel at all embarrassed about being pleased with something that *sparkled*.

He stepped away from the view and walked to a couch that had been placed facing the window for the occasion and took a seat. He took a deep breath and picked up a small device that looked like a miniature television remote from the table next to the couch. He turned the remote over in his hands, careful not to press any buttons, and admired its humble simplicity.

Today, Superman would leave, the fulfillment of his project nearing its end. S.T.A.R. Labs had put together a set of equipment for Superman to use on his long journey through space, and the schmuck had been working with a group of scientists to learn how to use it. Now all that was left was Superman’s departure. He would, however, *not* fly away and travel to a chunk of a planet believed to be all that remained of his home world, Krypton, to see

if there was any evidence of a living society there.

Naturally, it had been advertised on the front page of the Daily Planet. Countless admirers had crowded into the harbor to catch one last glimpse of their superhero before he disappeared for what could potentially be years. They had arrived early, with their chairs, tents, and makeshift kitchens, to claim their spots like they were tailgating at a football game.

Superman will leave today, Lex thought. *My enemy will be no more*. But not in the way the rest of the world expected. And then there would be no one to stop Lex from getting everything he wanted. Everything he rightfully deserved.

A door opened at the edge of the platform. Cheering and applause commenced. From his vantage point, Lex could see into the room Superman had been in and quickly reached for binoculars to get a clearer view. He stood and rushed to the window, set the remote down on the window ledge, and crouched down to better see under the overhang at the edge of the building.

Lois Lane, *his Lois*, was standing several feet inside the room. Though he couldn't see the tears, the redness of her face suggested she was crying. *Oh, Lois*, Lex thought, his heart reaching out to her. *It will all be over soon, my darling*. The emotions that coursed through him were not unlike those of a parent disciplining a child in a way that causes the parent sorrow but is undoubtedly necessary in teaching a lesson.

Superman turned to her and she nodded, wrapping her arms around herself. The door closed her away from him, forcing his attention to Superman who walked toward the center of the makeshift stage. They had chosen this location because it had plenty of room for an audience, or so they'd told Superman. In reality, it was next to an essential geographic feature that would provide a convenient way to hide what would happen shortly after Superman left – a large body of water.

Superman donned his equipment, all carefully and expertly arranged in a practical and efficient pack. He turned to wave to the crowd but did not say anything, just kept waving as the applause grew. Then he turned to face the harbor and pushed off. Forced to keep a lower speed near the ground, he went up and then did a barrel roll aiming himself toward the sea. A small cloud dissipated as he flew through it leaving a swirling trail of condensation.

Lex picked up the remote once again as he watched Superman weave around other clouds and shrink in size. Once Lex could no longer see the superhero, he pushed a button on the device he held in his hand.

Finally. *Finally*, it was all beginning.

He had waited patiently for months now.

He could feel a rising surge of satisfaction in his veins.

The door opened, and Carl stuck his head in. "The helicopter is ready, sir."

"On my way." Lex set down the binoculars and left the room, shutting the door behind him.

The large fishing boat bobbed with the passing waves as the helicopter landed gently on its deck. Lex stepped from the open door, ducking as the wind from the powerful blades pushed him downward despite their slowing rotation. As he stepped away from the helicopter, he glanced around looking for any indication that his prize had been collected.

"Where is he?" Lex bellowed to the approaching captain.

"The Hot Tuna is almost back now." The captain gestured toward the stern of the ship, and the two made their way toward a group of sailors preparing for the arrival of the smaller boat. When his large boat had been chosen for the job due to its size, the captain had received instructions to be at a specific location in the water at a set time, expecting the drop of a very special parcel. Several smaller, faster boats covered zones in the area to quickly retrieve the package that could land in any one of them.

Satisfaction had encircled Lex since the moment he'd pressed

the button, exposing Superman to kryptonite and expelling an inflated flotation device. As the Hot Tuna drew near, he could see a tangle of red fabric and yellow plastic, and the satisfaction changed to euphoria. The success of his plan was finally set in stone at the successful capture of the only thing that could ever stand in his way.

They hoisted their invaluable cargo to the deck of the ship and dropped it in an awkward heap with what was an enjoyable thud to Lex's ears. He crouched near the head of Superman, sweeping the wet fabric from his face.

"And so we meet again," Lex sneered. "Though under much more palatable circumstances." A wry smile tugged at the edge of his mouth. "For me anyway."

Lex rose from Superman's side, standing taller than he had in a long time. He turned abruptly away, heading for the helicopter once more, barking orders over his shoulder, directing his world once more.

As fate had always intended.

"No, sir," Travis Knapp said as he walked beside Lex down the long, sterile hallway. "She came willingly to the holding room." The tapping of their shoes was the only other sound to be heard above the buzzing of the fluorescent lighting. Doors were occasionally spaced on either side with labels indicating their purpose. Lex paid them no mind, focusing only on his destination and the task that awaited him there.

"Excellent," Lex said, relieved. "I didn't want this to be any more painful for her than it already will be."

"That's very considerate of you, sir," Travis acknowledged. They came to a door labeled 'Green Room' in which speakers traditionally relaxed before heading to the lecture hall next door to give their lectures. Travis stepped to the side of the doorway and faced Lex.

"Of course, it is," Lex confirmed. He looked Travis in the eye. "I want only what is best for her."

"Yes, sir." Travis nodded his head and opened the door to allow Lex in.

The room was small and a bit less sterile than the rest of the building. Two puffy club chairs sat against one wall, opposite a matching couch with a coffee table between them. A window opposite the doorway allowed light to spill into the room. In the shaft of light, Lois stretched out in one of the club chairs with her eyes closed and legs crossed, her head leaning back against the wall and her arms draped peacefully on the armrests.

Lex was grateful that Ferguson was able to gain the trust of Lois and Kent and was proving to be an invaluable asset. Ferguson was just inside the door, leaning on a table with his ankles crossed in front of him, holding a jacket casually slung over his linked hands. After the departure of Superman, it was Ferguson who had brought her here. He stood when he realized Lex was approaching, then nodded and stepped out of the room.

She didn't move as Lex approached, as if she were drained of energy. Lex felt an ache in his chest seeing her this way, sullen, with tears staining her cheeks. He crouched down in front of her and noticed the ring on her left hand. Simple, pathetic. Clark must have made her some sort of promise before leaving. He would replace it soon enough with far finer, infinitely more appropriate jewelry for the remarkable woman that Lois was.

He reached out to take her hand in his and was surprised that she allowed it. Her head came up as her eyes opened slowly as if she'd been asleep. Her eyes went wide with recognition seconds later, and she yanked her hand from his.

"Lex?!?" she said, sitting up straight in the chair and looking around the room. "Where's Scott? Wh-what are you doing here? How is this possible?"

"Lois, forgive me," Lex apologized. "I didn't mean to startle you. Scott stepped out for a moment." He shifted his weight and

moved to sit on the armrest her hand had vacated.

A frown creased her brow, and the draw to smooth it with his fingers was palpable, but he resisted. She was nervous. Of course, she didn't realize he was no longer in prison, and it was enough of a shock already. He would be patient with her as only he could be.

"What are you doing here?" she asked. "I... thought you were in jail." She directed her frown at him, and he was so pleased she was looking at him that he didn't care that her expression held nothing but contempt.

"I was," he acknowledged, nodding, "but I was released on parole—"

"That's impossible," she interrupted, standing up and walking toward the door.

Lex chose not to respond. The last thing he wanted was to argue with Lois about piddly matters. Instead, he briefly closed his eyes and envisioned his goal, calming himself.

She reached the door and jiggled the handle. "Why is the door locked?" she asked as she slapped her hand on it.

Lex stood but ignored her question. "Lois," he said soothingly, "it pains me to see you suffering so... with no one to comfort you. I've come to offer my support." He held his hands at his side, palms up, offering whatever she needed as he took a few steps closer to her.

She turned to look at him, the same scowl still on her face. "Support?" She huffed, crossing her arms over her chest.

Even her temper was endearing to Lex, and he couldn't help but smile at her. "Yes," he assured her. "I know you are alone now, and I hope to fill that void." He took a step closer to her, leaving only a few feet between them.

"You're insane." She rolled her eyes as she shook her head and turned back to the door, pounding on it again.

"That is hardly true. Everyone has left you. You need companionship."

She stilled. After a moment, he heard her release a sob as her shoulders bobbed, and her head dropped. That was not what he was going for, and it broke his heart to have put her in this position. Reminding himself that this was a necessary step, and her reaction was only temporary, he took a deep breath. "Forgive me, I've been too frank." He reached a hand to her shoulder.

"No, he'll be..." She shrugged his hand away and pushed past him, moving to stand in front of the window before correcting herself. "They'll be back."

Lex sighed as he followed her. How could he make her see? "Lois, please," he said as he reached for her shoulder again.

"Stay away from me," she growled and used her hand to knock his arm away. Turning to face him, he saw both fear and determination in her eyes, a formidable combination.

"Lois," he breathed, looking down at her fisted hands before returning to her fury-filled eyes. "I have always loved you from the bottom of my heart. Please, darling, I just want to help."

"No!" she shouted and shoved him away. Rushing back to the door, she pounded more furiously than before. "Someone let me out!" she yelled at the door.

Lex closed his eyes and reached into his pocket. He hadn't wanted it to be this way but could see no other alternative now. He pulled the small syringe out of his pocket, removed the cap from the needle, and positioned it appropriately in his hand. He stepped up behind her and whispered, "*Everything* I do is because I love you." Then he pinched a spot on her shoulder hard enough that she couldn't pull free, quickly inserted the syringe, and injected the golden fluid.

A sharp intake of breath preceded a scream. But it died away quickly as her eyes rolled back, and her eyelids closed. Lex dropped the syringe and reached to catch her. Swiftly picking her up, he carried her to the couch. He brushed her hair from her face gently, as if she were made of porcelain, allowing his eyes to take in all of her. All that was this extraordinary woman would now be

his. Slowly, he leaned forward and gently pressed his lips to her forehead. "I'm sorry, my dear," he whispered. "I promise I'll make it up to you."

Grasping her hand, he was reminded of the ring on her left hand. He chuckled once more at Clark's now broken promise before removing it and tucking it in his pocket before calling for Travis.

November 21, 1995

Lex stood still in his living room as a flood of emotions swept over him, causing him to close his eyes slowly and inhale deeply. He had finally reached the culmination of his efforts, all these weeks of work leading to this one point in time. Careful planning, patient preparation, and determined perseverance were his greatest attributes, and they had not failed him in this.

Nearly bursting with anticipation, Lex picked up a picture frame resting on the shelf. Lois, in a most exquisite and delicate wedding gown, was positioned in front of him, leaning back with a hesitant smile on her face. Soon, she would arrive, and while he'd taken from her everything she held dear, he would replace it with his most sincere affection, and she wouldn't even realize what she'd lost.

He would change that hesitant smile into one filled with passion.

For him.

Lex placed the picture back in its spot and reached for a frame on the wall as the sound of a door opening and closing drifted into the room. He subdued his excitement lest he not fit into the mold he'd made for himself and Lois. To her, it would simply be another arrival home from an assignment.

To him, it was the beginning of the rest of his life.

Scott entered the room first, carrying several pieces of luggage with a large bag full of camera equipment pulling his shoulders back.

And then she walked in.

Delicate grace and breathtaking beauty.

"—have believed it if I hadn't seen it myself," she was saying. "I wonder where—" She stopped when she saw him and threw the most dazzling smile Lex had ever seen in his direction.

Though he was always master over his emotions, this would surely be his most demanding trial yet. His heart raced, and every ounce of control he possessed went into remaining reasonable in his excitement to see her. In her mind, she had only been absent a few days, though it had been an eternity to him.

"Lex!" she said, still smiling. She walked over to him and quickly planted her lips on his as he worked to only gently grasp her arm. His lips were consumed by the fire that lingered. "I've missed you! It feels so good to be home."

"And I have missed you, darling," Lex breathed, leaning forward to lightly brush his lips on the delicate skin of her cheek as he unwillingly relinquished his hold.

"That story was a waste of time," she said, shirking her jacket from her shoulders and draping it over the back of the sofa.

"Brenda really needs to get better at sniffing those out before sending me out like that."

"I'm sorry to hear it." He stood motionless, transfixed, staring.

She seated herself on the sofa. "At least I had Scott to keep me company. Though his stories are a little boring, he plays a mean poker game," she teased, winking at him.

"Well, you won't have to put up with me any longer," Ferguson assured her. "I have to get home to Samantha and Mom, make sure they're doing all right."

"Tell Samantha I said 'Hi,'" she said as she propped her feet up on the table. "See you tomorrow, Scott."

"Tomorrow." Ferguson gave a brief wave in her direction and nodded to Lex before exiting.

"What's that you have there?" she asked, rising from the

couch and gesturing toward the frame he still held behind his back.

“Oh,” he said, surprised. It had slipped his mind when she arrived. He glanced down at it before replying, “It’s our marriage certificate.” He pulled the frame from behind him, and she took it from his hands.

“Why did you take it off the wall?” she asked. She walked to the place on the wall where it had been and hung it back in its place, studying it for a moment before turning to look at him with an expectant smile gracing her lips.

“Remembering, my darling,” he said wistfully, wrapping his arms around her. She reached up to link her arms around his neck, and he breathed in deeply, savoring the scent of her, the feel of her in his arms, her affection. “Just remembering.”

“Did you manage alright without me?” He could hear the playful tone in her voice and smiled as she slowly closed her eyes and opened them.

“It was dreadful,” he exaggerated. “Never leave me again.” He squeezed her tightly and lifted her from the ground, swinging her around.

The easy laughter that erupted from her took his breath away, and he was beyond pleased to be the cause of it. “I’m sure you did fine,” she said, laughing.

“No, I am in earnest. I simply *cannot* live without you.” Looking into her eyes as he lowered her to the floor, he craved her, and, in a husky voice, said, “Now that you are home, I thought we could do some... things together.”

“What did you have in mind?” she teased, playing with the hair at the nape of his neck.

Finding it a staggering distraction, he swallowed, allowing her to see how she affected him. “Well, you have been away for several days.” But he’d been waiting far longer than that. He nuzzled her ear and spread delicate kisses down her neck as he whispered, “I’ve... missed... having you near.”

The pleasure of successfully completing his plans filled Lex. As Lois leaned her head back and exhaled in enjoyment, Lex questioned whether any moment had or would ever top this one.

Part 3 – “Our greatest glory is not in never falling...” – Confucius

Chapter 10

January 20, 1996

She was lying flat on her back on the sofa in the spacious living room, one arm draped over her eyes and the other resting across her abdomen, her bare feet propped up on the armrest. She still felt as though the room was spinning around her though slower now than it had been. The evening had started out so wonderfully – Lois had been filled with nostalgia and tenderness, celebrating an anniversary with her beloved husband.

Another wave of nausea attempted to overtake her senses, and she rolled to her side and pulled her knees up to her chest as she remembered instead the memories that had assailed her at the sound of a few lines from a song.

Memories of Clark Kent.

Her mind was cluttered with contradictions. She couldn’t be sure what was real and what wasn’t. But she was sure Lex must have done *something* to put her in this position.

“Will you be alright?” a concerned voice interrupted her thoughts. Scott sat in a chair at the end of the coffee table with his elbows on the armrests, wringing his hands and looking at her with a deep frown. He hadn’t said much in the car on the way to this house that she couldn’t quite refer to as home at the moment. He had said he was trying to help, but she was too focused on maintaining what little composure she had remaining to participate in any conversation, and he’d eventually stopped trying.

“I don’t know,” she managed to say. She wasn’t sure she’d

ever be alright again. Not after...

She felt tears welling in her eyes.

“The memories will continue to come back over time,” he explained. “I don’t fully understand the process, but the physical symptoms you have are normal, I believe. I don’t know how long they’ll last.”

“How did this happen?” she asked quietly, hoping for an explanation that would make any of this make more sense. But she would be denied one for now. She was startled by the sound of a door closing. Scott, startled as well, quickly stood up and walked toward the sound.

“Where is she?” she heard Lex’s voice and was filled with a sense of dismay.

She remembered Scott telling her that she would need to keep up the charade until... She didn’t know how long. They hadn’t discussed that yet. She would have to put a mask on to conceal everything running through her mind and pretend as best she could. How fortunate that she was legitimately sick at the moment.

Scott stepped back into the room and was immediately followed by Lex with a... caring... and *compassionate* expression on his face. Who *was* this man? He rushed to her side and knelt in front of her gently massaging her shoulder with one hand and taking one of her hands in the other. She resisted the urge to yank her hand away and instead angled her face away from him and toward the couch cushion, closing her eyes.

“Lois, my darling,” Lex soothed, giving her shoulder a gentle squeeze. “Are you alright? What has happened?”

“She was complaining of a headache while we danced,” Scott answered for her, a godsend. “From the looks of it, I’d say it’s a migraine.” She kept her eyes closed but heard what sounded like Scott walking closer and leaning against something.

“Oh, Lois,” Lex said sympathetically. He moved his hand from her shoulder to brush her hair from her face with such intimacy. She felt a tear slide from the corner of her eye down to the end of her nose. She felt it wiped away and swallowed to suppress the rest of them.

“She... uh...” Scott trailed off, “tossed her cookies... right before we left the Lexor.”

Lois groaned at the memory. “I’m sorry,” she finally managed to say. “I didn’t mean to ruin the evening. Maybe it was something I ate.” Her stomach was still doing flips in her abdomen, especially when thoughts of what she’d realized this evening popped into her head. She would have to figure out how to stop that from happening if she was going to keep playing the role.

“Not at all, darling,” he said, waving away her worry. His hands came together to gently hold hers. “I feel terrible that this has happened. Shall I get Dr. Hightower to come and take a look at you?”

“No!” she exclaimed. She still had very little understanding of what was going on, but a doctor could see through her and report everything to Lex. She couldn’t risk that. “No,” she said more calmly, “I’m sure it will pass on its own.”

“If it’s a migraine,” Scott cut in, “there will be little to be done. And if it were something she ate, it’s already gone. I’m sure she’ll be fine in a day or two. She heard him stand up and move about the room. “I’ll just be heading out now.”

She refused to open her eyes until she sensed Lex stand up and watched him move toward Scott.

“Scott,” Lex called to him, extending his hand to shake Scott’s. Scott turned and took the hand. “Thank you for seeing her safely home.” Lex released Scott’s hand and patted him on the shoulder. “I appreciate it greatly. I will take care of things from here.”

“Certainly, Lex,” Scott said with a nod. Scott caught Lois’s eye, and she read reassurance in his expression. “She’s in your capable hands now. I’ll see you Monday, Lois. Give me a call if you need anything.” He nodded to Lois with a small wave and left

the room. He must not believe she was in any immediate danger to have left her alone with him and that gave her some peace of mind.

Lex turned back to Lois and suggested gently, “My darling, let me help you to the bedroom. You’ll be much more comfortable there.”

“No!” she cried “No, the *idea* of moving makes me feel worse. I—I don’t think I could make it there...” She closed her eyes and gently shook her head. When she opened her eyes, Lex was again kneeling in front of her, his face filled with concern. She couldn’t reconcile this man with the one she knew he must be. Maybe something had happened to him, too. “Can you... just cover me up with a blanket?” she implored.

“What if I carry you?” he suggested, reaching his arm around her waist.

“Please, no,” she said quickly, holding up a hand to stop him. He leaned down to touch his forehead to hers in a very affectionate gesture that only confused her more.

“Of course, darling,” he conceded. “I’ll bring one right away.” He kissed her cheek before going to fulfill her request.

She breathed a sigh of relief as he left the room. She rolled once again onto her back and felt a pounding in her temples. A few tears leaked from her eyes. The sick feeling in her stomach was still there, and she grabbed a nearby throw pillow to press to her abdomen.

Lex returned just then with several pillows and blankets. He tossed one of each onto the love seat across the coffee table from the sofa where Lois reclined. He then came to her side and gently lifted her head as he placed one of the pillows where her head had rested. “Here you are,” he whispered as he lowered her head back down. He stood and began shaking the blanket he brought to unfold it. “I will sleep on the love seat,” he informed her.

She turned her head to look up at him then, a surprised frown on her face. “Lex, you don’t have to do that.”

“Oh, but I want to,” he responded. She rolled back onto her side again as he spread the blanket over her. He knelt again in front of her and began running his fingers through her hair in a way she didn’t want to admit was soothing.

She closed her eyes at the strange mix of emotions that assaulted her. “There’s no reason for us to both be uncomfortable,” she said as she shook her head to clear it and willed him to understand.

“Nonsense,” Lex countered. “I wouldn’t be comfortable at all knowing you were out here like this.” She felt him kiss her forehead. “You lay here and relax.” He pulled the blanket up over her shoulders and gently rested his hand on her hip. “I’ve got some reading to keep me company. And if you need anything I’ll be right here.” He patted her hip and moved away.

She was disappointed that he had chosen to stay but immensely relieved she had found a way to avoid sleeping in the same bed with him. Her exhaustion from the intensely emotional evening was catching up with her, and she considered how she would avoid the bedroom in the coming nights as she drifted into a fitful sleep.

Perry would not risk the newspaper on false accusations directed at the most loved and powerful man in Metropolis. Jimmy would eventually have to see that, and Perry would put him off until he did. At the moment, though, it seemed that Jimmy wasn’t going to let it go. Not yet.

“Jimmy, it’s getting late, you should head home.” Which was true. Only the editor in chief needed to stay this late and that was even questionable.

“No, Chief. I think we have something here.” Jimmy stepped closer and perched himself on the edge of Perry’s desk, thrusting the folder full of his notes in Perry’s direction. “This could be the biggest thing since Superman left.”

Perry closed his eyes and huffed. Jimmy had really grown up lately. He insisted on being taken seriously when he thought something was important. Funny, Perry taught him that, but now he wished he’d just let something go. When he opened his eyes again, Jimmy sat there still holding out the folder with a look of determination in his eyes. With a deep breath, Perry conceded. “Fine. Let me see the picture.”

Perry jerked the folder from his hands and opened it up. A quarter inch of papers was topped with a short stack of 8x10 prints. The first was the grainy image he’d seen before with two individuals facing each other, their arms both extended between them holding something. He set that one aside and looked at the next image. It was just the head of the person on the left, from the previous picture, zoomed in. This clearly showed Dr. Gregory Paulson, his face scrunched as if angry about something. Seeing this face was not surprising since Jack had been trailing behind Paulson to catch the shots.

The third picture brought Perry’s thoughts to a halt. Clear as day, Lex Luthor’s face was the one just below the brim of the hat. It was his outstretched hand giving or receiving whatever was contained in the package the two held between them. Perry didn’t like the look he saw in Luthor’s eyes at all. It was completely unlike the philanthropist he knew and respected. This face was cold and calculating, with a determined slant to his brow and a slight pursing of his lips.

Maybe Jimmy was right. Maybe there was something here. But he wasn’t yet ready to admit that to Jimmy. He shook his head to clear it.

“Maybe it’s just muffins that Lois baked for the doctor,” he mused, handing the pictures and folder back to Jimmy. He went back to looking over his storyboards, hoping that was it.

“Ha,” Jimmy burst out. “Lois doesn’t bake!” He slapped the folder down on the desk as he stood and started pacing back and forth. “And why have that exchange take place in *that* parking garage?”

Perry looked up at Jimmy, silently granting him permission to continue, before busying himself with his editing.

“So,” Jimmy started, “You know these allegations started up about two months ago, but no one has any evidence. And the first seven didn’t make it to trial because of that. You also know that eleven more claims have been filed, and the medical board is under pressure to do something.” Jimmy ticked off his points on his fingers.

“Right,” Perry acknowledged, expecting something profound to come next. He kept his head down, listening without acknowledging. Jimmy would have to prove his point just like any other reporter. More so in this case, given the person in question.

“What you don’t know yet,” Jimmy said as he stopped to face Perry, clearly pleased with himself, “because I only just found out about it this afternoon, is that *eighteen* more cases are in the process of being filed. That is, *eighteen*,” Jimmy emphasized the word with his tone and his arms, “more patients and families have come forward with the same set of claims.”

That caught Perry’s attention. “Say what now?”

“And they’re collecting evidence.” *Evidence*, Perry loved the sound of that word. Almost as much as *hard facts*. “They claim that the patients in question are occasionally unable to remember things that happened to them. *And* they are remembering things that they don’t fully understand.”

Perry set down his pen to give Jimmy his full attention. “What kind of things?” he asked as he steeped his hands over his work.

“Not sure yet. But get this,” Jimmy expanded, “some of the patients have physical copies of their health records... and they don’t match the digital copies.” A grin took over Jimmy’s face like he’d just solved a mystery. Only the mystery was just beginning. “Something is wrong here.”

An enlivening sense of anticipation coursed through Perry’s

veins. It had been a while since any truly noteworthy stories had come their way. “How many of them didn’t match?” he asked unable to keep his excitement from his voice.

“Thirteen,” Jimmy answered. “Some of the new claimants pointed this out, and others from the previous group are looking into it.” He sat forward in the chair, leaning on his knees. “I’ve contacted as many of them as I could already and set up interviews with two families.” With this he stood, collected his folder from Perry’s desk, and nodded with a wiggle of his eyebrows.

Perry gave a half smile and picked his pen back up to continue his work. “Alright. Keep me posted.”

Jimmy’s a good kid, Perry thought once more.

Chapter 11

January 21, 1996

Sunlight reached Lois’s face. As she rolled away from the brightness, her stomach gave a strange lurch, and she immediately remembered the events of the night before. She groaned and continued rolling onto her stomach, propping her head up on her hands and looking around the room.

It was *their* living room. She had memories of relaxing here on this very couch, watching tv with Lex. Was that real? How long had she lived like this? As Lex’s *wife*?

Clark’s face entered her thoughts and instinct told her which of those memories were right. There were still plenty of missing pieces, and she wasn’t sure if it would all come back or not. All she knew was that this was a peculiar situation, and she would have to handle it carefully. She had no idea what Lex would do... what he had done.

“Good morning, my love,” Lex said as he walked into the room carrying a tray of what smelled like breakfast. “How are you feeling now?” He set the tray down on the coffee table and sat down on the couch next to her, placing his hand on the small of her back and caressing it with slow, small circles.

At first, his touch was pleasant, and she let out a small sigh. Suddenly, her stomach turned. “Oh God,” she said hoarsely, covering her mouth. She clambered off of the sofa, hopped over the coffee table, and darted to the bathroom just across the hall.

Having not eaten anything yet, there was very little to come up, and she leaned miserably on the edge of the toilet seat, her face wet with tears. How long would this last, and what was she going to tell Lex?

She heard the water come on at the sink and knew Lex had come to take care of her, as strange as it was. She thought of several instances of his caring for her over the past couple of months and knew then that if she could keep her *other* memories to herself, keep them separated from the ones she had of him, that he would not hurt her in the least. He placed a cool cloth on the back of her neck and brushed her hair from her face with his fingers.

“Let me call Dr. Hightower,” he requested. “He could be here in a few minutes, and you can—”

“No, please. I...” she started, not relinquishing her position. Immediately, a thought struck her as the perfect pretense. “I...” But she wasn’t sure she could say it. What ramifications would such a confession have? She didn’t have enough time to consider them and knew this would take care of some other issues she was sure to face in the next few days. “I think I might be... pregnant,” she said, hoping she sounded sincere.

Lex was instantly at her side on his knees, one hand on her back, the other gently cupping her cheek and turning her face toward his. She risked opening her eyes and saw such delight that she felt... guilty? She knew she shouldn’t care about this man, who was evil after all, but her memories, true or not, prevented her from hating him.

“Lois...” he said, looking deep into her eyes. “That is the most wonderful thing you have ever said to me.” He leaned forward and

kissed her on the top of her head.

She allowed a small, exhausted smile to show. Lex quickly got up and rushed from the room.

Maybe this wouldn’t be too hard. She pushed herself up and used the washcloth to wipe her face. She was still wearing her extravagant, and now wrinkled, dress from the night before and felt the need to take a long hot shower to cleanse herself. She would wait for that until after Lex had left the house, regardless of how long that took. She made her way slowly to the sink and looked at herself in the mirror, seeing this *new* Lois for the first time.

Her red-rimmed eyes sat above dark circles, the exhaustion of the last twelve hours was clearly written all over her face. Red lines from the creases in the couch cushion ran down her cheek, and what was left of her make-up was smudged. She reached up to touch her short hair that stuck out in various directions, and she couldn’t believe she’d let anyone see her like this.

She sucked in a breath as Lex came back in carrying her bathrobe and the plate of food from earlier. He set them down on the counter. “No, Lois, you are breathtaking,” he said and reached carefully around her to put his hands on her abdomen, meeting her eyes in the mirror. It was such an affectionate gesture, and Lois found herself covering his hands with hers. He nuzzled her ear with his nose and whispered, “I love you.”

Lois leaned her head forward away from his. This mix of affection and distrust, contentment and anxiety, was only adding to the sour feeling in her stomach. She let out a nervous laugh.

“I have a few errands to run this morning,” he explained as he moved his hands to her shoulders. “You take a nice hot shower and relax. I will be back in a couple of hours, and we’ll celebrate.” He gave her shoulders a gentle squeeze and smiled at her reflection. Was that a twinkle in his eye?

She turned her head to the side. “Thank you, Lex,” she said, surprised at the sincerity she felt.

He kissed her temple. “No,” he whispered into her ear, “Thank *you*.” He squeezed her shoulders once more before turning to leave.

She breathed a sigh of relief, knowing she had some time to herself to sort things out. The mixture of contradictory emotions was going to get the best of her. She shook her head and swallowed hard, reaching to turn the hot water on.

It had been a few weeks since Clark had gone to work feeling this worthless. Not that he was surprised. He hadn’t been able to get back to sleep after Lana had left and his morning run just didn’t help center himself like it usually did. His mind was out of sorts, distracted, and worried he wouldn’t be able to focus and do his job correctly. But he *had* to attend a special meeting the city council was holding.

The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the current city sewer issue in the downtown area. It was built hundreds of years ago, and the area was growing up, not out, putting stress on all the systems but most notably the sewer. The city council would address the problems and propose solutions.

Surely, he could manage sitting through a boring, slow-paced meeting and write it up well enough without messing it up. He wouldn’t need to ask questions if he didn’t feel like it, he could just observe and allow others present to do the questioning. He would listen and write about it. It had worked in the past on some of his gloomier days before coming to Columbia.

But no. In addition to being late to the meeting, he couldn’t focus at all. Here he was, sitting in the back of the room, unable to listen for more than a few seconds at a time, with as much of an idea of what was said about the sewer issue as a person two blocks away.

Two months. This time he’d lasted longer than at any of his previous jobs. Deep down, he knew that he wasn’t cut out for this

job. Lois had pointed that much out more than two years ago.

Maybe now Lana would believe it.

He ran his hand over his face and looked at his blank notepad.

John Zartaga, a reporter for the other paper in town, The Missourian, leaned over and snickered when he saw the blank notepad. Clark should have closed it. A long time ago. When he realized they were done talking about the sewer problems. When he realized he wasn't going to write anything down.

When he realized he should have left.

"I think my baby sister was taking notes in the back of the room. She's here with her middle school class," Zartaga said, pretending to look over everyone in that direction. "You might be able to pay her to write your story for you." Zartaga paused before leaning over to whisper, "She'd probably do a better job."

Clark slammed his notebook closed and took a deep breath to calm himself. Zartaga was just pestering him. If Clark ignored him, he would go away. If only it were that easy.

"Don't take yourself so seriously, Kent," Zartaga sneered. "No one else does."

Then again, maybe Zartaga was right. Clark stood up and quietly walked out of the meeting.

If his dad hadn't pulled strings to get him here, he probably wouldn't have even been offered this job. And he was terrible at it. Everyone knew it. He should just quit. Let a more qualified person take over the position.

Would his dad send him away again if he went home now?

Chapter 12

Lois was relieved that she had some time to clean up, relax, and figure out what she would do without Lex around. He was still gone when she finished her shower. She went in search of the photo albums that they kept on a bookshelf in the living room. She remembered looking through them on occasion with Lex and wondered whether seeing the photos would help her figure out what was real.

As Lois walked around their house, she felt at odds. It was both familiar and new at the same time. She couldn't shake the overwhelming confusion that seemed to follow her. She had come in the front door, placed her keys in the bowl on the table, and then walked down this hallway countless times. But looking down the hall at the closed front door made it seem like it was just a dream. Yet here she was in the very house in which that dream took place.

In the living room, she found the shelf and pulled out several of the photo albums. The albums were not labeled but were different colors that she couldn't quite explain the meaning of. She sat down in the middle of the same sofa that she had slept on last night and set all but one of the albums next to her.

The first album was burgundy and sported a faux suede feel. She opened its cover and found a picture of her and Lex dressed for their wedding. It was a close-up picture of just their faces looking at each other. No big grins or huge smiles graced their faces, but instead, they intensely gazed at each other as if they were about to kiss.

The nausea returned. Every time she thought about the predicament she was currently trapped in, how she was married to Lex when she was supposed to be with Clark, she was overwhelmed with a sense of infidelity on her part. How had this even happened? How could she not know the answers to all the questions swimming around in her head?

So far, she remembered Clark... Superman... leaving to see what remnants of his home planet existed. She vaguely remembered that their plans for a romantic evening together had been interrupted to learn about this improbable possibility. She very clearly remembered that she had planned on telling Clark she wanted to say 'yes' to his proposal. She tried to swallow the guilt down and put her cool fingers on her forehead.

Was she having an affair? Certainly, she hadn't known until

now, and she didn't understand what events happened to get her here, but she recalled the intimacy she shared with Lex as part of this marriage and couldn't bear to think of what this would do to her relationship with Clark.

She didn't even know where Clark was.

Or what ridiculous situation he'd been placed in.

The nausea increased, and she took a slow, deep breath to clear it. She reminded herself that losing control and sinking into despair would help no one before turning back to the album.

The next page had a picture of Lois walking down the aisle toward Lex. Her white dress had a plunging neckline on the lace bodice above a satin trumpet skirt. A bustle was gathered at the back, beginning the long train that trailed behind her. Full length sleeves covered her arms and a veil covered her hair, which was left down and decorated with elegant beads and gemstones. The look on her face was one of nervousness.

Unbidden, another memory surfaced, and she was at her afternoon wedding, walking down the aisle.

###

May 8, 1994

She walked down the aisle toward Lex, slowly, nervously. She turned to see the guests attending the ceremony, and her heart sank as she noted the absence of her friends and turned back only to be surprised by the person officiating the wedding.

"The Archbishop?" she asked, stunned.

"Yes, I'm sorry," Lex whispered to her; "the Pope had a prior engagement." He turned to take in her features, his gaze roaming her face, finally resting on her eyes. "You look... beautiful," he said in awe as he took her hand and tucked it under his arm.

She smiled at his kind words and together they turned forward, and she was relieved she was no longer facing him. But all she felt was pity as she recalled the intensity of the one-sided conversation she'd just had with herself before the ceremony.

The Archbishop began the ceremony. "Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today in the sight of God and in the presence of these witnesses to join together this man and this woman in holy matrimony."

As Lois shifted from one foot to the other, Lex put his free hand over hers and gave it a gentle squeeze that did the opposite of what he had intended. Could she say no when the time came?

"If anyone knows why this union should not take place," the Archbishop continued, "let them speak now or forever hold their peace." A short pause followed, and Lois wondered why her friends weren't there to speak up for her. Why wasn't she speaking up for herself? She was beginning to realize she couldn't do this.

"Do you, Lex," he continued, unaware of the emotional struggle building in her mind, "take this woman to be your wedded bride from this day forward, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until death do you part?"

Lois looked at Lex as the last part was said. Did he love her? Lex briefly turned to her and smiled before looking back at the archbishop and saying with tenacity, "I do."

She slowly turned back to the archbishop and let the words he was speaking to her sink in. "And do you Lois take this man to be your wedded husband from this day forward..."

Forever?

"...for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health..."

Would she even be here if Lex hadn't been the subject of that unattainable interview of the 3rd richest man in the world?

"...to love and to cherish, until death do you part?"

Did she love Lex?

"I..." she started, knowing what needed to be said and unable to form the words. Then she thought about her missing friends... and Clark and wished they'd been here with her, to speak for her when she couldn't. "I..." she tried again.

Lex turned to look at her, fear and confusion on his face.

“Lois?” he asked.

She turned to look at him with an apology on her face. “I can’t.”

###

I can’t.

She didn’t marry him.

That is how the real wedding had turned out, but she could still recall a version in which she had said yes. They had kissed and danced at a party that Perry and Jimmy and all of her friends were now noticeably absent from. But she knew that wasn’t correct. Was this marriage between her and Lex even real, official, documented?

She instantly recalled the marriage certificate framed on the wall across the room and set the album aside to inspect it. When she reached it, she scrutinized the information it held. The signature below her name was absolutely hers. The date was listed as January 20th, 1994. That wasn’t even the date of their original unfinished wedding. What had even happened after that?

She wished she could remember something that would tell her if she was in fact legally married to Lex at this moment, because this document had to be a fake.

Suddenly she noticed the name of one of the witnesses. Scott Ferguson. Here he was again. Was there a ceremony? Was he at it? Did they merely change the date? She would need to talk to him about this.

Deciding that thinking further about it wouldn’t reveal any answers, Lois went back to the couch to continue looking at the photo albums. As she sat down, she decided the wedding album was not a good choice and placed it on the coffee table in front of her, picking up instead the next album on the top of the pile beside her. This one was covered in navy satin. Lois ran her hand over the cover and opened it up. It proved to be from even earlier in time, displaying a picture of Lex dancing with her at the White Orchid Ball.

Engulfed again, she sat back on the couch.

###

September 17, 1993

“Lex Luthor,” Lois addressed the man facing away from her as he welcomed guests to the ball. Her intent was to land a one-on-one interview with the most famous man in Metropolis, and this would be the night she did it. As he turned to her, she asked pointedly, “Why haven’t you returned my calls?” The man looked at her with eyes that were both intrigued and impressed and politely left the conversation he was currently in to make his way to her. As he neared she introduced herself, “Lois Lane. Daily Planet.” She put her hand out to shake his.

Taking the offered hand, he stared intently into her eyes. “Well, I can assure you,” he began and paused to kiss her hand. “I’ll never make that mistake again.”

Lois smiled at him as he swung her around and pulled her in close as they danced. “I hope you’ll forgive me for being so bold. I—”

“But boldness is a trait I find attractive in a woman, Miss Lane,” Lex interrupted, bringing his face closer to hers.

Taken aback by the unexpected compliment, she gave a quick laugh while maintaining eye contact. “Thank you,” she said. She looked down briefly to clear her head. Luthor was not at all what she had expected. “Anyway,” she continued, “Mr. Luthor, I—”

“Lex,” he insisted and spun her away from him.

“Lex,” she corrected herself. Just then, he pulled her back in. She wondered if his flirtatious style was commonplace or if he was only behaving this way for her. Pushing onward, she continued, “I know that your hesitant to give interviews.”

“Well you can understand,” he began to explain. “A man in my position. I wouldn’t want to be misinterpreted,” he said in a breathy voice, further reducing the distance between them. She smiled and had no choice but to be enamored with the charismatic

man in front of her. “I have had one or two bad experiences with the media.”

She laughed again to relieve the excitement she felt building. “But not with me,” she pointed out.

“So,” he countered, “Why don’t we make it...” He paused, glancing at her neck and then nuzzling her ear with his nose as he whispered, “dinner.” He came back just enough to look into her face, his eyes smoldering with interest.

She’d only wanted an interview, but suddenly she wanted more. “I’d love that,” she responded simply, a small smile touching her lips.

“As would I.” He squeezed the hand he held and swung her around. “I look forward to getting to know you better.”

She was completely captivated and somewhat nervous as he continued to look intently into her eyes. She couldn’t look away as he led her. Aware of his hand holding hers and the firm embrace he held her in, she wondered what kind of man he was. She’d expected someone distant, apathetic toward those not in his inner circle. But this man was... something else.

He spun her again and smiled at her. “You seem so tense,” he pointed out. “Have I done something to offend you?”

“No, I...” she started, shaking her head, “I’m just... surprised. You are not what I thought you’d be.”

“I’m glad,” he said with a quick lift of his eyebrows. As the song ended, he brought her hand to his lips and lingered over it with a kiss.

Her breath caught. No one had ever treated her with such class. “Thank you for the dance,” she finally managed to say.

“It was my pleasure.” He released her hand and turned to walk away, leaving her alone with the feeling of having been swept off her feet.

###

No, she thought, shaking her head adamantly. *That wasn’t it. Clark was there. He’d interrupted that dance.* And she had been so mad at him for it. She’d had to convince him to come to the event in the first place, and then he’d only frustrated her with his cutting in and attempts to stop her snooping.

She smiled at the memory. It had been annoying then, but she later understood what he was doing.

A closing door stopped her reverie, and she looked up nervously. Lex must be home. She considered her options and decided to use the current circumstance to her advantage. She could talk with Lex about their wedding and the ball, see if she could glean some information from him.

She could do this, she could pretend to be in love with him. To be pregnant, she suddenly remembered.

She looked up as he entered the living room and smiled at him. He was carrying something behind his back and carefully maneuvered around the furniture, keeping it hidden. “Hello, my darling,” he greeted her.

“Lex,” she responded as she leaned to the side, trying to peek around him. “What’s that you have there?”

He sat down next to her, opposite the stack of albums and shook his head with a smirk. “No, no,” he said as he leaned to block her view. “Not yet.”

She looked at his face then and was surprised by the happiness she saw there. He must have released whatever he was holding because his hand came forward to caress her cheek, and he leaned slowly forward. All of her memories of him included this openly affectionate man that affected her in ways she now found very confusing. She realized then he was about to kiss her. Suddenly... luckily, the nausea returned with force, and she covered her mouth as she got up and bumped into the coffee table in her rush to reach the bathroom.

How convenient. She would have no trouble convincing Lex she was pregnant. As an added benefit, she guessed that he would also be less interested in intimacy. Or at least she hoped that would

be the case.

Again, Lex came in behind her and offered her a cool washcloth. She expected to see concern on his face as she had last time, but when she looked up, he was grinning widely at her instead. She laughed and shook her head. "I'm glad you are enjoying this," she said sarcastically.

He quickly shook his head, dropping the grin, and knelt down beside her. "I'm sorry," he apologized, "I don't enjoy this." He placed his hand on her knee. "But I can't hide my happiness about what this means." He paused, holding her gaze. "About our future child."

She felt a stab of regret at her decision to use the unfortunate symptoms of her returning memories to her advantage. He would certainly be devastated and angry when he learned the truth. But he'd put her in this position in the first place, and now she needed a way to keep him at a distance, however short that distance might be. She shook her head and smiled outwardly while chastising herself inwardly. Why should she care about how this affected him?

Lois took the washcloth from him and stood up. Lex supported her as she rose. "Come back to the living room when you are done here," he said as he squeezed her elbow and then left.

Before she went back, she mentally prepared herself to spend some time with Lex, taking deep breaths and repeating to herself that she could do this. She wasn't sure how long she'd been living this lie, but she couldn't remember any instances in which he had done anything malicious or dangerous. That realization made her more confident that she was safe with Lex... as long as he didn't suspect anything.

When she returned to the living room, she found Lex seated in the spot she'd left, holding the album she'd been looking through. He looked up as she entered. "Feeling better, I hope?" he asked, smiling. Yes, his eyes were twinkling. "You are glowing, you know."

She laughed. That simply wasn't possible, but perhaps he was seeing what he wanted to see. The thought struck a nerve, but she shook it off. "Stop," she said jokingly as she took the seat beside him, careful to show just enough affection.

"You were looking through these albums, I see." He turned a few pages and admired the pictures.

"Yeah," she admitted, looking over his arm at the images. "I was feeling... a little sentimental, I guess," she explained.

He turned another page. "About?" he asked, his attention on the album before him.

"The first time we danced," she said as she reached over his arm and pointed at the picture. It had clearly been taken from the balcony above by someone but displayed them looking directly at each other, both smiling.

"Ah," Lex agreed. "One of my favorites." As he looked intently at the picture, she leaned back in her seat, shifting her focus to Lex.

He sat there, reclining comfortably with his slippers propped on the coffee table, a small smile touching the corners of his mouth, his usual assertive confidence softened. He could be so intense at times, yet here was, looking through pictures and seeming so... normal. Relaxed. Content.

Was this real?

"You asked me to dinner that night." She watched as he slowly ran his finger over her image.

"And you agreed," he pointed out. He turned his head to face her with a sincere smile on his face. "It was the beginning of a new and wonderful adventure for me."

"Hmm." She drew her legs up to her chest, hoping to discourage any more closeness from Lex. "I recall having my own adventures that night as well," she said.

"Yes, I do recall. You were in my office." He chuckled as he looked back at the album and continued turning pages. The

pictures he looked over now were of other guests at the ball.

Lois continued to watch Lex, weighing what she would say next. She wished she could just ask outright what had happened. "Yes," she ventured with a grin on her face. "You found u—" She stopped herself just before saying 'us,' recalling just in the nick of time that Clark hadn't been there in his version. She tucked her hair behind her ear before speaking again. "You found me later." She smiled shyly at him, pretending to be embarrassed for another reason.

"Yes." Lex smiled and eyed her without turning his head from the album. "Snooping, if I recall."

"Investigating." She watched him carefully to see if he showed any signs of having noticed the mistake she almost made.

He smiled as he continued to remember that evening. "It was raining that night," he pointed out, "or I would have taken you out on the balcony to get a better look at the view." He closed the navy album and patted it with his hands.

"The rain added to the whimsy of the evening," she added.

"It did, didn't it." He smiled, a wistful look in his eyes. He leaned forward, placed the navy album down, and picked up the burgundy wedding album. "It was not raining at our wedding, though."

"No," Lois admitted, "it was clear and bright." She shifted on the couch again to see his face better. What could she ask that might shed light on what happened without tipping him off? "Were you nervous?" she asked.

Lex looked at her and smiled brightly. "Not at all." He set the album down with the others and then turned his body toward her, bringing his knee up onto the couch beside her. "I was finally getting everything I wanted in life," he said as he took her hand from where it rested on her knee. His words were so endearing, the kind of things girls dream of hearing. "If I recall, you looked quite nervous up there beside me."

She chuckled, recalling the nervous look on her own face in the picture. "Well, my friends weren't there..." Were they? Something flitted across his eyes, and his smile straightened a small amount. Had she made a mistake? She smiled and looked at their connected hands, stroking his fingers with her thumb in the hopes of distracting him. "I mean, next to me," she amended. "Julie, my friend from high school, would have made an excellent bridesmaid." She dared to look up at him then.

His relaxed smile told her he had accepted it. He nodded as he suggested, "We can recreate the event sometime, and she can be there with you."

She sighed, infusing it with wistfulness to cover her aversion to the idea.

Lex squeezed her hand. "Listen, darling," he started, "I haven't had lunch yet. Would you care to join me?" He stood up and reached his hand toward hers.

"Um..." She thought for a brief moment. She'd done well enough just now that she could handle more. She may even have more opportunities to get more information, if she could figure out how. "Sure," she agreed with a smile. "I still have an empty stomach." She reached up to grasp his proffered hand, and he pulled her up off the couch. As she stood, she caught a glimpse of the package he had been hiding from her earlier. "Wait," she insisted, stopping him. "What was that thing you were hiding behind your back?" She glanced back toward the end of the couch where he'd set it.

"Oh, right!" he said quickly. Lois moved out of his way as he leaned down, reaching for the package. He then stood to hand it to her. "You..." he smiled at her, "distracted me for a moment."

He placed the brown paper wrapped package in her hands. "For me?" Lois asked as she took the box, noting how light it was. She turned it over in her hands. It looked a bit like a present except it was void of any decoration or tags.

"Yes, darling." Lex put his hands behind his back and rocked

forward on his toes, like a child with a secret. “Open it,” he said with that twinkle in his eye once more.

She carefully undid the tape to remove the wrapping, revealing a simple box. Setting the paper down, she took the lid off the small white box and peered inside. She frowned and felt her mouth open as she reached in and pulled out the most adorable baby booties she’d ever seen. They were classic white lace-up shoes, the kind that parents might have bronzed and displayed on their mantle. Another unwanted stab of regret hit her, and she looked up at him with questioning eyes.

“They were mine,” he said.

A small gasp escaped her, and he took the box from her other hand and set it down.

He looked at the booties in her hand as he explained, “My mother had kept them as a memento. After she died, I kept them, though I don’t really know why.” He shrugged before he looked her in the eye again. A smile pulled up one side of his mouth. “It seemed like an appropriate gift.”

For a moment she forgot that she wasn’t pregnant, that she wasn’t in love with him. That he’d done something to her to replace Clark in her memories. She searched his face. She had never thought of him as sentimental. Certainly, her current memories of him painted a picture of a kind and affectionate husband.

But this.

This was meaningful.

Who was this man?

“Lex...” she finally said. “This is so... sweet.” She looked up at him and smiled the first genuine smile since her eyes were opened to the predicament she was in. “Thank you.” She leaned forward then and kissed him on the cheek. Startled by her own action, she quickly turned away and walked the few steps to a shelf at the side of the room. Pretending was one thing, but she would have to sort through these memories and soon. Whatever he’d done to her, it was enough to make her *feel* like she loved him. And it apparently hadn’t worn off completely... yet.

Chapter 13

Clark walked down the crowded, construction-laden Ninth street toward the university. Like any major city in the U.S., construction was a constant feature. The loud sounds did little to drown out his self-deprecating thoughts as he ducked under a covered path and continued down the sidewalk. He was hoping that maybe he’d find Lana and they could talk. He needed her, not just to tell him more about what he was saying in his sleep, but to help him feel... less like himself.

Less worthless.

The morning had gone horribly. After the long night he’d had, he should have known it would be this way. Walking slowly with his head down, he thought about everything that was going wrong. He hadn’t slept. He forgot to eat breakfast. He was ten minutes late to the city council meeting. He didn’t get any information at the meeting. And Zartaga knew it. He was a complete failure.

And he didn’t know where Lana was.

Just then, the furious ding of a bicycle bell caught his attention, but before he had time to register where it was coming from, the handle bar that must have belonged to that bell caught his left arm as it swung forward with his step. The fabric of his shirt sleeve wrapped around it, and he felt himself pulled off balance.

A muffled scream and a crash followed. He found himself tangled in a pile of bicycle, people, and a chair.

“Geez,” he heard from someone underneath him. “You gotta pay attention man,” a kid who looked like he was in college yelled at him.

Dazed, Clark took in the scene around him. A table had been pushed back against three occupied chairs with a fourth chair, a

bicycle, and two people wedged underneath. He was stretched on top of the biker and bike with his own legs sprawled out on the sidewalk.

“Is everyone okay?” he asked as he looked around what appeared to be a sidewalk cafe.

He received shocked nods from the three at the table. But the biker underneath shoved hard to dislodge himself and yelled, “Get off me!”

Clark attempted to apologize as he quickly got up and reached to help up the biker. That was when he realized the bike was completely bent out of shape, and the wrought iron chair was deformed. Clark wiped his hand across his face in frustration only to realize he had blood on his cheek. The biker didn’t appear to be physically hurt, but there was no questioning his anger.

“Are you always such a moron or is today special?” the biker asked with a sneer.

Moron. Add that to the list of Clark’s shortcomings.

“I’m sorry,” Clark quickly apologized. “I’ll replace the bike,” he added, realizing it just wasn’t enough.

She slowly turned back to the archbishop and let the words he was speaking to her sink in. “And do you Lois take this man to be your wedded husband from this day forward, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until death do you part?”

“I...” she started. Thinking then about her missing friends... and Clark, she found she couldn’t speak. “I ...” she tried again.

Lex turned to look at her, fear and confusion on his face.

“Lois?” he asked.

She turned to look at him, an apology on her face. “I can’t.”

The doors at the back of the room opened, and a familiar voice called to her. “Lois!”

Turning to see Perry striding down the aisle with Jimmy close behind him, she breathed a sigh of relief as she threw her veil back over her head. “Lex,” she happily exclaimed, planting a kiss on his lips. “They came!”

“Stop the wedding,” he instructed. “You can’t marry this man.”

“What, is there an echo in here? I just said that.”

“What’s the meaning of this?” Lex asked, confused.

“The meaning of this is, Luthor, you’re through,” Perry said with a stern look on his face, coming to a stop in front of Lex. It was then that Lois noticed a large number of police officers and Detective Henderson who had followed him in. “We have all the evidence against you we need.”

“Evidence? Evidence for what?”

“This is a warrant for your arrest,” Henderson explained, holding up papers. She looked to Lex to see confusion written on his face as Henderson continued, “for arson and other crimes too numerous to mention.”

“You’re out of your minds, both of you.” Lex’s expression changed to one of disbelief, but all Lois could do was watch in confusion.

“You have the right to remain silent.” Henderson began reciting the Miranda warning, “You have the right to an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be supplied—”

“Will you shut up?” Lex interrupted. “I can afford a thousand attorneys. I’ll have your badge. I’ll have your head for this. Get me the governor on the phone. Get me the president. Get him on the phone!”

Lois stared at him, mouth agape. She’d never seen Lex behave in any way other than as a gentleman, and it was disconcerting to think about what might have happened had Perry and Jimmy not burst in when they did.

A commotion at the back of the room drew everyone’s attention. Mrs. Cox was being led in handcuffs down the aisle, a smirk on her face.

“Et tu, Mrs. Cox?” Lex asked.

Still processing what was happening, she stood motionless as he said, “Lois, I’m sorry.” She felt her hand drawn upwards as Lex kissed it. “We’ll take a rain check,” he continued. “Something’s come up.”

She let her hand drop, stunned by what was happening.

“Let’s go pal,” Henderson said, clasping his hand on Lex’s arm.

“You let go of me!” Lex yelled as he shoved Henderson to the ground. Lois watched in shock as he rushed away from the scene, expertly taking down three cops who attempted to stop his exit before running through a door at the side of the room.

Unable to move, she stood transfixed in the nightmare.

Evidence? Were the things Clark eluded to actually true? Had she really been so blind? Clark was right: she was an investigative reporter, but she’d never investigated Lex, not really. She felt duped. Foolish. A laughing stock.

Her mother was suddenly, thankfully, at Lois’s side. “Oh honey,” she said soothingly, handing her a handkerchief. “I know things haven’t worked out the way you planned, but—”

“Why?” Lois interrupted as she dabbed at her eyes. “Isn’t this the way every girl dreams her wedding’s gonna be?”

###

Lois shook her head to clear it. It was getting easier to cope with the memories as they came, the warning signs giving her just a few seconds to ready herself. She was also able to recover more quickly now than last night at the hotel. Conveniently, Lex was called away to take care of some business, giving her more time alone to consider everything without having to worry that she would accidentally reveal that she remembered anything or would be overcome with a sour stomach. Now, the nausea seemed to only assault her every time she thought of her current circumstances or when she was in a position to be intimate with Lex. The only benefit of that was how it helped her cover seem so believable.

This time, she was already seated at the dining room table and needed only to set down the mug of coffee she’d been sipping. After Lex had left, memories continued to resurface. As she walked through her house, the mere sight of pictures and objects brought them on. It was becoming difficult to keep track of them as there were so many. And they were so contradictory. The investigative reporter in her knew that writing them down would be the first step to making sense of them. So here she sat at the dining room table, a pad covered in scribbles in front of her, tapping a pencil with one hand, her head resting on the other. She wrote snippets, sipping coffee and sorting everything that came to mind.

She had nearly two years’ worth of memories as a TV reporter, but it couldn’t have really been that long. How peculiar it felt to think about *work*. Crafting words into profound statements was still a necessary part of the job, but standing in front of a camera and saying those words was something she’d never considered for herself.

Following the anniversary party, Lois had taken the next week off from work in anticipation of spending quality time with her husband. Now, her time off would be spent much differently, trying to piece together reality.

It was becoming a painful process as the differences between what she thought was real and what was actually real became more apparent. This last memory of the ending to her ill-fated wedding to Lex reminded her just how senseless it was to never question Lex and accept his lies.

She’d remembered what he’d done to the Daily Planet. She’d remembered the lengths he went to so that she felt like she had nowhere to turn but to him. He’d choreographed it all.

And now it was happening all over again.

Except now she had no idea how it had even happened.

Her heart ached for Clark. She missed him, needed him... had

hurt him. What did he know? What sort of life had Lex forced him into? The only thing she knew for certain was that he must be miserable even though Scott said he was alive and well.

That was another thing. She hadn’t seen Scott today, and what little conversation they did have last night didn’t shed much light on what had happened or how or when. She understood why – he had to keep up appearances to prevent Lex from questioning his behavior.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, slowly releasing it and as much tension as she could.

As far as she could tell from piecing together the memories she had, she’d been living this lie for two months. Memories from the moment Clark had appeared in her life were the first ones she could recognize as changed, every one involving him riddled with lies. In some cases, only minute details were altered, but others were drastically transformed. Memories of things that had never happened were mixed together with events that had been previously completely inaccessible.

Scribbling as quickly as she could manage, she wrote everything down that came across her mind. Starting with Clark’s arrival, she made columns to separate those events she knew were real, the ones she knew were not real, and the memories she wasn’t sure of.

The only thing she was sure of was that the last two months of memories, though they began with lies, were authentic, and her awareness of this had been and was still making her physically ill. That was the hard part.

Knowing she’d been living with Lex as his wife.

Happily married.

Her stomach churned. The only thing keeping her from sinking into a pit of despair too deep to climb out of was the fact that as reprehensible as it was, it was not something done by choice. Even if she had seemed willing afterward, Lex had done this to her. And she couldn’t even begin to imagine how he’d done it or what he’d done.

Her head was beginning to hurt thinking about all of this. Pushing her chair back from the table, she stood and made her way back to the living room, taking her pad of notes with her.

How had this happened? How much time had passed after Superman “left” before this lie began?

Taking a seat on the couch, she glanced around the room only to catch sight of the baby booties Lex had given her just before lunch sitting on the end table. She picked them up gently and examined them more closely without him present to watch. The solid white leather booties showed the smallest amount of wear. The laces were tied in a simple bow, one end of the lace longer than the other.

The man who gave her these booties obviously cared for her, but how could he be the same person she had been gradually remembering more about all afternoon? She felt like she knew two Lex Luthors now – the corrupt businessman who wanted to destroy Superman and rule Metropolis, and this thoughtful and caring one that wanted only her happiness. How could they be the same person? Had something happened to Lex as well?

She shook her head to stop the mess of thoughts running through it and set the booties back on the table. This could not be the same Lex that Lois had remembered. The one who had lied, cheated, stolen... killed.

She needed a break from all of this, but reminders were everywhere, and there were so many questions yet to be answered. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath as she slammed the notebook closed in frustration.

A nap is a good idea, she thought as she shoved the notebook under the couch. She was overwhelmed and exhausted. She went in search of a bed that was not theirs and hoped that sleep would bring some much-needed relief... if only temporarily.

"It's just a face," Imogene explained. The dark-haired, older woman sat with impeccable posture complete with her hands neatly folded in her lap. "A nice enough looking one, but that's it."

Jimmy perched on the edge of a flowered love seat in the small living room of Imogene Hubert. Her husband, Hal, was relaxing in the chair across from him. "Is it always the same face?" he asked, jotting a few notes down.

"Oh, yes." She nodded, not bothered by this at all. "Sometimes, I feel like we're in a big, white room and sometimes I can't tell where we are, but it's always the same face."

According to Hal, Imogene had gone to the health care facility to have a mole removed. She came home without it, but they argued over whether the procedure had taken place. A bandage covered the site where it had been, but Imogene insisted that it was merely covering a scratch she'd received while weeding near her rose bushes in the garden that morning. Now, the only evidence that a mole had ever existed was the hard copy health records Hal had kept.

When Jimmy first arrived, they showed him Imogene's old health records clearly indicating the mole, its location, and suggested treatment. Then they showed him the copy of the digital records that showed no such diagnosis but rather described her skin as nearly flawless. After discussing what had happened, Imogene mentioned that it was around the time she started having this strange dream. And that's what she was trying to explain now.

"It's the same dream the other two we've met with kept mentioning," Hal explained. Hal had talked with some of the other claimants to see what could be done, and it was at one of their meetings that they discovered several of the patients had been having the same strange dream of a face.

"And this dream started the same time this procedure supposedly happened?"

"Yes," Hal cut in. "She told me about it. I think it scared her at first, but now it's like they're old friends. She's named him Jacob." Hal shook his head.

Jimmy smiled and nodded, trying not to chuckle. "You said she's forgotten some other things?"

"Yeah," Hal answered. "We had lunch that day. Ran into some friends from our home town. But she doesn't remember any of that. She thinks she spent the whole afternoon shopping. But didn't come home with any bags."

"I see." Jimmy took notes as he talked, trying to think of relevant questions to ask, pondering possible explanations. Was the face a real person? Perhaps if it was, that person likely knew something that would help them understand what had really happened. "Mr. Hubert, would you mind taking your wife down to the police station? I have an idea."

"Sure, what is it?"

"I'd like Imogene to describe the face in her dream to a sketch artist down at the police station." Jimmy scribbled down a name on a scrap of paper and handed to Hal. "Detective Henderson can hook you up with him." Jimmy stood up to leave, satisfied with the information he'd received.

Hal and Imogene stood as well, Hal extending his hand. "Sure, no problem."

"Today if possible," Jimmy added, shaking Hal's hand.

She knows, Lex realized as he eyed the object in his hand.

Lex had suspected something was amiss this morning, when she had commented about her friends not being at the wedding. That memory had been altered. At first, he thought maybe she was just tired because of her condition.

And then he stumbled across this notebook. One of Lois's. Stuffed under the couch.

He'd been thinking about her earlier comment for much of the day and had sat down to polish his knife collection as he usually did when he needed time to focus and center himself. If he hadn't

dropped the lid to the cleaner only to have it roll under the couch, he never would have found it. But when he reached his fingers under the edge, they brushed across something unexpected instead.

A notebook.

Small, with a leather cover. One of the ones he'd given her several weeks ago just because he loved her and enjoyed giving her gifts.

He'd pulled it out and flipped through the pages. It looked like notes for a story at first, but as he flipped further, the writing looked more hurried, frantic even. Columns of notes scribbled in haste.

He paused on one page as a single, elegantly written word leaped from the paper.

Clark.

The blood drained from his head, leaving him woozy. As he looked more closely at the words on the page, reading bits and pieces, he realized that there was no mistaking what was going on.

Somehow, she knew.

She remembered.

As he flipped through the notebook more slowly, he saw a jumble of the events and descriptions he'd given her mixed with the real memories he'd covered up. Snippets, it appeared. Pieces. She hadn't remembered everything, it seemed... or she hadn't had a chance to write it all down. From the looks of it, she was trying to sort out what was real from the rest of it.

Lex closed his eyes and mentally ran through the last several days, searching for some evidence of when this had happened. Then he would be able to consider how it had happened.

Hightower had insisted that the process was irreversible. That it wouldn't wear off with time. That it worked. Immediate regret filled him and quickly turned to anger.

He tried to relax, breathing deeply. He spotted the baby booties he'd brought to her. Her reaction brought a smile to his face. She hadn't been expecting the gesture, and he could tell by the look on her face that it had exactly the effect on her that he was hoping for. She was enchanted.

He had diligently spent the last two months making amends for the way in which he'd interrupted her life. He had painstakingly displayed his affection for Lois. She and all the world could see just how much he truly loved her. How he would do whatever was necessary for her happiness. He knew what was best for her and would take care of her.

Lois.

He couldn't lose *his* Lois. His heart ached at the thought of losing her... and their unborn child.

Suddenly, it hit him. That must be it. The pregnancy must have done something, changed something. Hormones were notorious for wreaking havoc in all sorts of ways in pregnant women. And they probably hadn't tested that aspect. Questions bombarded him. Had it been the pregnancy? Did Hightower make a mistake or lie? Would it be safe to alter her memories again? If it weren't safe, could he endure several months of her hatred before having the opportunity to repeat the procedure?

Lex shook his head, his face turning stern. She couldn't hate him. Could she? She'd so easily stepped into her role as his wife, and he *knew* those affections couldn't be faked. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad, even if she did remember everything. Maybe she would come to realize that she preferred him over Clark.

He should have killed Clark when he had the chance.

Yet knowing he was so miserable gave Lex such great satisfaction. Lex had carefully crafted a miserable existence for the deceiving alien. He had nothing but years of memories of being forced to leave his job for something that never happened, countless failures, and disappointing his friends and family, which led to his new low self-esteem as well as a fear of intimacy. And he'd made sure to leave just enough of the shell of the old Clark to

make sure he wouldn't give up on life altogether.

According to his last report, the Lang girl had just left him. A smile spread across his face at the thought. He wondered just what had happened to bring about that added despair.

Lex shook his head. He couldn't think about that now. He needed first to get Lois somewhere secluded, protected. He knew just the place.

And then he would have Hightower make sure the procedure wouldn't hurt his future heir. That was the last thing he wanted.

Chapter 14

A few hours later, they relaxed on the plush chaise sectional sofa, watching the news after dinner as they always did. But this time Lex noticed the subtle differences. She was making an effort to mask it, but she sat just the slightest bit further away and did not lean in his direction as much as she used to. When he reached for her hand, she seemed startled but allowed him to take it.

How long had she known?

How long had she known she was pregnant?

He gently squeezed her hand and could sense the faintest turmoil within her. It troubled him to know she was distressed and trying to hide it. In her condition, he knew it could be dangerous. It was imperative, for her safety and that of their unborn child, that something be done as quickly as possible. But he would first have to discuss it with Hightower to determine what would be the best course of action.

As they reclined next to each other, he considered what could immediately be done and made a decision. He leaned closer to her shoulder and ignored the subtle shift she made. "Lois, my dear," Lex cooed into her ear, "I've decided we should take a little vacation."

"A vacation?" Lois said distractedly. She kept her eyes on the television, but he wondered if her attention was really so focused on the news. Or was she only pretending?

"Yes," he said as he laced his fingers through hers. She didn't pull away, and he pulled her hand into his lap. As he began stroking her fingers, he heard her breath catch, and it made him smile. "Since we have some time off, I thought we could celebrate our happy news with a little get-away to that chateau of mine upstate." The increase in her breathing was only barely noticeable. "It has a sort of gothic feel to it. Very romantic," he said as he brought her fingers to his lips. "I know you'll love it."

She turned to him then with a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. "Have we been there before? I don't remember it."

"No, darling. I only just acquired it last month. But I thought it would be the perfect place for us to relax." Lex suggestively inched his body closer to hers. "And... enjoy each other's company."

After adjusting her own position, she leaned her head on his shoulder and said, "I don't know, now might not be the best time."

"But Lois, darling, later you'll be too far along to be comfortable traveling long distances," he pointed out. "Now is the most suitable time."

She sighed, and he wondered what hidden meaning it carried. "Oh, Lex, I just don't feel up to it."

"Won't you reconsider?" he tried to appeal. "It will be very relaxing."

Her head rolled from side to side on his shoulder. "I don't know..."

He guessed the reason for her reluctance to say yes: she was aware. What could he say to help her feel more comfortable with the idea, to be willing to go? He gathered that she was nervous to spend time with him and assumed she would come up with some excuse to not share a bed with him tonight. Perhaps the promise of some time alone would do the trick.

"I was hoping we could go in the morning, but I have an appointment just before lunch. I was hoping that you might be

willing to head there yourself. I've arranged for Scott to drive you."

Scott. She closed her eyes to restrain her excitement at hearing this. She hadn't been sure when she would see him again. This would be the perfect opportunity to ask him questions and work out what to do next. Suddenly, the idea wasn't so bad.

"Well," she began, trying not to sound too eager. "Is it far? I don't think I could be in a car for too long. Driving home last night was miserable." It was true enough.

"It's only a couple of hours. And you could stop along the way if you needed a break." He squeezed her hand again, his need for contact surprising her after having remembered whom he really was. "The countryside is beautiful."

"When would you get there?" she asked.

"Later that afternoon. I hope to be there in time to watch the sunset with you over the river." He turned to kiss the top of her head. "I thought I would have Scott take you there just after breakfast. However, since I am certain you will miss me," he said with laughter in his voice, "I was going to have them prepare your favorite dessert – Double Fudge Crunch Bars. They will be there waiting."

She smiled and chuckled at his thoughtfulness and then felt the familiar nausea flaring up. She swallowed to suppress it before answering, "That sounds... perfect," she said with as genuine a smile as she could manage.

Lex shifted then, and as she lifted her head from his shoulder, she turned to see some unreadable expression flit across his face before it was replaced with the affection she had grown accustomed to, however outlandish it seemed now.

"Perfect." His eyes smiled at her as he slowly leaned closer, making his intentions clear when he glanced at her lips.

As if on cue, the nausea overwhelmed her once more, and she made a mad dash to the bathroom. It was certainly bothersome but made it exceedingly easy to convince Lex she was pregnant. So long as he didn't notice that it only seemed to happen when he tried to be intimate with her.

Lex followed her, ever the completely contradictory sympathetic husband, rubbed small circles all over her back, offered her a washcloth at the right time, and spoke soft assurances to her. It was awkward to have him here. She was embarrassed to have an audience for the unpleasant event, but she allowed it for fear that he would see through her deception.

A thought struck her as he pulled her hair from her face: where would she sleep tonight? He would expect her to be fine with sleeping in their bed. But the thought of being there, next to him, with the potential for anything to happen had her stomach heaving anew. If only she could come up with a reason to need to sleep somewhere else.

"Lois, darling," Lex began. "After the last twenty-four hours or so, it appears you have all-the-time sickness instead of morning sickness."

She laughed at his reference between her heaving.

"I don't think you've slept well lately," he continued, rubbing her back again. "I'm worried about you... and the baby."

She could feel his sincerity in the way he tenderly touched her and hear the smile in his voice at the mention of this nonexistent baby. It made her cringe. "I'll be okay," she insisted, though her body tried to prove otherwise.

"I know," he cooed.

When she sat back, finally sure that there was nothing left to expel, Lex handed her a fresh washcloth and stood. He reached for her hands, and she was thankful for the help. Standing at the sink, her body shivered despite her efforts to stop it. She was exhausted. Once she finished brushing her teeth, Lex surprised her by scooping her up in his arms and carrying her from the bathroom. She tensed, unsure of his intentions.

"I think it would be best if I allowed you to sleep undisturbed tonight," he explained stepping just across the hall to the guest bedroom. "There will be fewer steps for you to take should you need to return."

She breathed a sigh of relief as he lay her on the bed and helped her under the covers as if he were tucking a child into bed. His thoughtfulness astounded her, and she was grateful.

"Thank you," she said as she reached to squeeze his hand. "I'm sorry."

"Nonsense." He leaned closer and caressed her cheek with his hand. "Sleep well, my darling," he said before gently pressing his lips to hers.

She smiled weakly as he left the room and, as soon as the door closed behind him, dropped her head back with an exasperated sigh.

This. This pretending. This conflict of emotions. All of this was hard.

Clark lay sprawled face down on the bed, feet and hands dangling over the edges, contemplating the misery that was his existence. If he were going to be completely honest with himself, everything that had happened was a direct result of his own deficiencies.

He was gullible, believing things that would have been obviously false to anyone else. He was stubborn, failing to listen to reason when the accuracy of his information was brought into question. He was thoughtless to his core to be able to hurt someone unconsciously. He was an irresponsible, unreliable reporter who could be outdone by a middle school student. He was careless and inattentive, destroying things around him.

And to top it all off, this afternoon his ineptness led him to the wrong house when he tried to find Lana. He must have written the address down incorrectly. He couldn't even do *that* right.

The snickers and raised eyebrows of the numerous people in that house, gathered for some kind of party he wasn't invited to, still grated on his nerves in his mind.

Can he do anything right?

Nope.

He couldn't even fall asleep to end this disastrous day. He began counting... all the ways he was a failure... one... two... three... four...

Chapter 15

January 22, 1996

The rings she wore to signify her marriage to Lex flashed in the sunlight as Lois turned them over in her hands. After getting in the car with Scott, she took them off and now sat with her head on the headrest as she watched the scenery go by, unseeing. Her thoughts were a jumble of contradictions.

Angry that Lex had done... something to her.

Moved by what appeared to be his genuine affection for her.

Charmed by his unwavering adoration and considerate behavior, especially when she kept running from him every time he tried to be intimate.

Ashamed that she couldn't shake her affections for him, though she now knew most of those memories were lies.

Distressed by the memories with Lex that were real.

Angry at herself for letting Clark down.

Desperate to know what happened to Clark.

Terrified of the possibilities.

Determined to get out of this and put everything back to normal.

Not *normal*.

Things could never go back to *normal*...

Lois closed her eyes to the scenery and her thoughts. A tear slipped down her cheek, and she took a slow deep breath.

Spending time thinking like this was not productive. It would only

hinder her ability to think clearly and work toward her goal. She needed to focus instead and remember that she and Clark had overcome everything they'd been through. Surely this would be no different. She had to believe that.

"I hope you don't mind," Scott interrupted her introspection, "I called ahead to the chateau and let them know we would be late. Since you are so *sick* with this *pregnancy*, we'll have to make additional stops and won't arrive at the time Lex told them yesterday."

Not much had been said since she got into the car with Scott, as she just sat and thought. Now, she laughed at the reference to her *condition* but was pleased that it would give them an excuse to take it slow. "Scott, I'm not really pregnant," she corrected.

"I know," he said, releasing a small laugh, "But this will give us time to make it to Clark before Lex figures out we're gone."

Lois quickly turned to face him, shifting her body. "You know where he is?" she asked.

"Our flight leaves in just under an hour from Metropolitan International Airport."

"Oh Scott," she exclaimed. "Where is he?"

"Columbia, Missouri," Scott informed her. "We sent him back to Kansas, but his dad sent him to Columbia. He's working for the paper there."

"*We*?" Lois picked up on the word. Had she heard him correctly? He had something to do with all of this?

She could see the self-reproach in his features as he weighed how he would answer the question. "Yeah," he finally said, guilt coloring his response.

"You... had a hand in this?" she asked, confused.

"Yeah," he repeated with the same sad tone of voice, knuckles whitening as he gripped the steering wheel tightly. "And while I don't expect you to believe me, I have never regretted anything more." He glanced at the treble clef on his wrist before he turned and looked at her, eyes beseeching. "You can trust me. I'm on your side now, and I will help until everything is—"

"What happened?" she interrupted, needing answers to an overflow of questions.

He sighed. "In short, Lex Luthor paid me and some other guys to... incapacitate Superman..." He paused and looked at her before he continued, "Clark... change his and your memories and then do whatever else we needed to make it work."

She barely heard the admission of his knowledge of Clark's secret after the word *incapacitate* knocked the breath from her. Her mouth hung open, and she took short, quick breaths.

"I don't really know why." She heard him pause and saw him look at her, but her mind was stuck. "I know now that Lex Luthor is the worst kind of monster. I'm sorry I didn't see it sooner."

Incapacitate. The word hung in the air, thick with dread until she remembered Scott's words at the party. *He is alive and... well*. She grasped that bit of information and held it close. Swallowing, she looked away. Agonizing over what had happened would not solve anything. Forcing herself to focus on the immediate situation, she responded, "I know he's a monster. But everything is... mixed up in my head. It's like I can't shake the stuff that I know is wrong." She leaned her head back on the headrest, turning to look out the window. "It's... overwhelming, exhausting"

"That should wear off over time. Eventually, you'll remember everything that was real, but I don't know how long that will take. And the fake stuff... I don't know if it will go away."

"When did it happen?" she asked.

"About two months ago."

"When Superman left..." she thought out loud. "How many people know... the secret?"

"Seven," he answered.

She took a deep breath, closing her eyes. They'd worked so hard to keep this secret. And now five criminals could do anything they wanted with that information. Thankfully, it seemed one of

them had seen the error of his ways.

“Lex, of course, me, and three others that were working on this,” he continued. “I worked with Hightower. Did whatever he told me to. Then, as your cameraman, I was your... guard.”

“*Doctor* Hightower?” she asked as she knit her brows. “He’s not really a doctor, is he?”

“He is, actually.” Scott nodded and explained, “He built the device that did all this memory changing. Someone named Anna Seville was in charge of changing records. Dr. Florence Montgomery took care of Superman, and his lackeys, Travis and Carl—”

“Carl!?” Lois shouldn’t be surprised. Yes, Carl was very thoughtful and relatable, and all her interactions with him over the last two months seemed so genuine that she thought of him as a friend. But his right-hand man, Nigel St. John, and his personal assistant, Mrs. Cox, had their fingers in every bit of Lex’s plans. She rolled her eyes. “How’d you know how to... get me to remember? It was the song, right?”

Scott shrugged as if it were some small thing he’d done. Nodding again, he explained further, “I heard Hightower talking one day about a key to the machine. Some great joke he had. Once I decided to stop this, I thought about that key. The rest was a lot of guessing... and being wrong.”

“You didn’t know which song.” Thinking back over the past couple weeks, there were many occasions where Scott would start singing with no prompt like he had these songs stuck in his head. He never sang them very loud, and now she realized that he had studied her after the first few lines before continuing. The singing started just after his sister, Samantha, died. She thought it was related to his grieving, but apparently, it was not.

“Here we are at the airport,” he interrupted her train of thought. “We’re flying as usual, reporter and cameraman.”

“We’re flying under our *real* names?” She couldn’t keep the shock from her voice. It was over. Lex would find them in a heartbeat.

“I know it’s not ideal.” Scott shrugged. “But I don’t have that kind of money and flying on the company dollar was the only way I saw it being possible. I bought us some time letting them know we’d be late. We’ll just have to work fast once we get there.”

She sighed. This was going to be tough. Would they have enough time? How long would it take Lex to realize his wife and her cameraman hadn’t shown up where they were supposed to?

Almost everyone knew them as Lois Lane, reporter for LNN, and Scott Ferguson, her trusted cameraman. How had that not felt awkward for him for the past two months? Or had it?

“Thank you,” she said, realizing that it didn’t matter what role Scott had played. He was serious about making it all better.

“No problem,” he said, brushing off her gratitude. Did he feel like he owed her?

They pulled up to the departing flights terminal and parked.

“One more question, Scott?” she asked, reaching to stop him before he got out of the car.

“Yeah?” He sat back just enough to turn and look at her.

“Am I actually married to Lex?” she asked, frowning, not sure what she wanted the answer to this question to be.

“Um... Yeah... As far as I know.”

Lex sat in his office, leaning back in the chair at his desk with his eyes closed. 48 hours ago, preparations were underway for his second wedding anniversary with his beautiful wife. 36 hours ago, the celebration was just beginning. 34 hours ago, he was worried about her sudden illness. 24 hours ago, he received the best news of his life. 18 hours ago, he realized things were not as good as they seemed. And one hour ago, he watched her leave, on her way to a place where she would be safe. Now, he was determined to take back control of the situation and waited impatiently to speak with the only person who could offer some assurance that all was

not lost.

His Lois.

He’d seen what the morning sickness, however briefly it had been occurring, was doing to her. He had surprised himself by suggesting she sleep in the guest room. But her usual glow, though still brightened by pregnancy, was slightly dimmed by the dark circles under her eyes. And he wasn’t sure how much she was able to keep down yesterday. The fatigue had gotten the better of her last evening, and he knew she needed rest in her condition.

A knock at the door brought him back from his woolgathering. He called for whomever it was to come in and was pleased to see Dr. Hightower follow Carl into the room.

“You wanted to see me, Mr. Luthor?” Hightower asked.

“Yes,” Lex began, using his hand to indicate that Hightower take a seat and simultaneously nodding to give Carl permission to leave. Once they were both seated, Lex leaned forward, tenting his fingers and frowning at Hightower. “Tell me, Hightower,” Lex started, leaning back in his seat. “You did test your machine on pregnant women. Am I right?”

“Yes sir,” he replied with a nod.

“Was there ever any danger to the fetus?” Lex certainly had other questions that he wanted to ask the doctor, but this trumped them all. He couldn’t put the baby at risk, even if it meant a tense time with Lois as a captive. He would cope, though, if necessary, but hoped for a different outcome.

“No sir.” Hightower’s serious look and continued eye contact spoke well for him, easing some of Lex’s worries. “We were affecting memories directly through contact with the brain or through sight. While infants do have short term memories, at that young age they aren’t kept. Our devices don’t connect with the fetus, however, under any circumstances.”

Relief filled him as he released the breath he’d been holding. He relaxed, comforted by the fact that he should be able to proceed as he had hoped.

“Lois is pregnant,” he stated, smiling to himself.

“Congratulations, sir.” Hightower nodded.

“Thank you.” Lex carefully worded his next question. “Could the hormones associated with pregnancy affect the permanence of the procedure?”

“No sir,” Hightower responded with a frown. “The changes that we made to the brain are independent of hormones.”

The furrowed brow gave Lex pause. Was something amiss? He would not put up with this behavior. He slowly rose from his chair, walked around to the front of the desk, and leaned against it, facing Hightower.

“You’re certain?” Lex asked with a raised eyebrow, looking for any signs of duplicity.

“Yes,” he said confidently. Though his brow was still furrowed, Hightower appeared unconcerned by this, sure of himself, and sure of his work.

“I fear Lois has remembered a few things.” Lex continued to watch him carefully. He was sure the slightest glimpse of doubt crossed Hightower’s face before the doctor schooled his features.

“That’s impossible,” he said, his eyes darting away and then back quickly. While he appeared to have the same confidence now, he was a fool to be arrogant on the outside. Lex’s patience and respect for the man waned.

“That is where you are wrong,” Lex pointed out as he stood and walked to the window. “Yesterday afternoon, I read a notebook that I found at home. My dear investigative reporter is emerging and is attempting to make sense of it. The notebook had accounts of several events that were altered. Both real and fake, side by side.” He took a deep breath as he turned, staring directly at Hightower. “You will tell me how this is possible.”

“I have no idea.” There was that fear again in Hightower’s eyes, briefly still. He *was* hiding something. “We tested extensively.” Lex could tell Hightower was trying to sound sure

and convinced. But it was the small things that Lex paid attention to, allowing him to see through the facade.

"I see." Lex relaxed a bit, allowing his businessman persona to take over. Hightower would feel his wrath in time. Until then, he would need Hightower once more. "I'll need you to repeat the procedure."

"Certainly, sir," Hightower agreed. A little too quickly.

"I want you to bring whatever you need to this address tomorrow morning," he instructed as he quickly scribbled the address.

Tomorrow morning couldn't come soon enough.

"Lana!" a familiar voice called to her. She turned to see Clark jogging toward her. "Wait up!"

Of course, he would find her here. He knew her schedule. She silently berated herself for being so predictable as she leaned closer to her friend. "I'm sorry, I should talk to him," she told her as she adjusted the shoulder strap of her bag. "I'll meet you in the library." Her friend looked in Clark's direction before nodding and walking away.

Lana stood there, hugging her many folders and books to her chest, as Clark closed in. "Hey Clark," she said, feeling shy as he stopped in front of her.

"Can we talk?" he asked as he shoved his hands into his pockets. "For a bit?" he added, turning his sweet puppy dog eyes on her.

She could never stay mad at him, especially when he always seemed so remorseful. But it had never taken him this long to come around. "Sure," she replied, knowing what they needed to talk about, but hoping he would bring up something else. But as Clark shifted his weight from one foot to the next, she knew it would not be an easy conversation.

"Lana," he started, looking down at his toes. "I... I need you to tell me what you heard me say in my sleep." He looked up at her face then, silently imploring her to agree.

But, instead, her anger flared, and she aimed it directly at him "Clark, I—" she started forcefully.

"Please," he interrupted, his pleading tone quickly subduing her. "I've been trying to remember, and all I can come up with is how I ruined her life and she hates me. I want to fix things between us, but I don't know what you heard me say, and I can't imagine how anything I have said about her would ever be anything but negative." He paused then and turned his pleading eyes to her once more before adding, "I *need* your help."

She sighed. The mix of emotions was almost too much. How was she going to respond to that? He was supposed to figure this out on his own and come back to her with an apology. This request would require her to live it all over again. His pleading eyes tore at her resolve. She turned her head to the side and looked off into the distance. "I don't know if I can have this conversation," she said honestly.

"Remember that dream I had in high school that I was mad at *you* for?" Clark asked. He gestured for her to walk with him down the sidewalk away from the library and then put his hands out toward her to carry her things for her.

"What dream?" she asked, allowing him to lighten her load and falling into step beside him.

"The one where you were kissing some guy," he explained, "and thought it was perfectly reasonable."

"Oh, yeah." She rolled her eyes at the memory. "That wasn't fair. It was a dream. It never even happened."

"Well, this is kind of like that," Clark pointed out. "I was dreaming, and it never happened, yet you're mad at me for it. I don't think it's fair that you're mad at me for something I said when I was asleep." He paused, but she didn't look at him. "Especially without telling me what I said..." he added.

He was right. But she wasn't ready to admit it... yet. They

walked in silence for a moment. She remembered that *situation* well. He was so mad at her, and she had no idea why. She'd had to plead with him to even talk to her about it. When he'd finally told her why he was mad, it took more convincing for him to believe her than she had expected.

She sighed and shook her head. He deserved an explanation, and then he could convince her this time around.

"It was weird," she began, her steps slowing slightly. "The first time I heard you talking, you seemed to be trying to tell her something. But your alarm clock went off. You kept talking like it was the phone, and she needed to answer it." She ducked her head, feeling the embarrassment of the mistake she made. "I thought you were talking to me."

"Did I ever tell her that something?" he asked.

They neared the end of the sidewalk, and she allowed him to lead her to the right, toward the courtyard at the center of campus.

"No," she admitted. "Not even later."

"What do you mean 'later'?" he questioned. "It happened again?"

"Yeah," she answered simply, unwilling to admit that she had often wondered what secret he had to share. Sometimes she'd even stayed close to listen in on the conversation, but not after she realized he wasn't talking to her.

"What else?" he prompted, catching her attention with his hand gesturing for more.

She closed her eyes and swallowed. Was this how Clark had felt while telling her about his dream all those years ago? "The next night you were trying to tell her something again but got interrupted by another ringing telephone that you just had to answer."

He gave a small laugh "Alarm clock?"

She laughed in response, glancing at him to see a little of the tension leave his face. "No. But, you did answer it. You said something about telling the world but then seemed really upset saying, 'let them go'."

"Hmmm... But I didn't say who to let go, or who I was talking to?" She gave a small shake of her head. And turned her face downward. "Keep going," he encouraged. "This isn't as bad as you thought it would be, right?"

Is it? she thought to herself. It certainly felt awkward to her. And they hadn't yet reached the worst of it. But they would have to keep going.

The sidewalk led them to a fountain in the middle of the long courtyard surrounded by various buildings. Lana sat down on the edge of the fountain. Clark stood a few feet from her, looking into the pool behind her, the sunlight bouncing from its surface and reflecting on his face. She was saddened by the stress and worry written there.

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly before continuing. "The night after that, you were telling her that your parents were kidnapped. I guessed she wanted to help you find them because you thanked her."

"Thanked her?" Clark said, surprised. "That's definitely *not* the Lois I remember. She might have been the one to kidnap them..." The last part he said under his breath, but she heard it. He stepped to her side and sat down beside her, setting her things on the edge of the fountain.

She saw him glance at her hands and moved them to her pockets to prevent him from taking them. She wouldn't be able to cope with the conflicting feelings.

"The next night you seemed to think something bad was going to happen to her and were telling her to get away as far as she could." She paused and looked down the long sidewalk in front of them. "I guess the bad thing happened because the night after that you were yelling for her, telling her to live, fight... breathe." She looked toward her shoes and crossed her feet. "'Don't you die on me, Lois,' you said."

She glanced at him then, at the incredulous look on his face. Was it really so unbelievable? “Did she die?” he asked tentatively. “No,” Lana sighed and slumped her shoulders, preparing for the next part of the story. “She didn’t die. But you were talking to her about how you almost lost her, and it made you think about how ashamed you were.”

Clark snapped his fingers and pointed at her. “That’s the Lois I remember,” he said. “The one who could make anyone feel like the worst possible—”

“No,” she interrupted forcefully, fisting her hands and turning to look at him with disdain. “You were ashamed because you hadn’t told her that you *love* her.”

“What??” Clark was taken aback as she allowed the hurt to show. “Lana, you know this was just a dream, right?”

Fuming, she did her best to ignore his question. He needed to know what hearing this had done to her to understand why she was so upset. Looking back at the ground, she kept going with the retelling of the story. “You said something like... you were ashamed because you kept pushing her away even when you said you wouldn’t, and she couldn’t have died before she knew why.”

“Why I pushed her away?” Clark asked. “Or why she could have died?”

“How should I know?” she spat at him and rolled her eyes.

Clark clearly regretted asking that question and sat back silently.

“You said,” she pressed on, pausing to take a breath, “If you died without ever knowing why, I’d never be able to forgive myself... because I *love* you.” She let out a deep breath in an attempt to control her emotions and stood up, pacing back and forth in front of Clark who remained seated on the edge of the fountain.

Now it was his turn.

“Lana?” His brow furrowed, concern filling his voice and relieving some of her anger. “It was just a dream.” He reached for her hand as she passed and pulled her to a stop, exactly the way she was hoping he would. She didn’t meet his eyes, but instead looked upward. “Why is this so upsetting to you?” he asked in his deep, caring voice.

“It wasn’t just once.” She tried to pull away from him but was comforted when he didn’t let her hand go. “This was like five dreams, and it happened again and again.” She felt the tears gathering in the corner of her eyes and looked away.

“How many times?”

“I don’t know... Three?”

Three? Why hadn’t she said this before? He saw a single tear streak down her face as she tugged her hand free and went back to pacing.

“Was it the same every time?” he asked as he stood up.

“No,” she said in a slightly higher pitch, indicating her frustration. She swung her right arm out as she began, “The first time I heard it, it wasn’t bad. I actually thought you were dreaming about me. But the second time through, you said *Lois* a bunch of times. That made me a little angry, but...” She stopped pacing and let her arm drop by her side. “The last time, you said *Lois* almost every time you talked so it was *very clear* you were talking to her.” Lana paused and wiped her arm across her face. “You sounded so... sincere.” She opened her mouth to continue but no sound came out.

He could see the anguish in her eyes and desperately wanted to fix it. “What?” Clark prompted. “What is it?” Holding her eyes with his, he waited for her to go on.

She closed her eyes before she started again. “When you found me in the kitchen the other night, you’d just asked her to marry you... again,” she said, crossing her arms.

“*Marry me??*” Clark croaked out. He tried not to laugh at the absurdity of it. “This is just so... unbelievable!”

Lana didn’t say anything but instead quickly wiped at her eyes again. Clark wasn’t surprised at that – it made sense now why she was so upset. He stepped closer to her, and when she didn’t seem to be offended by that, he reached out and put his hands at her waist. She relaxed a bit at his touch and rested her head on his chin. He knew she needed him to convince her everything was going to be alright.

“Lana, I ...” he started, not sure what to say. “I’m sorry. I see why you were... *are* so upset by this. I wish I could go back and change it.” He pressed his lips to her forehead. “Thank you... for telling me all this. I know it was hard. But it *was* just a dream.”

Lana let out a choked laugh. “I guess it’s not fair to be upset with you for a dream you didn’t even know you had.”

Clark chuckled. “And I guarantee that is not *at all* like the interactions I actually had with her.”

Lana finally reached her arms around him, and Clark felt like things were finally going back to normal. “Yeah,” she said, “I just... was worried.”

“I know and I’m sorry,” Clark apologized again, leaning his head down. “You don’t need to worry about it anymore.”

Movement to his right caught his attention. Lana said something, but Clark didn’t hear it. He was looking over her shoulder into a face that froze him in place and filled him with guilt and humiliation. *Lois?*

“Clark?” he heard Lana say.

He felt her head turn to see where he had been looking, but he quickly distracted her. “We have to go.” Clark hastily picked up Lana’s things, grabbed her hand, and started walking in the opposite direction of the face he had seen. He had to get away, to hide. The campus was not very crowded at this time of the morning, but enough people would be in the library to blend in with.

“What’s the matter?”

“Uh... nothing,” he stammered as he led her up the steps to the library doors. “I don’t want you to miss any more of your study session.” It was at least partially true.

As they walked through the library, he did his best to convince himself that the face outside did *not* belong to Lois. Surely, it was just a result of the conversation they were having. He walked her to the room where her study group was working on a large project, which was spread over a large table, and set her things in a chair in the corner.

Aside from the unfortunate end to their conversation, he was pleased with how things had turned out. “Come stay with me tonight,” he whispered as he reached for her other hand, intent on proving that his affections lay with her.

She looked up at him and smiled. “Okay.”

He smiled back at her, gave her a quick kiss on the cheek, and squeezed her hand before he left.

As he came to the doors leading out of the library, he scanned the faces of the passersby, looking for the one that could induce incredible amounts of remorse and fearing he would see it. Once he was sure she wasn’t near, he left and quickly made his way back to the paper, where he hoped this shadow couldn’t follow him.

Chapter 16

“I don’t understand,” she said, shaking her head. “Why would he run from me like that? It was like he thought *I* was the bad guy.” Lois was pacing in the small space of the hotel room she would stay in that night. Scott’s room was attached to Lois’s by a door separating the two. Now, Scott sat on Lois’s bed, watching her as she struggled to understand what had happened and ranted about what didn’t make sense.

“Remember, Lex put some pretty rotten things in Clark’s mind,” he answered. “I don’t know all of what he put there, but he wanted Clark to be miserable. *Miserable*. Don’t give up, though.”

Lois stopped to look out the window. There wasn't much to see, just the thick tree line that the hotel butted up against. She knew the highway was on the other side, just as loud as it could be. At least the evergreen trees were nice to look at. Not that she was in a position to enjoy it.

She hung her head. "It hurts," she whispered, "to see him like this." She only saw him for a moment, but Clark's jarred expression was already etched in her mind. The look in his eyes was one of disbelief and panic, haunting her. She saw it again every time she closed her eyes. What had Lex done to him to make him afraid of her?

"Were you able to sing any of the songs I gave you?" Scott asked.

"No, I didn't even get that close to him." She threw her hands up in frustration, turning to face him. "He was with a woman. Who was she?"

"I'm not sure," he said, shaking his head.

She hadn't expected that. Of course, she hadn't really known what to expect. If she had believed for the past two months that she was happily married to Lex Luthor, it was possible that he could have been with someone else as well.

She swallowed, unwilling to allow herself to think about that any further. "As soon as he saw me, he bolted."

"Give him time," Scott said encouragingly. "We'll figure out where he is."

How would they? Columbia was a dwarf next to Metropolis, but, as a college town, it was filled with people this time of year. All they knew at this point was that he worked for the local paper, covering city government issues.

"Looks like I'll be a stalker for a while..." she said sarcastically. She turned and leaned against the window sill.

"Don't worry," Scott said, chuckling as he stood from the bed and made his way to his room. "It will all work out in the end. For now, let's get some lunch."

"Sounds good, I'm starving." And she was. She hadn't been able to eat breakfast that morning. She'd been too nervous, knowing she would have some time to talk to Scott and worrying that Lex would want to do more than just say goodbye. Then she hadn't eaten much on the plane or since they arrived. "Know any good places to eat?"

"Yeah," Scott answered from the other room. "I heard from the guy at the front desk that Shiloh is good."

An advertisement for the restaurant lay on the table. Lois looked it over. "A bar and grill? Sounds great. Looks like they're right downtown, so maybe afterwards we can walk toward the paper and see if we see Clark there."

"Sure." Scott entered her room again and leaned on the doorway.

She looked at him standing there and, for the first time, noticed the lines around his eyes. The question she hadn't had a chance to ask yet popped into her head. "Scott, why are you doing this?"

"Because I'm hungry," he answered.

"No," she said with a laugh. "You work for Lex. And you had a hand in all this. Why are you helping me? And why now?" She pinned him with a serious stare. After finding out that he had been part of the plan, it didn't make sense. Something was missing for her to understand. Had he just had some prick of conscience?

He looked at the floor and shook his head. Seconds passed. Lois waited as patiently as she could for him to answer. "I made a promise," he finally said without looking up.

"A promise? To whom?"

A long heavy breath escaped him. He fiddled with the treble clef held on his wrist by a leather strap. When he said, "My sister," Lois finally realized where she'd seen the charm before. It had been Samantha's. He'd started wearing it just after she died.

"Samantha? How—" she began, brows knit, but was interrupted

by the look on Scott's face when his head came up. His eyes were filled with grief and anger. She sat silently, waiting for him to continue. Lois couldn't imagine how Samantha could possibly be involved in this. She was young, sweet, and innocent.

"She made me promise just before she died that I would stop this," Scott admitted. "She—" He stopped and let another heavy breath out.

It was plainly written on his face that this was hard for him to talk about. She offered him a way out. "Look, Scott, you don't have to explain."

"No, it's okay. My... uh... therapist has been encouraging me to talk about what happened instead of bottling everything up inside."

Lois briefly considered making some snarky comment about therapists but stopped herself, knowing full well that now wasn't the time.

Scott sighed again. "Hightower. He... used my sister when we were testing the device. She was a test subject." He sat down on the edge of the bed, clenching his fists into tight balls. "I was part of the test, too, in a way." Scott was clearly frustrated and felt the need to stand back up. As he paced the room, Lois could feel the anger radiating from him, and she prepared herself to hear something devastating.

"He... *took advantage* of her." He kicked the edge of the dresser and let out a growl, causing Lois to jump.

Lois felt the blood drain from her face and sat down on the bed. This was beyond anything she was expecting. That Lex could even authorize such depravity surprised her and, at the same time, brought back to mind her own predicament. As the nausea crept back up, she reached for a glass of water on the table beside the bed.

"There was a specific test. One Luthor ordered... to test the limits..." He trailed off, swallowed, and took a deep breath before trying to continue again. "After he... uh..."—Scott cleared his throat—"he used the device on her." Scott slammed his white knuckles into the wall. "Then he brought her home to see if I could tell," he said as his voice cracked. He rubbed his knuckles with his other hand.

"Oh my God," she said under her breath.

"You know she died of pancreatic cancer. We tested on cancer patients but not late stage. I don't know if it was the treatment or the cancer or some song playing in the hall at the hospital or what, but she remembered. There at the end, she became so miserable." He paused and swallowed hard. "I thought it was just the cancer, the pain, knowing she was dying. But that last day... she told me... all of it... And I could see she felt relieved to tell me. I promised I would stop Hightower, stop Lex."

"Oh, Scott," was all she could say. The times in her life when Lois was left speechless were few and far between, but the sullen air hovering around them and the despicable nature of what she'd just learned stunned her.

"She knew everything," he added. "Hightower told her everything about what we were doing and whose idea it was before he..."

She walked over to him at that moment and placed her hand on his shoulder to offer support. "I'm so sorry."

"Me too." He shook his head and reached for the charm on his wrist. "I hope you can at least be sure you can trust me now."

"I didn't need this to be able to trust you." Nodding to the charm, she asked, "Is this why you wear that?"

Scott nodded and, standing straighter, seemed to shake himself out of the somber mood that had taken over. "She wanted me to keep it." A sad smile spread across his face.

"She would be proud of what you've already done."

Scott paused before he nodded again and let out a deep breath. "Let's go get some food."

“And here’s the records I got from the doctor last week.” Alexia Mayfield handed Jimmy a file folder. He flipped through the pages of this set of records and the paper copies from two months ago, scanning for anything that stood out.

“And what was the procedure your brother was supposed to go in for?”

“Asthma tests,” David Mayfield, her brother, said. “I’d been having some trouble breathing lately. After I exercise. So, I went in, and they did all these breathing tests.”

“Wait, you remember all this?” Jimmy asked with his brow furrowed.

“Yeah, this morning. It was the weirdest thing.” David shook his head and took a sip of his drink before continuing. “So, we were on our way home this morning, from our parents’ house in Vermont. We stopped at this diner to get some breakfast and as soon as I walked in, I started to feel... weird, kind of like when they put the laughing gas mask on you at the dentist, but without thinking everything is funny.”

“He looked like he might pass out,” Alexia added. “I helped him sit down and after a few minutes it was gone.”

“Everything got all foggy, and I remembered something that happened the morning of the tests and then the asthma tests themselves, like I was reliving it all. Then it was over.”

Jimmy looked between the two with his eyebrows raised. If more of the patients were able to remember, they might be able to piece together something to figure out what was really going on. “Do you have any idea what caused you to remember?”

“I don’t know,” David said. “Maybe the smell of the food? I’ve heard smells can trigger memories.”

“Have you talked to your lawyer yet?” Jimmy asked.

“It’s on our list of things to do this afternoon,” Alexia said.

“I’ll be interested to hear how that goes.” Jimmy jotted down a reminder to follow up with them later. “Is there anything else you can remember about the diner? Anything at all? Sometimes sights and sounds can trigger memories.”

“It was kind of old-fashioned-country themed,” said Alexia. “They were playing a lot of Nat King Cole songs. I had a veggie omelet, and he had waffles.” She shrugged. “Not sure if any of that helps.”

“Me either, but you never know.” Jimmy smiled at them both as he rose from his seat to leave.

Chapter 17

Clark’s focus was shot the rest of his morning at the paper. He’d relived the moment when he’d seen her over and over until he couldn’t even be sure that it was Lois he’d seen. Just the *idea* of her being here filled him with apprehension. He must have imagined it. He hoped he imagined it. That must be it. He had been so stressed about his conversation with Lana that he *imagined* Lois. Plenty of other people in the world had dark hair and rich eyes... and stood watching him from a distance.

Clark groaned and pushed himself back from his desk.

It was time for lunch. A walk would do him good. Food in his stomach would help as well.

The short walk to Shiloh Bar and Grill did little to relax him, but the aromas wafting toward him and the live music playing on stage promised an environment that would lift his spirits if only temporarily. He chose a seat at the bar and ordered the steak and fries. If only they served buttermilk with it.

The band performing their own over dramatized renditions of popular songs was mildly distracting, providing Clark with a very small sense of accomplishment in choosing well where to eat lunch. He couldn’t stifle the laugh when the lead singer began singing a fast and catchy song in the style of blues, accentuating the uplifting words with a tone filled with anguish that did not match in the least.

Focusing on the music, he was able to relax by the time his

lunch arrived. As the waitress placed his food in front of him, the band switched to something jazzy. He thought he recognized the song as one his parents had listened to but couldn’t quite place it. As he took a bite of food, he allowed his foot to tap in time as the words finally came to him.

Nat King Cole.

“*You*,” a voice he’d recognize anywhere began, “*stepped out of a dream.*”

His mouth suddenly went dry, making it difficult to continue chewing. She really had stepped out of a dream.

“*You are too wonderful*,” the voice continued, “*to be what you seem.*”

Reaching for his drink with one hand and napkin with the other, he attempted to swallow before choking on his food. He thought his heart would stop. There wasn’t enough time or circumstances that would ever pass to make him forget that voice.

“*Could there be eyes like yours?*”

He felt the blood drain from his face as he looked over his shoulder to see her standing with the band. She was looking straight at him. There was no mistaking it now. Lois Lane was right there.

“*Could there be lips like yours?*”

He needed to leave. He had to get out of the suffocating restaurant. No longer caring about his lunch, he dug into his pocket and pulled out his wallet, fished for the cash as quickly as his fingers would let him, which was not fast enough, and threw the cash on the counter.

“*Could there be smiles like yours*,” she sang, “*honest and truly?*”

Making his way to the door to leave, he chanced another glance in her direction.

“*You*,” she sang again, looking straight at him, “*stepped out of a cloud.*”

It was a mistake to look at her. A smile on her lips and a question in her eyes, she had her sights trained on him while she moved with the music. It sent chills through him, and he turned to make his getaway.

Once out of the building, he took a few breaths before deciding which way he would go. Applause drifted to his ears and when it suddenly increased in volume, he glanced over his shoulder to see Lois coming out of the restaurant. Before she could spot him, he took off running and ducked around the corner of the building directly behind the restaurant.

Lois.

It *had* been her that he saw. What was she doing *here*?

As much as he wanted to know the answers to those questions, the need to get away from her was far more powerful. He couldn’t get away fast enough.

Clark was fast. Once outside the restaurant, she knew there would be no sign of him. Lois had no way of knowing which way he’d gone, but at least this time she wasn’t surprised to see him flee as fast as possible.

That must not have been the right song.

Scott came out of the restaurant as she was searching for a sign of Clark and stopped beside her.

“He’s gone,” she said in disbelief. “I thought you said his powers were disabled?”

“They were...are.” Scott looked around. “He’s probably just hiding somewhere. Come on, we’ll walk toward the paper.”

The unusually warm, for January at least, weather made the trek through town more enjoyable. With so many out taking advantage of the almost comfortable temperatures, Lois was kept busy scanning the faces for Clark but did not see him.

He was not at the paper when they arrived either. Once they knew he covered local government issues, they headed toward a place where Clark might be found covering some happenings.

County offices were in buildings just a few blocks away with municipal offices a block to the right. A small park, not unlike the one in front of Metropolis's court house, surrounded the lone columns of the original courthouse and was at the center of these government buildings.

The park featured an amphitheater where a band, if a saxophonist and a drummer could be called a band, was playing with a microphone for the sax connected to one large speaker. Lois and Scott meandered on the pathways, listening to the music as the musicians collected tips until Lois spotted Clark walking from the street corner toward the courthouse.

"Looks like he's coming this way," Scott said. He motioned his head toward the band and raised his eyebrows at Lois.

She nodded, sidled up next to the saxophone player, and then stole the mic.

"Hey! Don't—" the saxophone player started. Lois aimed a pleading look in his direction and held the mic up to her mouth.

At the saxophonist's questioning look, she took a chance. "*What a day this has been,*" she sang a cappella, looking around. She'd lost track of Clark and scanned the area for any sign of him as she sung a little bit more. "*What a rare mood I'm in.*"

She turned to see a smile spread across the saxophonist's face as he recognized the song and began playing with her. She smiled back at him and continued singing. "*Why, it's almost like bein' in love.*" The drummer picked up the beat, and the three continued the impromptu song.

"*There's a smile on my face, for the whole human race. Why, it's almost like bein' in love.*"

Lois looked up just in time to see Clark standing motionless a good fifty yards away from her in front of the courthouse, frozen mid step. His head was still lowered but she could see his eyes looking directly at her, his face expressionless. She nodded in his direction as she continued the song. And when he didn't immediately make a run for it, she waved.

But this clearly wasn't the song either. As soon as her hand went up, he shook his head and took a step back, turning toward the courthouse and going inside.

Her voice cracked as she continued the happy words of the song.

She ached to speak to him, to tell him what was happening and what had happened. To place her hand on his arm. To take his fear of her away. To kiss him.

She could have followed him then – her press credentials would have gotten her inside – but she chose to let him go for a bit. Clark wouldn't allow her closer at this moment. She would have to wait for another chance. One in which his odds of getting away were smaller.

Clark sat on a bench in a basement hallway of the courthouse, hiding. Worried Lois would follow him in, he'd followed the twisted maze of hallways until he wasn't sure he would be able to find his way out. Now he waited, afraid to leave for fear of running into her. After that third run-in with her, he was certain she was following him. But why?

Her voice had been like honey, sweet and smooth, and it made him want to gag the way it coated his throat. It was not enough that he lost his job and had struggled to keep one ever since. She felt some unconscionable need to torment him further. It wouldn't surprise him to know she was trying to exact revenge, though why she'd waited more than two years to do so was anyone's guess.

He leaned his head back against the wall and closed his eyes, picturing again the confusion on her face. Why had she seemed distressed? Was his response not enough for her? Was she looking for him to be destroyed? Was she sad that he'd run away instead of allowing her to castigate him in front of an audience?

Three times he'd run into her today. Two of the times, she had sung. The songs were stuck in his head and along with them, her

face. He'd tried every trick in the book to purge them from his mind. He wondered if some pathetically desperate part of him wanted to remember her. Wanted to pretend that she had been singing *to him*.

He let out a harsh laugh directed at himself and shook his head. Checking the time, he realized it was getting late. He needed to head back to his desk at the paper to pick up a few things before heading home for the evening to get ready for Lana to return.

Coward. He was a grown man allowing this fanatical woman to control his life from afar. *No more,* he thought, rising from his seat and winding back through the labyrinth that was the courthouse's basement.

Taking the steps two at a time, he reached the lobby and cautiously peered through the windows before venturing outside. It was late in the afternoon, and the sidewalks were less crowded. Taking a deep breath, he pushed the door open and walked resolutely down the street to the paper.

He could do this. No need to be afraid.

He opened the front door to the paper, striding in with determination. He hadn't made it more than two steps in before he heard yet another song from the velvet voice he had refused to let control him.

"*L is for the way you look at me,*" she sang.

He tried not to respond in any way, focusing instead on the second set of doors.

"*O is for the only one I see.*"

He resisted the urge to glance at her, afraid of what he would see. But he still wondered... Was she singing to him? He shook his head and breathed a sigh of relief as he caught the eye of the security guard, Will, standing near that alluring second set of doors. Giving a quick nod and look that sent the message he intended, he continued undeterred.

"*V is very, very extra-ordinary,*" she sang as he crossed through those blessed doors.

"Excuse me, miss," he heard Will say, stopping her. "You can't go in there."

The rest of the conversation was cut from his hearing by the closing of the door. Clark didn't stick around to see what happened but went straight to his desk to collect his things. He headed out the back door and straight home to await Lana's arrival.

He prayed Lana would be willing to listen and maybe even help. He also prayed she wouldn't be offended when she learned who was now following him around.

Lex popped the cap free from the glass bottle of imported mineral water and carefully poured the thirst-quenching liquid into the tumbler before adding a slice of lime. He took a sip and then slowly swirled the refreshing fluid as he allowed himself to relax into the seat. Peering past the droplets of rain streaking across the window, he tried to enjoy the scenery as much as could be expected given the weather.

The pitter-patter of rain hitting the roof of the car provided a relaxing environment in which Lex could consider the situation further and determine the best course of action regarding Lois and her returning memories. He was certain she must still be confused and would surely attempt to make sense of what she now remembered. She must not want him to know, and he would be happy to keep it that way. If only he understood how it had happened. Hightower's explanation fell short of satisfying him.

After wrapping up his meeting with Hightower, he had taken care of a few other things before beginning his own journey to the chateau. The falling rain would stop them from being able to enjoy the spectacular sunset over the river, but at least he would be able to have a sense of security knowing she would be secluded from the rest of the world.

Everything he did was because he loved her.

She may not see it, but it was true regardless.

The phone rang, drawing him out of his thoughts. He took a sip of the drink he held and reached to answer.

“How is Lois settling in?” Lex asked the person on the other end of the line.

His body stiffened at the response. “Excuse me?”

He sat up straighter, irritation straining his features. “Why did you not let me know as soon as they called?” His hand tightened dangerously on the half-empty tumbler. “Your instructions were to notify me of any changes,” he nearly barked.

A crack of thunder rent through the air that matched his mood as if he controlled the weather.

He closed his eyes to stem the rising anger coursing through him. “What time did you receive the call?” he asked, his voice calmer now.

Immediately, he disconnected the call and dialed another familiar number, taking a gulp of his drink.

His blood boiled more with every unanswered ring he heard. Ferguson should have answered on the first ring, as he always had. A niggling suspicion entered his mind, and Lex thought perhaps he could hazard a guess as to what or whom had really caused Lois to regain some of her memories. Hightower would have more questions to answer.

He let out a yell of frustration and hurled the tumbler in a fit of rage before quickly reining in his anger, temporarily appeased by the shattering of glass. Lex squeezed the phone, pressing it to his forehead. A swift and unyielding reprisal was required. He immediately gave the driver directions to return to Metropolis before dialing another, less familiar number, preparing his next steps.

“Montgomery,” he said gruffly, “I need you to build something for me – a weapon to kill Superman.”

He listened to her exclamations and smiled as he remembered why he’d wanted her working on this project in the first place. “You have 24 hours.”

Her protestations induced a roll of his eyes and a twitch of his mouth.

“No, 24 hours. Make it happen,” he demanded, leaving no room for argument. He abruptly ended the call, setting the phone down as gently as he could manage. Another loud crack of thunder mirrored his frustrations.

He would not allow this opportunity to eliminate his nemesis to fail.

Chapter 18

Lana didn’t usually knock, but she didn’t feel like she could just walk right in. Not tonight. She remained hopeful after their earlier conversation but reluctant to let it slide that he was talking about someone else in his sleep. Taking a deep breath, she reminded herself that they needed each other and that this was just a bump in the road. Working through this would likely strengthen their relationship.

She reached up to knock on the door, suddenly nervous.

In high school, Clark had kept her at a distance, and she’d never understood why. Despite her best efforts to put him at ease and let him know what she wanted from him, he’d never taken her up on her offers. She’d spent more time than she should have over the years between then and now feeling like she was lacking something. Then, when she’d run into him in Smallville just before coming here, she’d realized it wasn’t something *she* was lacking, but something he thought *he* was lacking. She had resolved to prove to him that there wasn’t anything wrong with him. He had only just begun to finally let her in, and it was perfect.

But then he started talking about Lois in his sleep. That meant something. Didn’t it? And as much as she tried to ignore it, it kept getting worse until she couldn’t stand it anymore. Even if he

couldn’t remember it.

Her breathing faltered as she heard the locks on his door click open.

And now, here they were. At this precipice where something had to change. She was terrified of what would become of their tentative relationship, but his insistence that he didn’t even remember the dream gave her hope that they could move past this. So, she came, ready to see where this would lead.

Opening the door, he smiled and invited her in with a swing of his hand. “Thank you,” he said, “for coming tonight.” But he kept his physical distance. She still didn’t fully understand why. They were both adults. They’d shared a bed, even though it was just for sleeping. She hoped that being away from Smallville, with no one else they knew nearby, would change that.

“Sure.” She smiled a small and slightly awkward smile.

Their relationship had changed due to her efforts. She had been gradually working her way into his life, slowly, persistently. Maybe something about her reminded him of Lois.

Maybe he’d been talking about Lois in his sleep for a long time, and she’d only noticed it once she had begun staying the night at his house. That thought didn’t sit well with her, and she pushed it aside as quickly as possible.

Whatever the case, she didn’t want to lose him if there was nothing to it.

As she followed him into his apartment, she became keenly aware that he wasn’t quite himself. He’d been acting depressed since before coming to Columbia, but tonight he seemed agitated. He couldn’t seem to decide what to do with his hands, and his hair looked as though he’d run his fingers through it repeatedly. He didn’t quite meet her eyes, but she could see the exhaustion in them. She took a seat on his couch and raised an eyebrow, waiting for him to speak first.

“I’ve had a rough couple of days,” he explained, shaking his head.

“Me too,” she agreed. She pressed her lips together and looked away. *He* was the one with another woman on his mind, why should he be having any trouble?

“I’m sorry,” he said. And he sounded sincere. Whatever was going on with him, all of his problems, she’d only ever tried to help him. She looked at him again, more closely this time. His brown eyes weren’t as lively as usual. He hadn’t shaved. The corners of his mouth were decidedly down. He wrung his hands as he leaned forward to rest his elbows on his knees and look at the rug. It broke her heart every time she saw him struggling and renewed her resolve to help him through this.

“I need to tell you about something that happened today,” he said, not looking up. “I need you to help me figure out what to do, but I’m worried that it will be asking too much of you.”

She reached out and touched his arm then, drawing his attention to her face. “Clark, I’ll always help if I can.” She smiled at him, thinking this might be her big moment. The opportunity she would have to finally be able to help him out of this funk he was stuck in.

“I saw Lois today,” he said slowly.

Her smile faltered, and she fought to keep in her angry retort. How dare that woman show her face here!

“Several times, actually. Just before we went into the library, she was down the sidewalk... That’s why I practically dragged you. I’m sorry about that. It was just... It was a really big shock, and I didn’t know what to do.”

“I...” she started, unsure what she would say, fearing that her response would make him feel like her anger was directed at him.

“Then later, it was like she was following me. It was bizarre.” He stood then and began pacing as she’d done during their previous conversations.

“Following you?” she asked. Why would Lois be *following* Clark? This didn’t fit with anything she was expecting to hear him

say this evening.

“Look, I don’t know why she’s here of all places.” He stopped pacing and stood stiffly in the center of the room. Clark’s frustration showed in the way he threw his hands around as he spoke. “I didn’t ask her to come or even hope she would. In fact, seeing her makes me want to leave, go back to Kansas, especially after these last few days...”

Lana’s mind wrestled with the ideas racing through her head, things falling in to place quickly. She knew Clark would never lie to her, but it also occurred to her that maybe there was something Clark didn’t know. It couldn’t be merely a coincidence that all this was happening. Lana wanted to ask more about the encounters he’d had with Lois but imagined that it would only put them both in a more awkward position.

She closed her eyes. She knew what she *wanted* to say, and she knew what he *needed* to hear. But they weren’t the same thing. Most importantly, she knew that if that woman was following him around, there was surely a reason. And what she *didn’t* want, couldn’t handle, didn’t matter at the moment. If two years wasn’t enough time for him to move past this guilt, would he ever be able to?

She took a deep breath, opened her eyes, and stood to face Clark. “Clark,” she started, feeling more determined when the confusion he was clearly feeling shown through his eyes, “I think you should talk to her.”

“What?!?” He recoiled from the snake bite she delivered. “No!” he yelled.

“Find out why she’s here at least. Find out why you are—”

“It’s just to make me miserable,” he cut in, “to point out all the ways I’ve failed and to make sure everyone knows. In fact, I bet that’s why I kept losing my job in the past. Maybe she’s been following me around this whole time. I had no idea she was so... evil.” A disgusted look crossed his face, and he crossed his arms over his chest.

“Clark, what you were saying in your dream just doesn’t match this.” Lana could see it more clearly now after this outburst. “Something is up. I don’t know what, but you have to find out.” She stepped as close as she dared and laid her hand on his arm. She waited until he looked at her. “Hear her out. You’ll have an easier time moving on if you do. *We* will have an easier time moving forward after this is over.”

He groaned as he rolled his eyes. Lana smiled inwardly, his mannerisms were so endearing to her. But this mess was complicated, and she was worried she’d have to hear about *Lois* again.

“Look, I’m not going to stay tonight,” she informed him as she patted his arm before turning away from him to grab her things. “This is a lot for both of us to cope with, and I just can’t put myself in this position. You understand, don’t you?”

“Yeah,” he replied as if he were a boy who’d been scolded. “I’m sorry.” His arms dropped to his sides, but he didn’t move to follow her or stop her as she opened the door to leave.

Lana looked back at him as he stood there full of conflict, slouching. She could see in his eyes how disappointed he was that she wasn’t staying. He looked hurt, and she could tell that something was about to change irrevocably. Whether it would be in the manner she hoped for or something far worse, she didn’t know.

“Me too.”

Lex reclined, at least physically comfortable in the plush seat of his private jet, if not mentally. Anger was welling inside him. His only consolation was the impending end of his enemy. He should have disposed of the dross when he first had the chance, forever settling Lois as *his*.

After he’d received that fateful phone call, the rain had intensified quickly, pelting his window and preventing an

immediate departure. Now he would have to wait before he could go after her. He would have driven. Nothing would have stopped him. But before he’d made a rash decision, he finally saw reason. Waiting, however impatiently, for takeoff aboard his private jet at the airport was the obvious choice given the time it would take to drive to *misery*.

Lex chuckled at his joke. For Missouri was surely a place of *misery* if Clark... Superman were there, working to steal what was rightfully his. And it would continue to be so for the man formerly of steel once he took his family from the clutches of that interloper.

His family. He sighed at the thought, his own sentimentality once again surprising him. The moment Lois uttered that unprecedented, sensational statement, his life had changed permanently in a manner he could never have imagined.

He would be a father to his own flesh and blood. And that flesh and blood would belong to Lois as well.

He no longer worried about the effects of the device on his unborn child, but he did worry about his or her mother. He would have to keep a watchful eye on Lois to ensure that no harm came to her either.

A smile touched his lips, and he allowed himself to think for a moment about his future family. The mother of his children. An heir. Would it be a boy filled with mischief that he could instruct in the ways of business? Would it be a girl with as much beauty and intelligence as her mother? Who could have known how such thoughts would fill him with a keen sense of fulfillment?

“Anything to drink, sir?” the flight attendant asked, interrupting his reverie.

Lex looked up at the flight attendant. Once he may have considered her attractive, enjoyed some playful banter with her, but his mind could only think of Lois. “Yes,” he finally answered.

Taking a deep breath, he mentally shook himself from his musings. Tonight, he needed something to help him relax, cope with the unusual and unexpected feelings. For that, he would break his self-imposed rule of never drinking alone. “Single malt scotch, please. With a splash of water.”

“Right away.”

Lex allowed his attention to be caught by the twinkling of city lights off in the distance and endeavored to focus his thoughts on something more productive – how he would defeat his foe. And how he would ensure that Clark... Superman knew that Lois was pregnant with *his* child.

Chapter 19

January 23, 1996

The air was crisp and cold in the faint predawn light. Even without the sun, the warm front that still lingered promised weather more appropriate for early spring later in the day. Dew covered the grass and birds fooled by the temporary warmth chirped merrily in the trees. It was during this time that Clark could be truly alone with his thoughts. Thoughts of his inadequacies and failures plagued him most days, but today his mind was preoccupied with something else.

Lois.

Yesterday, she had kept showing up wherever he was. He’d seen her at work, at the grocery store, on the trail, while he was putting gas in the car. She had to have been following him everywhere he went. He felt such overwhelming regret whenever he saw her. He just wanted to get away from her and never have to feel this way again. But was leaving Columbia something he could do?

And why was she always *singing*??

It made him uncomfortable. The theme of each song was love. Love lost. Love found. Love desired. There was no logical reason for her to be singing, let alone about love. It was a slap in the face. Torture. And Lana thought he should talk to her?

Realizing his frustrated breathing was making running difficult, he focused on what he was doing for a moment. The breeze was cool on his face. His heart pumped steadily as the muscles in his legs worked to propel him forward. He swung his arms in time with his steps, using their reach to stretch his stride.

He listened intently to the quiet world around him – chirping birds, rustling branches, the sound of his own steady breathing, the crunch of the gravel as his feet touched the ground.

The sound of a bicycle approaching from behind.

When after a half minute, the bike didn't pass as he expected, he turned to see why and was shocked to see *her* riding.

Lois was following him on a bike. Why did she have to ruin his only time to himself?

He groaned aloud as he turned forward once more and picked up his pace, knowing he would never outrun her.

"Clark?" she called to him as she approached. Why wouldn't she leave him alone? "Please, Clark. I just need to talk to you for a minute," she said, passing him. He saw her then, with her hair pulled back from her face by the breeze that their movement made.

This was ridiculous. This woman hated him and, as if he wasn't already miserable enough, had come to pile on more guilt. What would she want to talk about? Had she lost her job again because of what had happened? Did she just like making him feel miserable and need a good fix to last her a while?

He shook his head and turned to begin running the other way on the trail. He knew this wouldn't stop her either, but it was all he could think to do, and the thin trail wouldn't make it easy for her to turn around. At least he'd bought himself a few moments to think before being forced to listen to whatever demoralizing reproof she would throw at him.

Lana had encouraged him to talk to her. Maybe if he just let her say what she needed to, she'd leave him alone, and he could be perfectly miserable without her following him around everywhere.

He stopped in the middle of the tree-lined path, steeling himself for the conversation to come, when a commotion behind him reached his ears. His expectation of seeing Lois struggling to turn the bike around was dashed when instead he saw her struggling against a person.

The man was tall and wore a coat that might have been a little too heavy for the weather. His face was angled away from him so that he couldn't clearly see who it was. He gripped her arms as she struggled against him. "Clark!" she yelled, pulling one arm free and reaching in his direction, entreating him. She was in trouble.

Clark took a few steps forward but staggered as a sharp pain shot from his head through every inch of him. With the next step, the pain intensified, paralyzing him. He looked up to see the horror in Lois's eyes before he stumbled to the ground, catching himself with his hands. The small pebbles felt like needles on his palms. He reached to cradle his head.

"No!" she screamed. "Stop!"

What was happening? He was unable to move. He would fail her... again. But this time in a way that was far more perilous. What would that man do to her?

The commotion stopped, and Clark glanced up to see Lois looking at him with... understanding? And worry? The man glared at him, a satisfied smirk on his face. He seemed to sneer at Clark as his free hand came up to Lois's neck with something in it. Clark reached toward them in a feeble attempt to make a difference. But the man brought whatever it was to Lois's neck, and he watched in panic as her body went limp in the man's arms.

Adrenaline coursing through him, Clark struggled to get up and move closer to them. He *had* to at least try to help. Reaching his feet, he lost his balance when the pain became unbearable. The sound of something small hitting the ground and bouncing to a stop near him coincided with the pain redoubling. He grunted at its sudden increase and tried to slow his breathing. What was

happening to him?? He was consumed by invisible flames burning him until everything went black.

Jimmy walked up the steps of the town home. He was physically exhausted, but his brain was functioning at full speed. His phone woke him early this morning, and the voice on the other end was one of the patients he'd scheduled an interview with later in the day. Something had happened, though, and they wanted to meet now instead of waiting until later.

Naturally, Jimmy pulled himself out of bed as quickly as he could and did the minimal amount of getting ready before racing to their house. He took a moment to catch his breath before he knocked on the door and waited for someone to answer.

"Mr. Olsen," Ronald Simmons greeted as he opened the door. "Thank you for coming so early. I'm sorry if I woke you." He thrust his hand forward and shook Jimmy's hand as if the sun hadn't just risen above the horizon only an hour ago.

"Not at all. You sounded like you had something important to tell me when I spoke to you on the phone." Jimmy entered the house at Mr. Simmons's invitation, and they found a place at the dining room table to sit. "Are those the medical records?" Jimmy asked, gesturing towards the stack of papers on the table.

"Yes, those copies are for you," Mr. Simmons answered. "I'm sure you'll find the same thing as with the other patients, but what I have to tell you is more important than that."

"What is it, Mr. Simmons?" Jimmy asked as he pulled his notepad out of his satchel.

"I remembered."

Jimmy stilled at those words before he excitedly turned to face Mr. Simmons, his eyes wide. "The procedure?"

"The whole day." Mr. Simmons turned toward the door and in a very polite manner called for his wife. "Vera, Honey? Are you coming?" Jimmy heard a faint reply from some faraway room as Ronald turned back to whisper, "I'm going to let her tell you because she's so excited about it."

"When did it happen?"

"This morning." The look on Mr. Simmons's face was filled with intrigue and excitement. It was contagious, and Jimmy felt his own excitement growing.

"Oh, Mr. Olsen. Wait till you hear." An excited woman came in rubbing her hands on a dish cloth. She stopped abruptly and smiled. "Can I get you anything, dear?"

Before Jimmy could put together a response, Mr. Simmons answered for him. "No, Vera. Just tell him what happened."

"Oh, Ronald," she said, exasperated, but smiled at him before sitting down at the table. "I was cleaning in the kitchen this morning, and I just can't do any cleaning without singing. Ronald woke up and came to say good morning to me, and we chatted for a bit while I worked on the oven. As he was leaving, I started singing 'Miss Otis Regrets' and that's when it happened."

"Everything got all fuzzy, and I felt like I was falling," Ronald said. "Then it was like I was reliving the things that happened."

"And then it was over, quick as that." Vera snapped her fingers and nodded.

"You think it was the song?" Jimmy looked from Vera to Ronald. Both nodded again. "How can you be sure?"

"Well, I always clean the oven on this day of the week and I always sing, but it's been ages since I sang 'Miss Otis Regrets,' and it happened as soon as I started singing."

An interesting conclusion to reach, but it made sense. Jimmy jotted down the name of the song as he thought about what this could mean for the story. His eyes widened as he remembered the Mayfields' story and that Alexia had mentioned music. They would have heard it as soon as they walked in. "Who sings 'Miss Otis Regrets'?" Jimmy asked hesitantly.

"Nat King Cole."

Jimmy frowned at the answer. *Could it be? Or is it merely a*

coincidence?

“Clark?” a male voice filtered through the din resonating in Clark’s head. Where was he? What had happened? He felt a nudge to his shoulder and opened his eyes to see an unfamiliar face frowning down at him. He was sprawled flat on his back on the ground.

Closing his eyes, he moved his arms to push himself up. Agony rippled through his body as he tried to sit and a groan escaped as he fell back to the ground. How could anyone hurt this much? What had caused it?

He heard sounds of the stranger moving around, scraping across the gravel, followed by footsteps receding quickly as the pain suddenly abated. The footsteps returning made Clark flinch, but, to his relief, the pain didn’t return.

His body relaxed, but he kept his eyes closed and remained motionless on the ground, catching his breath, trying to understand what had just happened.

“Clark?” the male voice asked again.

“H—How do you know my name?” Clark’s voice came out thin and struggling.

“I’m a friend of Lois’s. I’ve been helping her,” he said. “My name’s Scott.”

Clark’s eyes opened wide, and he rose as quickly as he could under the circumstances. His head swam at the sudden movement, and he wobbled and grasped Scott’s outstretched hand when it was offered. Looking around, he saw no sign of her or the man or Lois. “Someone took her!” he grunted out.

“I know, I... I saw the whole thing.”

Clark turned to look at him with anger in his eyes. Even in his fear and private anguish he’d tried to do *something*, however unsuccessfully. Yet this seemingly healthy individual had sat idly by doing nothing? “Why didn’t you try to help?”

“It’s a long story, but Lois can handle herself with Lex. It’s you I’m worried about now.”

“Lex?” Clark repeated. Clark tried to feel relieved that Lois wasn’t in any danger, but the situation seemed anything but harmless.

Scott ignored his question and looked him over. Shaking his head, he then began looking around them.

It took another moment for Clark to process the rest of Scott’s words. “Me!? I’m fine.” Clark brushed himself off. “But someone just *kidnapped* Lois.”

“She will be okay for now,” Scott assured. “But she needs your help.”

Clark huffed. “She doesn’t need my help.” He shook his head. The last time he tried to help Lois, it ended badly for everyone. His help was the last thing she needed.

“She does, and you are the only one I know of who can help her.” Scott had a look of resolve on his face that startled Clark. Given his response to the abduction of his friend, he was oddly calm.

Clark grunted a laugh. “Sorry, I think you’ve got me confused with someone else.” He turned to continue on the path but was stopped by Scott grabbing his arm. Clark shook it off but turned to look at the man.

“No, I don’t.” The determination in his face and voice made Clark pause. “Look I know you have no idea what I’m talking about yet. Lois was trying to get you to remember, but...” Scott reached into his pocket and pulled out an unmarked CD in a clear case. “Clark, I know this doesn’t make any sense, but I want you to take this CD. Find a safe, preferably private, place and listen to it.”

Clark eyed the CD and wished he could be anywhere but here. “What’s on it?” he finally asked.

“Nat King Cole.” Scott held out the CD further.

You stepped out of a dream...

Why it’s almost like bein’ in love...

L is for the way you look at me...

The songs Lois had been singing. They were all sung by Nat King Cole.

Clark frowned, unable to make sense of this. “What’s going on?”

Scott shook his head. “Someone... messed with your memories. Listen to the songs. When you’re ready, come find me at this hotel.” Scott handed him a hotel business card with a handwritten number on it and took a step back. “If you aren’t there by dinner time, I’m going without you.”

He nodded to Clark as he began to turn and continued down the path in the direction Clark had come from.

“Going where?” Clark shouted after him.

Scott turned to walk backwards, arms out to the side as he answered the question, “To save Lois.” He picked up his pace, jogging backwards for a moment as he shouted, “Remember!” He then turned and ran for several paces before disappearing onto a very narrow side trail.

Remember?

Chapter 20

Lex stood in front of the door to the hotel room he knew Ferguson to be in and reached out to firmly knock. The sound of movement in the room reached his ears, and Lex waited for the door to open, preparing to dress down his wife’s inept guard.

Ferguson had clearly been expecting someone else, Lois, of course, when the door opened. “Lex,” Ferguson said without attempting to mask his surprise. “I’m glad you’ve come,” he said as Lex pushed past him into the room. “Something is up with Lois.”

Lex turned his head to look over his shoulder and eyed him, his patience dwindling. “And you are only just now telling me this?” Taking a deep breath, he reminded himself that Lois was safely aboard his private jet, and he was merely coming to leave some instructions for this man.

Ferguson closed the door and took the few quick steps to stand just inside the main room. “I’m sorry,” Ferguson said, sincerity and concern coloring his tone. “I should have. I just wasn’t sure what to do. I was waiting until—”

“Until when?” Lex snapped, turning abruptly to face him, searching for signs of duplicity.

“Until I knew what was going on with her.”

“Trying to take matters into your own hands?” He had assumed, based on the way in which Ferguson and his wife had left, that Ferguson had something to do with their disappearance. But if even his wife’s guard was unsure of what was happening, perhaps Hightower had been right. Still, Ferguson could be involved and his show of genuine concern merely a result of having lost control of the situation. “How could you let her come out here where you know Kent to be? What were you thinking?”

“She was... confused, distressed. I am only trying to keep her safe.” The palm up stance Ferguson assumed painted a picture of genuine concern that, while comforting, inspired just a bit of jealousy. It was Lex’s place to keep her safe and no one else’s.

“Ought I be jealous?” he sneered.

“No, no! It’s not like that.” Ferguson appeared uncomfortable. “You can’t expect me to watch someone as a full-time job and not begin to worry about that person’s well-being.”

Lex considered that statement for a moment. “I suppose you wouldn’t be as good at the assignment if you didn’t care about her well-being.” Choosing to allow it to pass for the moment, Lex moved the conversation to the situation at hand. “So, tell me. What is going on with her?” Lex clasped his hands behind his back and waited, motionless, with his eyebrows high in expectation. Ferguson’s explanation would reveal whether he was with or against Lex.

"I think she's remembered some things." It seemed that Ferguson was choosing to be honest with him, a sign of loyalty.

"And you are here instead of with her? Have you any idea what she has been up to this morning?" There was no sign of Ferguson when Lex had taken her from that trail. He didn't even seem to realize she was missing at this point.

"She said she needed to take a walk to clear her head. She's really struggling. I didn't want to put any more stress on her... since she is expecting." Ferguson breathed out as he leaned on the dresser.

Lex was initially caught off guard by the sentimentality that had been weaving its way through him over the past two months, but as it bubbled to the surface now, he reluctantly embraced it. He did not want any harm to come to Lois or the baby, regardless of the circumstances. Ferguson had been right to give her space if, in fact, his motives were the way he presented them. Lex released his hands and walked toward the window, peering out at the trees concealing any view to be had. He relaxed as a plan to deal with the situation finally solidified in his mind. "Yes, well, I have her now, aboard the jet. We'll head to the chateau after you and I are done here."

"Is she alright?" Scott asked, surprised.

"She is. And I thank you for your concern," Lex began as he adjusted his coat to leave this dilapidated hotel room. "One last thing before I leave. I noticed she is not wearing her wedding rings. Where are they?"

Lex looked up when an answer was not immediately given to see worry written in Ferguson's features. "I don't want to make things worse for Lois," he began, "because I don't know what's caused... any of this... but I don't think any of it is intentional." Lex watched as Ferguson crossed the room and rifled through something near the bed before approaching Lex. "Lois gave me her rings this morning."

"She what?" Lex turned to face him, saw the rings in Ferguson's hand, and took a halting step forward. While this was jarring, Lex took the gesture as confirmation that he did indeed have Ferguson's loyalty. "She has remembered more than I thought."

"She's confused. She doesn't know what is real and what isn't."

Lex picked up the rings and rubbed them between his fingers. It was certainly fortunate that Lex had arrived when he did. Squeezing them in his fist, Lex shook his head to clear it. If she had remembered enough to doubt his affection, she would be feeling very confused. He doubled his resolve to put things back to the way they had been.

Still, Lex needed to guarantee the appearance of his weakened adversary at the chateau in order to complete his new plan. In this state, Clark Kent was just as vulnerable as any man, but Lex had carefully scripted a death befitting the alien that would strip him of everything. Lex nodded to himself and tucked the rings in his coat pocket before giving his instructions. "I need you to make sure that Kent comes after her."

Scott's eyebrows raised. "Why not just kill him now?"

Lex narrowed his eyes and looked Ferguson over appraisingly. "Because that isn't good enough for him. He needs to understand a few things before he dies, and it is necessary for him to come to the chateau to learn those lessons." Lex strode toward the door. Should the man prove himself by following through with his instructions, Lex would be sure to make his expectations for appropriate behavior in any situation clearer in the future. "See that he arrives before the day is over."

A constant, low rumble was the first sound Lois registered when she awoke. Keeping her eyes closed and her body as still as possible, she struggled to determine where she was. The sound was surely the dull roar of jet engines, which meant she must be

on a plane. She was lying down with her head propped on a pillow, and her hands and feet were free. The dull ache in her neck and dryness in her throat were the only sources of discomfort she was aware of. Wherever she was headed, she was okay for the moment.

Just to be on the safe side, she continued to feign sleep while she tried to remember what had happened and how she had gotten to this point.

She'd been riding a bicycle. Clark had run past her. She'd been about to sing another song in an effort to release his memories. Lex had stopped her, holding her back.

Lex.

Maintaining her stillness, she relived the scene. She was watching Clark stumble in pain with a mix of confusion and fear evident in his face. Lex must have had kryptonite. How much did he know?

She wasn't really safe at all. He'd taken her with him. She must be on his private jet. *Their* private jet. She was nauseous at the thought.

Her ability to recall many of the dangerous and seemingly hopeless situations she and Clark had been in before eased the fear momentarily before it occurred to her that she hadn't yet released his memories... Superman was still gone.

Panicked breaths came quickly and before she could calm them, a hand came to rest on her shoulder. Lex's voice drew her eyes open before she was able to decide what she would do and how she would do it.

"Lois, darling?" He was leaning over her, looking at her with a frown creasing his brow, the concern evident in his eyes.

She frowned at her conflicting thoughts. Half her mind still felt an unreasonable attachment to him, the other half was angry, knowing him as a monster.

"Are you alright?" His voice was tender, worried.

"I... I think so," she answered as she attempted to sit up. Seeing her struggle, Lex reached to support her, which did not relieve the confusion Lois felt. She *knew* just how manipulative and unscrupulous Lex was, yet these warm feelings for him still responded to his care. The nausea overwhelmed her suddenly, and she was surprised when Lex provided her with an airsick bag.

Had he expected this?

This warm-hearted, despicable Lex was such a contradiction. He was vile enough to have done his utmost to ruin the life she had known and replace it with the one of his choosing, yet affectionate and concerned enough to care about her needs. She recalled the way he'd responded three days ago at their home when she'd told him she was pregnant and began to wonder if somewhere within that fabricated exterior, an actual heart was beating. *A very small, shriveled and black heart*, she reminded herself.

Wiping her face with the proffered napkin, she shook her head. Anger flared again at the knowledge of everything that had happened because this selfish man – if he could be called man, Clark was more human than Lex – would stop at nothing to have his way. She stamped it down in favor of using her position to gain any information she could. "What are we doing on the jet?"

"You and Scott made a little detour on your way to the chateau. I came to you to bring you home. Do you not remember?" His expression was inscrutable though his voice held the same concern as before.

"I..." She stopped. Admitting anything would hinder her ability to find out what he knew... or what he was willing to tell her. She reached for her head and used her feigned condition to take some time to think. "I don't feel well." Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Lex reach for a glass on the table at the end of the couch.

"Here, this will help." Lex handed her the glass of water, and she took several sips to relieve the burning in her throat before

passing the glass back to him.

How convenient that her own lie provided such an excellent excuse. She had previously felt a bit guilty for deceiving him but remembering the kind of maliciousness he was capable of made her feel like he deserved everything that came to him.

“Please, lie back and relax,” he suggested. Lex guided a pillow under her head as she leaned back. “We don’t need you under any undue stress in your condition.”

“Where is Scott?” she asked as she closed her eyes.

“He is still in Columbia,” he answered. “I spoke with him just before we left. He’ll meet up with us at the chateau later. I had an errand for him to run.”

A tingle of foreboding sent a chill through her. What sort of *errand* could Lex possibly have in Columbia, Missouri? But she feared she knew the answer to that question, and it only made keeping calm that much more difficult.

“What did he tell you?” she asked, wondering herself what Scott would have said in that conversation. She believed Scott was on her side. And if he was, surely he would not have told Lex everything. Only hinted? Made something up?

“He said that you were confused, that you wanted to talk to Clark.” She opened her eyes, expecting to see an inaccurate representation of Lex’s current state. However, she knew the disapproval she saw in his eyes was genuine... “Why on earth would you want to talk to that miscreant? Hasn’t he caused you enough pain already?”

She shook her head and then placed a hand on his arm. “Please, don’t hold it against Scott. It was my idea. I needed to ask Clark about... something.” Keeping her mask in place, she smiled inwardly as his expression led her to think that he believed her excuse. But the seconds that drew out destroyed that confidence.

“Lois, I found your notebook,” he said, his eyes boring into her. But it wasn’t anger smoldering behind his eyes. She wished she knew what he was thinking.

She searched her memory of what she’d written and how she’d organized things. What excuse for that could she possibly have? She swung her legs back to the floor and positioned herself in a sitting position next to Lex. Wringing her fingers, she distorted the truth. “I... I’ve been having... dreams.”

“Darling,” Lex began, taking her hand in his, believing her story, “think for a moment. How could Clark possibly have anything to say to you about your *dreams*? He’s been out of your life, thankfully so, for years. I can’t imagine why you’d want to bring him back into it. Have you forgotten what he did to you?”

Actually... She glanced down at the hand tenderly and gently grasping hers. The judgmental look on Lex’s face didn’t match the affection in his hand, and she found it offensive. It was as if he was treating her like a child. Funny, she didn’t have any memories of him behaving this way over the past two months. Perhaps when he didn’t have anything to worry about, he was capable of being a decent person. Even if he could never truly *be* a decent person.

“He must be made to keep his distance from you. Which reminds me.” Lois watched nervously as Lex used his free hand to reach into his pocket. “I was hurt to find out that you had removed your rings.”

Lois prayed that Lex hadn’t noticed her sharp intake of breath at the sight of the rings she’d given to Scott when they arrived in Columbia. As she was leaving the tiny regional airport, she had decided that it would be better if she didn’t have to explain them to Clark when he recovered his memories. She’d given them to Scott to hold.

But why would Scott have given them to Lex? Was he not truly on her side? Was it to keep Lex from suspecting his involvement?

“I...” she started. She frowned, and Lex could see her struggle to control her breathing. She was doing a fair job of concealing her

emotions, but now he could see the contest between fear and hopelessness dancing in her eyes. “What did you do to Clark?” She shook her head, pausing before clarifying, “On the trail, he was hurting, what did you do to make him hurt like that?”

Lex was not entirely surprised that she would ask this. After all, he knew she’d regained some of her memories, and he would have to take care of that. He gave her credit for attempting to keep up the charade but wondered how long she would be able to do so. His own feelings of fury toward the man who could take her from him again and concern for his child growing inside the woman he loved warred inside him.

“I merely sent him a warning,” he explained, choosing to be as patient as he could manage under the circumstances. The last thing he wanted was to add to her stress, knowing that it would not be good for her or the baby.

“A warning?” The increase in her frown and narrowing of her eyes told Lex that he’d pushed a button. He found her tenacity endearing. “Lex, I am not a ch—”

Lex held up his hand to stop her, knowing that it would further infuriate her but also that time was running out. The fact that he found an enraged Lois even more attractive than a compliant one only served to push him to provoke her more. “It’s alright, Darling.” He covered her hand with his and smiled at her. While she was distracted by her own anger, he easily slipped the rings back onto her finger. “Soon, we’ll be back at the chateau and all will be as it was.”

She jerked her hand from his as she stood up from the couch. He could see her composure crumbling before him and knew that while it was predominantly her anger, she was beginning to lose control for another reason.

“What if I don’t want to go to the chateau?” she spat.

Lex took a slow deep breath, standing and moving to close the distance between them. It wouldn’t do for him to lose his control as well. She wasn’t in her right mind now, and he would have to be tolerant just a little while longer. “Now, Lois, why wouldn’t you want to go to the chateau?”

“Because you’ve... done something to me.” She backed away from him until she bumped into the door of the cockpit.

The resentment in her eyes pricked a nerve and caused Lex to lose his ability to care how she responded to his words. “Yes,” he responded with his eyebrows lifted, reaching his hand toward her abdomen with a mirthless smile. “I certainly have.”

“Don’t touch me.” She shoved his hand away and pushed past him, releasing a single sob that sounded remarkably like a certain name.

Lex chided himself for his foolish behavior. This was not going as planned, but she would soon be asleep, calm and relaxed once more. He could see now that he would have to choose. It had been such a fantastic idea to completely ruin the life of his nemesis, strip him of everything he had, as was done to Lex, while having his prize as well. But now he saw the fallacy in that line of reasoning.

“You know, I thought I was doing the considerate thing by allowing him to live out his miserable life,” Lex said, turning slowly toward her as he felt his patience slip away. “But you have put me in a difficult position because, while I want to do whatever it takes to make you happy, I certainly cannot allow him to live knowing that it is a risk to what we have.”

“*We* don’t have anything. You *invented* all of it,” she spat.

Ah, the admission he’d waited for and had hoped to lure out of her. She was aware of the circumstances. Lex took this moment to pour himself a drink at the counter adjacent to the end of the couch.

“Did I?” he asked innocently. “I recall many instances where you were a *very* willing partner.” He looked at her over the rim of his glass as he took a sip and reminisced over the last two months during which she had lived every minute as his faithful wife.

"In your dreams," she seethed.

"Well, yes, there also." Lex couldn't help but smile at his joke. "But, darling—"

"Don't call me that," she shouted.

He breathed and began again, more forcefully this time, "Once you forgot about Clark, I was your top priority, and I know you still remember the past two years of wedded bliss. And while it may be true that the first part of our marriage is somewhat different than you remember, you cannot deny that the past two months have been very much a reality. You have *willingly* been my wife since the procedure took place."

"You have clearly misinterpreted the word *willingly*." Lois's narrow-eyed glare didn't cover the green tinge developing on her face. Lex looked away from her, reminding himself that this was only temporary. The loving looks they shared would return soon enough.

"It is of no consequence," he said more to himself. "I can handle your ire until the procedure can be repeated. And rest assured that there is no risk to the baby."

"There is no baby," she stated, crossing her arms over her chest. "I lied."

Lex wanted to quickly turn to her but maintained control of himself as he thought through all the evidence that suggested she was lying about that. "Do you not recall your fatigue leading up to our anniversary party?"

"Planning took a lot out of me," she retorted.

"And how do you intend to explain your morning sickness?" he challenged.

Her breathing rate seemed to be slowing as she blinked a few times before narrowing her eyes at him. "Revulsion," she replied slowly.

"I see." Her arrow hit its mark, but Lex chose the high road knowing only a few minutes remained. "Well, I suppose I'll have to look into the truth of your declaration soon. But since I can see that you are thoroughly incensed, and as I don't wish to put you under any further stress, it makes the drug I put in your drink that much more justified."

She quickly looked at the glass of water she'd taken sips from earlier before turning a fearful gaze on him that quickly turned to indignation. Yes, an angry Lois was very attractive, but that sort of thinking would have to wait.

"You will *never* get away with this." She closed her eyes and opened them very slowly. "Clark will come for me."

"I'm counting on it." He smiled at her and felt a twinge of regret at the way he was surely making her feel – as if she was the target of his anger when it was strictly directed at his nemesis.

Lois opened her mouth to speak as she took a step toward him, but nothing came out. Lex closed the distance between them as her eyes began to roll back and caught her, gently laying her on the couch once more. He repositioned a pillow beneath her head and, as he lowered her head onto it, paused for a moment, observing her closely.

It had been too long since he'd last seen her, and he missed everything about her. Her sharp words from moments ago filtered through his reverie, and he gently rested his hand on her abdomen as he considered the facts. The changing hormones of pregnancy seemed to be the only reasonable explanation for why she'd regained her memories. In addition, she had been sick to her stomach multiple times over the past four days, today included.

In fact, she seemed to be sick nearly constantly. He'd been witness to it. There was no faking that. Could there have been some other reason for her symptoms? Was it merely revulsion? Perhaps it was the migraine Scott had suggested that first night. But she hadn't complained of any headaches. What else could it be?

"Oh, Lois," he said, bringing her relaxed hand to his lips. A mix of emotions muddled his thoughts, but he refused to give in to

the heartache he felt at the idea of losing something so precious to him as his unborn child until he could verify it one way or the other.

Chapter 21

It had been a last-minute decision to enroll. Lana's life in Smallville, including her job working at the bank, just wasn't fulfilling. And when she sat and thought about her options and what she really wanted out of life, journalism sat at the top of the list. She had been accepted into the journalism school just before the next semester would commence.

She had considered herself lucky when she ran into Clark that day in Smallville and learned they would be in the same place together. She could hardly contain her excitement. She never had a chance with him in high school because of the way he had kept his distance. But he was kind and considerate. Protective and trustworthy. He was the best she could have hoped for. No one had ever measured up to Clark, and no one ever would.

And life had seen fit to give them a second chance.

Attending journalism school and practically living with Clark had not been quite what she had expected, but determination to get what she wanted out of life kept her going. Today, however, she trudged across campus on her way to meet with a group of fellow students, feeling bothered by the turn of events.

This thing with Lois put a wedge between them, and she wanted to rip it away and insist that *she* was all he needed. But unless he dealt with it, Lois would always be there, separating them. Maybe her friends were right. Maybe Clark was a lost cause, and there was no hope of Lana guiding him back to the incredible man she used to know.

If only she had some sort of sign that a life with Clark was possible. A light at the end of the tunnel. A glimmer of what could be. She knew Clark loved her, but she didn't know how deep it ran... or if it was more than what he felt for Lois.

She groaned aloud, fisting her hands. She ignored the strange looks from those she passed and continued forward.

She was still on a precipice, waiting for something to change. Ready to fall or to jump, not knowing what to do or how to do it.

"Lana!"

She knew it was Clark instantly. He was coming toward her on the path. Judging by his appearance, he'd run the entire way. But more importantly, something was wrong. As he stopped in front of her, she thought about how sick he looked, like he'd been dragged through the metaphorical mud.

"Clark?"

"I need your help, Lana," he blurted as he came to stop in front of her, placing his hands on his hips and breathing deeply.

Her heart leapt at his words, and she smiled at him.

"Something happened to Lois," he said between breaths.

And there it was. Her sign. Her smile disappeared, and she felt the sting of tears. This emotional roller coaster she was on needed to end.

"Can we go to my place and listen to this CD?" He held up an unmarked CD case as if it held the answers to some great puzzle.

Lana blinked at Clark's strange request. "I don't understand."

"Lois was following me on the trail this morning, and someone kidnapped her. This guy who was helping her, before she got kidnapped, that is, he said I have to help Lois and gave me this CD." He held the CD up and looked at it with uncertainty. "He said..." But he didn't finish, he just shook his head then hung it as he stared at his feet.

Lana groaned internally. Was it so much to ask for a simple, uncomplicated relationship in which Clark loved her and only her and there was nothing standing in their way? It certainly felt like it was all too much right now. She wanted to slap him in the face, knock some sense into him. Maybe she should. Could he not see what this was doing to her?

But when he looked up at her with those puppy dog eyes again, and she saw the inner turmoil he was feeling so plainly etched on his face, she knew she'd do anything for him.

Even this ridiculous undertaking.

"Look, I know it's a lot to ask... too much. But you are the only one I trust."

She shook her head and took a deep breath, steeling herself for whatever was to come. "Oh, Clark, who could say no to you?" She took his elbow and turned them toward his apartment, forgetting her own plans.

Fifteen minutes later, they were walking up the front steps to his apartment, Lana kicking herself the whole way as Clark explained just how horrible the past few days had been for him. This was even worse than normal for Clark. It was like that children's book she read as a kid, *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*. She silently hoped that someday she would understand why she put herself in these awkward positions. But she already knew: she just couldn't say no to this man. She loved him and would do anything for him.

"So, what's on the CD?" she finally asked once they entered the apartment.

"Nat King Cole." He went straight to the stereo beside the couch, opening the CD case and tossing it onto the couch once he had retrieved the disc.

"What are we listening for?" she asked as she attempted to get comfortable on the couch, though the circumstances that brought her here made it difficult to do. Picking up the CD case revealed that it was just a copy of an album or a mix of different songs.

"I don't know." Clark pressed play and sat on the floor, facing the stereo.

A catchy intro of piano and guitar preceded a song Lana recognized.

L is for the way you look at me

O is for the only one I see

But she wouldn't get to hear more. Clark pressed the button to advance to the next track.

"Hey, I thought you had to listen to these," Lana pointed out as the intro to the next song, one she didn't recognize, began.

Clark shook his head. "Lois already sang this one to me."

"I'm sorry," Lana was unable to keep the shock from her voice. "What did you say?"

"Every time I saw her yesterday, she sang to me," Clark said, as if it were both obvious and perfectly acceptable.

Lana simply sat with her mouth open as anger ignited in her. Lois was singing *love songs* to him? Why hadn't he mentioned that? It seemed like an important piece of information since it was just as confusing as the rest of this crazy, messed up story. She could believe it wasn't an intentional omission given the strangeness of it all, but it still grated on her nerves.

The jazz opening of guitar and piano seemed to draw on forever, leaving Clark and Lana in a tense silence that she was sure he wasn't even aware of. Lana didn't recognize the song and when the music began to build up, she felt relief coming only to have that taken away by more of the same instrumental music. She tried to focus on why she was doing this. *Clark needs me*, she kept repeating to herself. *Clark needs me*.

It is only a paper moon.

Hanging over a cardboard scene

But it wouldn't be make believe

If you believe in me.

"What's supposed to happen?" she asked.

"I'm supposed to remember something." Clark shook his head and reached to advance to the next track for more jazzy piano and guitar to begin.

A buzzard took a monkey for a ride in the air

The monkey thought that everything was on the square

He advanced to the next track.

The absurdity of his behavior was increasing, and she wasn't sure how she should react. "A song is supposed to help you remember something?" she asked, trying to understand. Why couldn't he just explain what was going on?

She narrowed her eyes at him when he shushed her, throwing logs on the embers of her ire.

I love you

For sentimental reasons

Next track.

"Clark..." she tried to get his attention.

This time he held a hand up to her, and it was all she could do to not slap it away.

There was a boy

A very strange enchanted boy

That wasn't it. Clark wasn't sure what was supposed to happen, but so far none of these songs did any more for him than the ones Lois sang yesterday.

Next track.

They try to tell us we're too young

To young to really be in love

This wasn't it either.

Next track.

Gee it's great after being out late

Nope. Next track.

I was walkin' along mindin' my business

As Clark reached to advance the track once more, he became vaguely aware of Lana moving behind him. He turned in time to see her reach for the door. "Lana?" he asked bewildered. "What are you doing?" He needed her, why was she leaving?

"Clark, this is stupid," she said as she spun on her heels. "I just tried to get your attention *repeatedly*, and you're so focused on listening to the stupid songs. Which you aren't even listening to all of!"

Clark watched her take a slow deep breath when she paused. He got up off the floor and opened his mouth to speak, but she put her hand up to stop him.

"I don't have any idea what is going on, but I know it doesn't include me. I'm just... in the way, accidentally mixed up in some... crazy happening. If you have to remember something by listening to music, I bet I know what it is and when you do remember, you'll realize that I was right about you and Lois." She turned away, shaking her head.

"Lana—" he started, taking a step toward her.

"No, Clark." The eyes she turned on him froze him in place. Regret and resolve and anger filled her expression before it softened, awareness dawning. He wished he knew exactly what she was thinking instead of these vague emotions. She gave a strangled laugh. "It's so obvious to me now."

Clark searched his mind for anything obvious, but all he found was a jumbled mess of despair, guilt, and shame. And mixed in was this irrational need to go after Lois knowing full well that it would only lead to more of the same feelings. What could Lana possibly know that Clark didn't?

"I was right, you are in love with her," she said.

"I am not!" he protested. "Have you not heard anything I've said for the past three days?" Anger and impatience boiled inside him, and he breathed as if he'd just finished running a marathon.

She took the few steps to reach him, her face not holding the anger he expected but rather an expression of sad acceptance. He was thoroughly confused and unable to move, only able to watch as she stretched up to kiss him on the cheek. When she pulled back, she looked into his eyes and, in their depths, he saw what he was doing to her. He felt sick.

"I thought I could fix you, help you get back to the person you were back in high school. Love you until you love me..." She pressed her hand to his cheek and produced the most tragic smile

Clark had ever seen.

“Lana,” he finally managed to say as she pulled away. She shook her head, stopping him.

“I don’t know what happened, but something did. You have to find her and put everything back to the way it was.” She shrugged, opened the door to leave and said, “And I’m not a part of it.” She turned to look over her shoulder at him. “Goodbye, Clark.”

The door closed, and his mind reeled. Not only had he ruined Lois’s life, now he’d ruined Lana’s life as well.

I’ve been hit!

This is it! This is it! I, T, It!

Clark turned toward the stereo, still feeling stunned.

I was walkin’ along mindin’ my business,

When love came and hit me in the eye,

Flash, bam, alakazam,

Out of an orange colored, purple striped, pretty, green polka dot sky,

Flash, bam, alakazam, and goodbye.

Clark ran a frustrated hand through his hair, leaving it mussed. There was no bottom to this pit of despair he had fallen into over two years ago. Everything he did was wrong. Every choice he made hurt others. And he was powerless to stop it.

The violins of an orchestra began the next song on the CD. Clark recognized the intro as one of his mother’s favorite songs, one he had no interest in hearing right now. He reached to turn the stereo off as the smooth voice of Nat King Cole drew out the first word of the song out.

Smile

As his vision grew cloudy, and he began to feel light headed, Clark wondered if the emotional stress he’d been under was finally starting to have physical effects.

Tho’ your heart is aching.

But as he blinked and shook his head to clear it, it worsened instead, and he was transported to a park where he walked...

With Lois.

###

May 21, 1995

“You chilly?” he asked as he put his arm around Lois’s shoulder. It was a cool evening, and it smelled like rain was approaching.

“No,” she replied simply. She reached up to lace her fingers into his, gripping the hand hanging over her shoulder. The action warmed him and solidified his resolve.

“Lois, I’ve been thinking,” he started tentatively. He had so much he wanted to say to her and after thinking for a long time, he finally knew how he might tell her everything. He hoped he had the courage to see it through.

“Me too,” she said.

“What about?” he asked. He wanted to know every thought that ever went through her head, to know her completely.

“You first,” she insisted.

“Okay,” he said with a smile. He lowered his head, preparing himself to pour his heart out and to hear her reaction. He watched his feet as they walked, unable to look at her just yet. He wouldn’t be able to say all of this with those eyes of hers bewitching him. “Sometimes... you think you’re immortal. You start to think that the people around you are too. And it just takes a second to realize how... wrong you are... about everything.”

They stopped there in the middle of the walkway, and Clark turned Lois to face him.

“Listen,” Clark began, looking Lois straight in the eye. The compassion he saw in her eyes made his breath catch, but he pushed on. “What I’m trying to say, Lois, is I almost lost you and I... feel... ashamed.” He looked away as he composed himself. Why was he so nervous about this?

Lois moved into his line of vision. “Ashamed? Why?” she asked, searching his eyes. The sincerity in her voice gave him the

courage he needed to keep going.

“I kept pushing you away even when I promised I’d stop.” Clark stared directly into her eyes, forcing his next words to penetrate any defenses she had left. “If you died without ever knowing why, I’d never be able to forgive myself. Because I love you.”

When she smiled at him and reached to run her fingers through his hair and caress his face, he melted into the touch and knew he had made the right decision. He took her hand and led her to the fountain they had neared while walking and motioned for her to sit.

A flash of lightning brightened their surroundings, and a crack of thunder rent through the air. He looked up as the impending storm broke free.

“Come on! Give me a break!” he yelled at the sky. Would everything try to prevent him from saying what he needed to say? “You want to go back?” Lois asked.

Clark looked back at her with determination. She sat, ducking her head to avoid getting rain in her eyes, but the twinkle in them belied her suggestion. “If the earth opened up at my feet, I wouldn’t move until I’d said this.” Without averting his eyes, he knelt in front of her and took her hand in his. It was soft, warm, willing, and when he grasped it, he could hear her heartbeat accelerating.

“Lois,” Clark began, rain dripping from his hair into his face, “will you marry me?”

As Clark brought out the intricate, beautifully designed diamond engagement ring, he heard her gasp.

###

His vision cleared, and he collapsed onto the couch he had been standing in front of. Swallowing hard, he struggled past the unease. Was that what was supposed to happen? But he hadn’t remembered anything real. He recognized it immediately as the dream Lana described. He could feel the emotions welling inside him as if it were real, but there was no way that was even possible. It was no wonder she believed he was in love with Lois after hearing what he said.

Only it was a dream. Scott gave him the impression that something had happened to his memories. This couldn’t be what he was referring to. What difference would a dream about Lois make?

Regardless, Clark couldn’t ignore this urge to help, even knowing that Lois would not welcome it. Knowing he would likely screw that up as well, he got ready to go find Scott and see what was next.

Chapter 22

Her first view of the chateau that was to be her destination the previous morning was from a distance. While she was unable to get a good impression of its size from the angle, she could see that it was positioned on the top of a bluff, resulting in a steep drop-off on one side of the house. They traveled below it, along a small river that was a tributary of the Hobbs River. Bare trees covered much of the base of the bluff while the top was steep, exposed rock.

A short while later, they pulled into the driveway of the house, but evergreen trees obscured her view of it. Suddenly, the drive opened up to a well-manicured lawn, allowing her to see the enormity and grandeur of it. Chateau fully encompassed what this house was.

Lex was right when he said it had a gothic feel to it – it looked like it was straight out of a novel. The dark grey brick building looked more like a small castle, complete with a turret rising to the sky from the corner of the house. It was set up on a small hill with ivy growing several feet up on one side, stretching almost to the roof in some places. Dormer windows lined the top and broke up the dark and brooding roof.

The car continued along the drive and around to the back of the house where Lois realized the bluff she'd seen on approach must be located. Of course, what gothic home wouldn't be complete without a cliff in close proximity? She also saw from this side that the house had a basement that opened up to the rear. Behind the house was a detached garage. What appeared to be a greenhouse was further from the house, tucked up against the trees and covered with lovely vines. It was very much like a fairy tale. The whole scene made Lois uneasy.

She could only imagine the struggles that awaited her, but she was done trying to play Lex's game and pretend nothing was wrong. And while the memories that would have her believe his charade still held a place in her mind, those of Clark prevented her from accepting them. After she had awakened near the end of the flight back to Metropolis, she simply glowered and refused to respond to or look at Lex.

Still, he continued to speak to her as he had for the past two months, though the false memories made it feel like years. Regardless of his behavior now and during those months when she thought they were a happy couple, she knew she could not trust Lex to be sincere. It was a façade that would eventually fade away, revealing the evil that lurked behind it.

She shifted in her seat to get a better look at the house from the back as the car slowly pulled to a stop. Counting the basement, it had four stories, the fourth being the roof level with the dormer windows. More ivy covered the back of the house, crawling up to a small balcony atop the second floor that was flanked with turrets. Below the balcony was a patio complete with a table and chairs, a small fire pit surrounded by a comfy looking couch and chairs, and a luxurious pool that was surely heated to be so inviting in this cold weather.

Distracted by both the beauty and haunting nature of the house, Lois hadn't noticed the guards posted at strategic points until now. They stood or walked about the grounds, looking ominous and threatening. But the man that came up to open the door of the car could only be described as a butler, from his attire to the way he held himself and acknowledged Lex as the master of the house.

Lex got out first and reached back to grab Lois's arm. "Here we are, Darling," he said as he helped her out.

She frowned as she looked around at the guards once more before landing her glare on Lex. His smile seemed subdued, his eyes determined, but his mouth relaxed. He seemed almost sad. The strange mix of emotions that had been plaguing her for days caused her stomach to roil once more.

"I'm sorry the circumstances of your arrival are less than ideal," he said, "but we will be happy together once more."

"I will *never* be happy with you," she said, finally breaking her silence. Her voice sounded brittle instead of confident as she intended. But when his smile wavered, she thought perhaps it had more of an effect than she would have otherwise.

He turned away from her abruptly and gave an instruction to the waiting butler who quickly set himself to the task he was given.

As Lex began striding toward the house, Lois considered taking advantage of the space she'd been given to make an escape. Turning quickly in the opposite direction, however, revealed that two of the guards had anticipated such a move and now blocked her way. Reluctantly, she reversed and made to follow Lex to the house instead.

Passing by what Lois had assumed would be their point of entry, he walked to the patio and paused near the pool, clasping his hands behind his back and looking out over the river valley below as he said, "I've always loved this home. It is composed of three large parcels and has several unique features including this vista. So, when it became available, I immediately bought it." He turned to look at her, his smile once more visible. His eyes dropped to her

abdomen as he said, "This will be the perfect place to raise our little one." The look in his eyes didn't hold any malice and even looked caring.

Lois shook her head and reminded herself of the truth of the situation. She'd been kidnapped, her life replaced by this nightmare. Her situation hadn't been deadly, but it had still been perilous because she hadn't realized the deception. She would not allow him to win. "I told you I'm not pregnant."

Lex turned back to the view. "That remains to be seen," he said longingly. Before she could remind him of the circumstances she'd explained, he turned and walked toward a wrought iron spiral staircase that ascended to the balcony attached to the main level. "Come with me, please."

As if she had a choice, she followed him up the stairs and to a door that opened into a large living room, she was surprised to find that the house appeared to be entirely furnished with luxurious yet rustic décor. Neither the furniture nor the house was anywhere near what she would have picked for herself... and Clark. A tightening in her chest and throat prevented her from saying anything as she followed Lex through the house.

He led her to a door on the second floor that she guessed would reveal a suite of rooms. She wasn't sure if it was the master suite or another bedroom as all the rooms she had looked into as they came down the hall appeared to be suites. But she was unprepared for what was behind the door and gasped as she realized where she was standing.

A nursery. Matching the style of the rest of the house, it contained a crib, changing table, and a chest of drawers that sat to the side of the main room. Toward the back of the room, a small sitting area was tucked beyond a wide doorway with plush couches and a thick, fuzzy rug on the floor, all in neutral tones for whatever child would grace it.

She stepped back and repeated her earlier claim, "I told you I am not pregnant."

"And as I said, that remains to be seen. You cannot deny that what took place those two months between you and I make it plausible."

Oh! How she wanted to. Her hand came to her mouth as nausea welled up in her. She closed her eyes to stem the guilt and anger that sought to overwhelm her. She made the decision to leave the room but didn't know where she would go. She was surprised to see that the two guards who had blocked her escape outside now stood in the hallway, and she stopped just short of bumping into them.

"My apologies, Lois, but I know you only too well to allow you to move freely about the house," Lex said from behind her. He took her by the elbow and led her down the hall to a second stairwell that led directly to the basement without an opening on the main floor.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked, trying unsuccessfully to jerk her arm free.

"To your rooms, of course," he replied.

Her *rooms* consisted of a suite located in the basement and included a sitting area with an attached bedroom and small kitchenette to one side as well as what she assumed was a bathroom on the other side. Being toward the front of the house, the entire suite was void of windows but seemed well enough lit. She stood near the middle of the room, observing her new prison.

How long would she be confined to it?

"Mrs. Luthor. It's good to see you again."

When she whipped around to see who had addressed her that way, she was surprised – yet not – to see Dr. Hightower enter the room. His smile seemed pleasant, but his eyes didn't match, giving her an eerie feeling. "What is he doing here?" she asked, taking a step closer to Lex. Lois was surprised that it made her feel oddly safer, but that was quickly dashed by his answer.

"Two reasons," he began, turning to her and rubbing his hands

tenderly on her upper arms. “First, he will restore you to me.” His grip tightened, restraining her. “And second, he will determine whether or not you carry our child.”

“No!” Bringing her hands up in front of her face to break his hold on her, she didn’t see Hightower advancing behind her and only realized he did so when she felt the needle stick her in the shoulder.

She looked into Lex’s face as it evolved into one of contrition. “Lois, *everything* I do is because I love you,” she heard him say as he faded away and darkness slowly overtook her.

Clark checked the name of the hotel on the business card Scott gave him. He looked back at the drab building and verified he was in the right place. The black number mounted on the white frame and centered on the red door was fading and falling off, but it still managed to mark Clark’s destination. He reached to knock on the door.

Seconds felt like hours as he waited for the door to open, giving Clark plenty of time to second guess his decision to come. He kept going back and forth after remembering the dream. But knowing that Lois was taken and that she would need some kind of help, even if it was from him, compelled him to seek out Scott and find out what was going on. When the door finally did open, Clark was surprised to see concern written on the face of someone who only hours ago had seemed so sure of what was to come.

Scott looked weary and nervous, fiddling with what looked like a musical symbol tied around his wrist with a leather strap. “I wasn’t sure you would come,” Scott said, gesturing for Clark to enter.

Clark harrumphed. “I’m not sure I should have,” he said as he crossed the threshold into the tiny hotel room.

“Me either.” Scott’s frown deepened, making Clark wonder what had caused such a change from the earlier confidence he’d seen on the trail.

Clark gave the trepidation Scott now showed only a moment’s consideration before reminding himself that he was here to see how he might help and maybe ease his guilty conscience in the process. He took a seat in the tiny chair near the window. “Just lay it out there,” he said.

Scott sat down on the bed facing Clark. “It’s a trap.” He rested his elbows on his knees and leaned his head up to look directly at Clark. “Lex wants me to make sure you go to Lois and when you do, he plans to kill you.”

“Excuse me?” Clark asked, raising his eyebrows.

“Remember when I said that someone messed with your memories?” Clark nodded, and Scott continued, “About two months ago, you and Lois were kidnapped. Your memories were changed and lives rearranged. A few days ago, I helped Lois recover her memories. We came to help you recover yours, but that idea was stopped in its tracks, literally, and now Lois is back with Lex Luthor who wants me to encourage you to come after her so that he can kill you.”

“*The Lex Luthor.*” Clark could feel his mouth drop open. Lex Luthor was a wealthy businessman in Metropolis. Clark wouldn’t have been able to pick him out of a line up. Scott simply nodded in response. “Because I ruined Lois’s life?”

“No,” Scott said, shaking his head. “That never happened.” Scott breathed out slowly and turned serious eyes to Clark, his eyebrows slightly raised as he said, “Because you are his arch nemesis, Superman.”

“*Superman?*” Clark repeated in disbelief. “That’s impossible.”

“I know it seems impossible, especially with your powers disabled, but—”

“How do you even know any of this?” Clark interrupted.

Scott took a deep breath before he continued. “I, uh, used to work for Lex. I was there when it happened.”

Clark could only frown as surprise and confusion prevented

him from putting words together.

“It’s true,” Scott said as he put his head down, fiddling with the charm tied to his wrist. “I was part of it. But I’m not now.” He paused to look up and met Clark’s eyes directly. “As I’ve already had to explain to Lois, I assisted in all of it, from changing the memories, to kidnapping you and Lois.” Scott continued, making direct eye contact with Clark, even as he balled his hands into fists. “I know now what kind of monster Lex is. I have lived every day for a while now riddled with guilt over the role I played in all of this. But I made a promise. And the only thing I could think to do was use what I know to undo it and help put everything back as it should be.”

“How do you expect me to believe that?” Clark stood and started pacing. “How can I believe *any* of this?”

“Is there any part of it you can believe?”

Clark grunted a weak laugh. “That you and Lois came here and that she’s gone now.” And the only reason he could believe that was because he’d seen it with his own eyes. Lex Luthor was a name he recognized, but that the third richest man in the world would ever have any reason to want to kill him was unbelievable. Even more ridiculous was the idea that Clark was Superman.

“How can any of the rest of that be true?”

“The procedure that was done to change memories has a key, or in your case, several keys.” Scott chuckled, and Clark wondered what was funny. “Your... stronger brain rejected much of it, and so we kept repeating it until it was done.”

His brow furrowed further. He just couldn’t believe what Scott was saying with everything he knew to be reality. It must have shown on his face.

“I know it seems unbelievable, but it’s true. Did you listen to the CD I gave you? The keys are all songs, and if any of those on the CD were the right ones, it should have unlocked some of the memories that were changed.”

“Well, it didn’t,” Clark said a little more harshly than he intended as he stood and walked to look out the window. Letting his irritation with this whole charade get the best of him, he added, “Probably because none of that is real.”

“You didn’t remember *anything?*”

The subdued tone Scott used brought Clark’s head around to see a matching look of disappointment. Clark shook his head and turned back to the window. “Nothing but a dream I had that’s ruined enough already.”

“What dream?” Scott asked with unmistakable hope.

“A dream in which I asked Lois to marry me.” He rubbed his hand over his face, reliving the very real emotions that had come with the dream. Fresh guilt over what he’d put Lana through in all this mixed with the misery that continually permeated his entire being.

“That wasn’t a dream.”

“Yes, it was. There is *no way* that happened. She *hates* me. The only thing I ever did for her was ruin her life.” Clark turned at the sound of Scott rifling through a bag. He walked back to the chair and sat. “Besides, I’d have to know a woman long enough before I would ever ask her to marry me. When would that have even happened?”

Clark grimaced. Lois still lived in Metropolis, her appearances on TV as a reporter could confirm that, whereas he’d been moving around the country from small town to small town trying to get and keep a job ever since he ruined her life. Well, it wasn’t completely ruined if she’d made it as a reporter on TV, something for which he was grateful.

Scott turned toward Clark with something in his hand, the earnestness in his face catching Clark by surprise. “I think you should see this.” He sat up straighter as Scott stepped forward just enough to pass the object to Clark who looked at it with narrowed eyes and a furrowed brow.

A photograph – wallet-sized, still relatively pristine, with just

a small crease on the corner.

As Clark brought the picture closer to him, he realized it was a picture of himself.

With Lois.

A beautiful smile on Lois's perfect face was aimed right at him, and his eyes were locked on to hers. He was holding the fingers of her left hand to his mouth, and his lips were pressing a kiss to them. Expertly centered in the shot was a beautiful and intricately designed diamond ring – the same ring from his dream – on her ring finger. Flipping the picture over, he found a date, November 18, 1995, written on the back in handwriting that looked remarkably like his own.

Clark stared dumbfounded for a moment before coming to his senses. "This must be a fake," he said, shaking his head.

When he looked up, Scott held out his hand, holding a brown leather wallet, probably the source of the picture. He took it and opened it to find his driver's license looking up at him. Only it was a New Troy license, not the Kansas one he currently carried in the wallet in his back pocket. Clark pulled his own wallet out and retrieved his current license, the Kansas one. Holding the two next to each other, he realized the photos were identical. Yet he'd never heard of the address listed on the New Troy license: 344 Clinton Street.

Discarding his own wallet and driver's license on the table beside the chair and again shaking his head in confusion, he continued to thumb through the contents of this wallet. A health insurance card. A couple of credit cards. A folded piece of paper with the words "I love you" written on one side and another date, October 22, 1995, on the other side, both in obviously feminine cursive. Tucked behind the driver's license was another picture of Lois, wrinkled as if it had been shoved in the wallet for some time, a head shot, this one dated merely September 1995 in his handwriting.

Clark's mind tried to put the pieces together, but they just didn't make any sense. He *knew* that ever since he met Lois, there had been nothing but trouble. He *knew* that after ruining her career, he bounced from job to job whenever someone found out what had happened. He *knew* that he'd been talking about Lois in his sleep, and now he *knew* what that dream had been like.

But now, someone was telling him that this dream of his wasn't a dream. Was that why it had felt so real? And this wallet, filled with things he'd never seen before covered in his distinctive handwriting, must have been his.

And the picture of Lois... The picture of him *with* Lois...

"Where did you get this?" he asked quietly, fearing the answer.

"I was there, remember? I followed all the directions Luthor gave me to take care of yours and Lois's stuff. But not on this. I... couldn't, for some reason. And when I... made my promise, I went back and got it. So that I could give it back to you."

Clark stuffed the contents back in the wallet only to find that there was something blocking the cards. Pulling the pocket open, he saw what he thought was a shiny coin. As he shook the coin into his hand, he felt the blood drain from his face when he saw instead the ring that Lois had been wearing in the picture. The very same ring from his dream. She must have said yes to be wearing it in the picture. "How...?"

"Luthor took it off when he kidnapped Lois the first time."

Clark hadn't realized he'd spoken that thought out loud.

Clark set the wallet down next to his on the table and rubbed his face with both of his hands. The sincerity in Scott's voice made a small part of him want to believe what he was being told, but it was still fought back by the guilt he'd been carrying around for years. But had he been carrying it around for years?

"If what you say is true..." He hung his head and shook it.

"But I'm *not* Superman." An awkward silence followed while Clark's thoughts jumped everywhere.

He heard a long, heavy breath escape Scott. "Look, Clark," he

started, "It *is* true. But I can't ask you to risk your life going into a set-up, especially when you have so little reason to believe any of what I'm saying."

At this Clark looked up, finally understanding the change he'd observed in Scott's demeanor. "What will you do?"

"I... I'm not sure yet, but it has to happen soon." Scott stood up and began putting the displaced items back into his bag. Clark noticed that the wallet that Scott said was his didn't go back in the bag. "I promised I would stop this, and I won't give up until I have."

Clark sat motionless in the chair, watching Scott pack his bags, not really seeing him while he considered his options. He could leave, walk away from all this nonsense. Go back to his life. The one that had fallen apart because of some dream. The life that was miserable because he was so obviously not where he was supposed to be.

Or he could go with Scott, try to help save Lois and put back whatever was out of place. But he'd be walking into a trap that he couldn't even begin to imagine in which there was a good chance someone was going to try to kill him, even though he clearly wasn't the person Lex wanted dead. He'd probably screw it up somehow, though, like he did everything else.

But maybe, just maybe, he could help. Maybe he could make up for everything he'd done to ruin Lois's life. Maybe she'd forgive him, and he'd finally be able to move on.

He stood up from the chair. "Scott," he said, suddenly feeling sure of something for the first time in a very long time. "I'll go with you."

Jimmy sat at his desk just outside Perry's office, looking over his notes from the interviews he'd conducted over the past three days when his phone rang.

"Olsen," he answered it, setting his pen down to rub his hand over his face in exhaustion. Waking up early this morning was necessary, but now it was catching up with him.

"Mr. Hubert," he greeted. "What can I do for you?"

Jimmy sat up suddenly, knocking over his coffee cup. "She did? When?" he asked as he sipped up the coffee with some scratch paper he had nearby.

"Just now? How?" He pushed the wet papers into the trash can sitting at the end of his desk. "You were singing?" Jimmy stilled. "What song?"

Jimmy's eyes grew wide. "Mr. Hubert, I'll call you back as soon as I can," he said in what he hoped was a calm manner.

As he ended the call, he pushed the papers around on his desk until he found the right one and then dialed the Mayfields' number. "David, it's Jimmy Olsen. Was the name of the song you heard *Miss Otis Regrets*?" he asked. "Can I talk to her then?"

Jimmy continued to shuffle the papers around on his desk as he waited. "Alexia, was the name of the song you heard *Miss Otis Regrets*?... If you heard it again, would you recognize it?... All right, I'll see if I can find a copy for you to listen to."

"Chief!" Perry looked up at the sound, but before he could say anything, Jimmy continued, "I think I'm onto something here. Do you have any Nat King Cole?"

"Probably, but don't tell Elvis," Perry answered. "Why?"

"Do you have a song called *Miss Otis Regrets*?" Jimmy's eyes were wide, his hands fidgeting. It was obviously he was only barely able to contain his excitement.

Perry slowly rose from his seat and began looking at a shelf full of CDs. "I think so. *Why*?" he emphasized the word. That kid was going to have to share some of the back story, or Perry was going to hold the CD just out of Jimmy's reach when he found it.

"Three people have talked to me about remembering the procedure in the last few days. Two of them remembered when they heard that song." Jimmy stood, looking over Perry's shoulder

at the CDs.

“And you think the song did it?” Perry raised one eyebrow.
“It’s what they all have in common,” he explained.

A knock at the door drew their attention, and a messenger handed an envelope to Jimmy. Perry went back to looking through the CDs while Jimmy tore open the envelope and shuffled through the contents.

“Chief, take a look at these.” Jimmy sounded both astonished and triumphant. “The sketch artist sent over the faces everyone described.”

Perry took the stack of pictures and flipped through all of the similarly drawn faces of a familiar person. “Great shades of Elvis! That’s Hightower!”

“I gotta see if that song was playing for the third person. I’ll call her if you’ll get it set up.”

Perry squatted to get a better view of the lower shelf before coming up with the disc. “*Miss Otis Regrets*. Right here,” he said. As Perry turned on the small stereo and inserted the CD, Jimmy picked up the conference phone and dialed a number. Excitement bubbled inside him. It had been a long time since Perry had been part of an investigation.

“Hello?” said the voice on the phone.

“Alexia?” Jimmy asked.

“Yes?” A muffled noise could be heard in the background.

“This is Jimmy Olsen. I found that song. Do you have a minute to listen to it?”

“Sure. Let me turn this off.” A click followed by relative silence was heard.

Jimmy nodded to Perry, who pushed the button to start the song.

The strains of the song filled the room, trumpets building tension, followed by the smooth voice of Nat King Cole as he began to croon.

Miss Otis Regrets

She’s unable to lunch today.

Jimmy eyed Perry with a look that was hopeful and nervous. It had been years since Perry had even listened to this song. It wasn’t one that was easily recognizable.

Madam,

Miss Otis Regrets

She’s unable to lunch today.

She is sorry to be delayed,

But last evening down at lover’s lane she strayed.

Madam,

Miss Otis Regrets

She’s unable to lunch today.

When the trumpets flared up again, Alexia shouted, “That’s it!”

Jimmy clapped his hands together in victory. “I knew it! Thanks, Alexia, I’ll get back to you soon.” Jimmy ended the call.

“Wanna fill me in, Jimmy?” Perry asked while Jimmy celebrated this information with several hand gestures Perry didn’t recognize.

“Yeah, sorry, Chief.” Jimmy composed himself, switching from excited kid to hard-working reporter. “Okay so yesterday when I interviewed David Mayfield, he remembered the procedure, but no one knew why. This morning I got a call from Ronald Simmons to meet earlier than expected, and his wife told me about the song she was singing when he remembered. I was going over my notes just now and got a call from Hal Hubert whose wife suddenly remembered. He, too, was singing, and it was the same song Simmons heard. So, I thought if it were also the same song Mayfield heard, we just have to figure out where it came—” Jimmy stopped abruptly and shook his head.

In the silence, Perry heard the next song on the CD begin.

You’ll never miss the water

Till your well runs dry

Till your well runs dry

You’ll never miss Joe Turner till he says goodbye

“Jimmy?” Perry waved his hand in front of Jimmy’s face when he received no response. A frown crossed Jimmy’s face that deepened the longer he was trapped in this trance. He stumbled, and Perry moved to help him sit down, though Jimmy still seemed unaware of him.

Perry watched as various emotions transformed Jimmy’s face. It seemed to pass just as quickly as it started. And though it seemed to last a long time, it was merely a few minutes before Jimmy looked up at him. Perry had never seen his eyes so wide or his face so pale.

“Chief... Oh my God...”

Chapter 23

Darling tell me do you love me

For what I am

Or for what I

May someday be

Or do you love me

Really love me

Because you love me

After letting his boss at the Tribune know that he needed a few days off for an emergency, Clark and Scott stopped at the mall to purchase all the Nat King Cole music they could find as well as a portable CD player. They then headed to the airport to fly to Metropolis. Scott assured him that listening to the songs would eventually release more memories.

They sat with an empty seat between them on the plane as it carried only half the number of passengers it could hold. Clark preferred it that way. Flying just wasn’t his style, and he’d have been even more anxious if the plane had been packed with people bumping into each other, bouncing and swaying with every jolt of the plane. At least on an empty plane he could close his eyes when it became too much and pretend something else was causing the movement.

Blue gardenia

Now I’m alone with you

And I am, oh, so blue

She has tossed us aside

After hours of listening, it just didn’t seem like anything was going to happen. And that made Clark wonder if his decision to give Scott the benefit of the doubt had been a bit impetuous. Here he was on a plane to Metropolis, on his way to the house of someone who wanted him dead to help someone who didn’t want him there. He *must* be mad.

Another jerk from the turbulence brought his attention back to the plane. He glanced at Scott to find him dozing with his head leaning against the window. Clark chose the aisle so that he could straighten his legs when he needed, another aspect that was made possible by the small number of passengers and one that also helped him maintain his calm. He closed his eyes and tried to relax.

That’s my girl

Take a look at her, she belongs to me

Yes, that’s my girl

Hands off, don’t touch

While he listened, he considered the wallet and photos with his own handwriting on them. They were compelling pieces of evidence that Scott was being truthful. And his conscience would feel some relief by making up for what he’d done in the past. In addition, he couldn’t ignore that there was nothing friendly in the way that man had taken Lois, and she likely needed help from someone. He’d always been the type of person to help in any way he could.

“Excuse me, sir,” said a polite but annoyed voice.

Clark opened his eyes to see the flight attendant making his

way down the aisle. The flight attendant nodded his head in the direction of Clark's foot blocking the walkway.

"Sorry," he said, quickly pulling the offending foot back and tucking it under the seat in front of him.

Clark took the opportunity to replace the CD that had just ended with the next before repositioning himself. He attempted to shift into a more comfortable position, but only a child could find such small seats anything but cramped.

Brush those tears from your eyes

As the next song started, he glanced around the cabin of the plane, taking into account the other passengers but quickly realized that was a mistake as he began to feel dizzy and sick to his stomach. The passengers on the plane became blurry, forcing Clark to close his eyes. He took a few deep breaths before everything before him morphed into something he'd never seen before.

And try to realize

That the ache in my heart is for you
###

May 21, 1995

He was standing next to her, leaning over her, filled with fear. Lois felt warm to his touch, but there was no movement... anywhere. She had to be okay, he couldn't let anything happen to her. He never should have agreed to this.

He grasped her hand as he demanded, "Live." He shifted a little and gently placed his hand under her neck. Without thinking, he leaned forward to put his mouth over hers. He breathed gently in and backed away from her, searching for some sign she was going to be alright.

Still nothing.

"Come on, Lois," he said gently, pleading. "Come back to me." In his peripheral vision, he saw the world crashing in slow motion into tiny pieces around him, fear of having to continue life without her consuming him. "Fight, Lois! Come on, fight." His voice wavered between demanding and desperate. How could he lose her? She was everything to him.

He leaned forward and breathed into her again, tenderly, worrying he would never again feel her return his kiss. How had he ever let her convince him this was a good idea? "Don't you die on me, Lois." He had to stay strong, had to will her out of this. She had to wake up. "Now come on, don't give up." He couldn't give up either. She would come out of this. "Come on, breathe Lois! Breathe!"

Still she didn't move.

His breath caught as his head sagged. He was at a loss for what to do next. A future that didn't include her flitted across his eyes, and he felt a sharp sense of loss. He needed her. More than he'd ever needed anything in his life. He would give his life for her... just like she had done for him.

Her chest suddenly rose with the effort to draw in that first breath, and his head came up quickly as she coughed through those first glorious breaths. "Okay, okay," he kept repeating, feeling that sense of loss melt away. The greatest hope he'd ever felt took its place, filling him completely.

He reached around to help her sit up, but instead found himself cradling her in his arms. He spoke soothingly, reassuringly, relieved, "Yeah that's it. Okay." He held her close, unable to look away from her beloved face, knowing he was forever hers.

"I heard you calling," she breathed out, opening her eyes to look into his. "I heard you calling," she repeated more strongly. Never in his whole life had any sound ever meant so much to him.
###

Clark leaned forward and waited for the fog to clear. "Whoa," he said under his breath, shaking his head gently. Some of what Lana had heard him say was in this... dream? Memory?

He saved her, brought her back from the clutches of death. He

belonged to her, he would do everything in his power to prevent her from ever feeling any pain of any kind. He would give his life for her. And she had done the same?

Was this another dream? Or had he loved her? Why didn't he know? Why couldn't he remember?

"Scott?" he said as he reached to nudge his unlikely ally.

Scott's eyes opened, and he looked from the window to Clark. "Are we about to land?" he asked in a groggy voice.

"I have no idea." Clark looked passed him to the window.

Scott rubbed his hand over his face and stretched as much as a person could on an airplane. When he realized Clark was still looking at him, his eyebrows rose as he said, "What is it?"

"When did Lois almost die?" Clark asked bluntly.

Scott frowned and shook his head slightly. "I don't know. Did you remember something?"

"I don't know. It seemed more like a dream, like the first one." Clark sat back in his seat, making use of the headrest. He frowned as he ran through the scene again. "She was lying somewhere and... not breathing. I thought she was dead, but I talked to her, helped her, told her to come back to me... and she did."

"Was anyone else there?" Scott sat forward, curiosity on his face. "Did you see anything else?"

"No... I don't know." Clark hadn't noticed any of the surroundings, just Lois, in his arms. Closing his eyes, he strained to bring the rest of the room into focus, but it wouldn't show itself. "I only saw Lois."

"Well, it's a start." Scott shrugged. "Keep listening. Once we reach Metropolis, we'll talk about what we'll do then. That'll give me more time to think about it."

Clark nodded and put the headphones back over his ears, skeptical still, but less so than before. It could have been a dream. But the feelings felt so real, so... authentic. He was aware of her figure in his arms, could tell how light she was, could feel the warmth of her against him.

There goes my heart, there goes the one I love

There goes the girl I wasn't worthy of

There goes my happiness, it couldn't be

There goes somebody else in place of me

Clark closed his eyes and forced himself to focus on the scene. Rubbing his thumb and index finger together, he realized he could still feel her face from when he'd put his hand on her chin. He could still feel her smooth skin. Her soft hair. Her delicate fingers. How was that possible?

He shook himself. No, it wasn't possible. Clark ruined her life, and Lois Lane wanted nothing to do with him.

Stretching her arms above her head, Lois rolled to her side toward the bright sun filtering in through the curtains covering the west facing windows. Her headache seemed to have disappeared, and she no longer found the sunlight to be so uncomfortably bright. Thankfully, the winter sun set early and while the day had been a long one, it still wasn't over.

Yawning as she sat up, she wondered what they would be having for dinner this evening and whether Scott would be here in time to eat with them. The anniversary party a few days ago had ended with Lex and Lois traveling to this wonderfully secluded home where they had spent the past few days relaxing together. But Lois was looking forward to returning to work soon, eager to get started on her next story.

A chilly afternoon breeze swept in through the curiously open window and with it voices. Lois rose from the bed and walked to the open window, looking out at the balcony. Not seeing anyone there, Lois opened the door to let herself out onto it. Another breeze blew past and Lois shivered, wondering once again why the window had been left open and grabbed the blanket draped over the chair near the door.

She walked to the railing and peered over the edge to see an

unfamiliar woman with a coffee cup in her hand, sitting in the patio chair at the table across from Lex. The brown-haired woman suddenly sat forward and leaned closer to Lex, causing a narrowing of Lois's eyes. Lois could see her lips moving as she spoke but couldn't hear any words. Lex nodded to whatever she'd said.

They both leaned back in their chairs, and Lex looked up. A smile stretched across his face as his eyes landed on her, and the jealousy she felt moments before cooled.

"Lois, Darling! I'm glad to see you up!" Lex called as he stood up and motioned to her. "Won't you come down and meet our guest? I was hoping to introduce you before she needed to leave."

"I'll be down in a minute," she said, nodding feebly, unsure whether she wanted to meet this mysterious guest, yet compelled to find out who she was as quickly as possible.

Lois returned to the bedroom in search of shoes and a sweater all the while wondering who this woman could possibly be. She found her shoes tucked slightly under the bench at the end of the bed but was unable to put one of them on. Reaching in, she found a napkin shoved into the toe of the shoe. If it hadn't been so neatly folded, she might have missed the writing on the inside. She didn't recall having written on a napkin or putting it in her shoe, but instead of discarding it, she tucked it into her back pocket to look at later.

Once her shoes were on, she quickly descended the grand spiral staircase at the front of the house all the way to the basement floor. As she stepped from the last stair, she faced the French doors of the family room that opened to the patio, but it was the voices drifting from the hall to the left that drew her attention. She paused momentarily and when she realized it was her husband's voice she'd heard, along with that woman's, she quietly stepped toward the sound, listening in.

"You're sure he's coming tonight?" the mystery woman asked. Was it Scott they were talking about?

"Absolutely," Lex answered. "I already spoke with Scott about it. They'll arrive before the day is over." So, they were talking about Scott. She smiled and began to turn back toward the French doors.

"And what if *he* doesn't come?" Lois stopped as she frowned at the way this woman sneered the word 'he.' How could anyone think Scott was anything other than the nicest guy? He was a great friend, supportive, helpful, dependable. He made her job at LNN better by simply being her cameraman.

"That's incredibly unlikely because the fool has never been able to stay away from Lois. Not until I did something about it." Lois's mind raced. Lex and Scott were good friends. So, who were they talking about? Was someone coming with Scott? "But after the last few days, it's clear that he has come back to cause trouble."

"Well, I for one look forward to the end of this," the mystery woman added. "That infiltrating miscreant shouldn't be allowed to roam freely. He's a danger to everyone."

Lois searched her memory for someone who couldn't stay away from her, someone who would want to cause trouble, but other than the various criminals she'd exposed over the years, nothing stood out.

"True. And no longer will you have to fear. After tonight, he'll be a distant memory." Lois's eyes went wide as she caught the meaning of what Lex was saying.

The scraping of chairs brought Lois quickly out of her thoughts, and she quickly retreated to the family room. She calmed her breathing and opened the French doors to the patio before Lex and their guest reached them.

As they came in, she pasted a smile on her face and took Lex's outstretched hand, leaning forward to receive the kiss he planted on her cheek. "Lex, who is our guest?" she asked, nodding to the

woman in question.

"This is Dr. Florence Montgomery, a colleague of mine," Lex introduced her. "Flo, my wife, Lois."

"Nice to meet you," Lois said, nodding to the woman without releasing her hold on Lex. "What brings you out this way?"

"She was just dropping off some equipment for me," Lex answered for her.

"Yes, well, I need to be going now." She ducked her head and began quickly ascending the steps to the main floor.

"I must apologize for her behavior," Lex began, a frown on his face as he watched Flo leave. "She is quite awkward and her... companion, Lowell, wasn't able to come with her today." He shook his head and sighed before turning to face Lois, enfolding her in his arms. "Are you feeling better?" he asked, his eyes exploring hers, his voice sensuous.

"Much." She smiled, but it faltered as she recalled the words she'd heard moments earlier.

"What is it, Darling?" Lex asked, his frown matching hers.

"I overheard you talking about someone coming tonight," she admitted. "With Scott?" She searched his eyes.

Lex took a deep breath before beginning. "Yes, I was planning on telling you soon." He released her from his embrace and led her to sit on the plush couch. Lois could tell by his behavior, and the conversation she'd overheard that something unpleasant was afoot. "I was hoping to shield you from all of this, but it seems I have no choice now." He took both of her hands in his and sighed.

"What's going on, Lex?" His tone was unnerving her, and she couldn't keep it from letting it show.

"We came to the chateau so quickly after the party because I received some distressing news about a person who has been attempting to take you from me." Lex squeezed her hands. "He planned to come to our house that evening, and so we came here instead."

Lois's eyes went wide. His insistence that they take a vacation seemed impulsive at the time, but he'd played it off as wanting some time alone with her. Now it made sense. They hadn't even packed anything, leaving the party and coming straight here.

"He has found out where we are again." A small gasp escaped Lois, but he continued, his eyes locked on hers, "I am through running from him. Tonight, I will stand up to him. He will not bother us again."

Lois's heart leapt at his protectiveness, but the memory of his comments to Dr. Montgomery and her own concern for what he would do brought her back to reality. "Who is it?" she asked, needing to know the identity of this person who wanted to ruin her happiness.

"Clark Kent."

Part 4 – "...but in rising every time we fall." – Confucius

Chapter 24

Clark wasn't sure if the warm front hadn't made it this far east or if it was the increase in latitude that accounted for the cooler temperatures, but the weather changed quickly as he and Scott made their way from the airport to a small diner in the small town near the chateau a few hours north of Metropolis. Cirrus clouds obscured the sky when they landed in Metropolis just before dinner, but now the clouds had thickened and the temperature had dropped significantly since then. Perhaps a cold front was approaching. Clark tried not to let the ominous weather bring him down.

Clark had "remembered" another fragment during the long car ride. Scott was able to confirm that the story about the Messenger and Dr. Platt had gone differently than he'd known for the past two years – no, two months. And while it was nice to have realized the main thing that had been plaguing him this whole time wasn't real, his guilt was still there and was further fueled knowing that

somehow, he'd been tricked into this whole mess.

Now they sat, quietly eating a meal before heading to the chateau. Clark was still wearing his headphones. Scott had suggested they wait until the middle of the night since Lex was expecting them to arrive before the end of the day. Scott was familiar with the layout of the house, including the countless secret passages, but having the element of surprise, however small, would help. And they needed all the help they could get.

*And now the purple dusk of twilight time
Steals across the meadows of my heart
High up in the sky the little stars climb
Always reminding me that we're apart*

At first, Clark didn't mind listening to the Nat King Cole songs. They were catchy, feel good songs. Even the depressing songs made you feel good inside. Now, they were starting to run together, and he couldn't remember whether or not he'd heard them before.

Clark shoveled another spoonful of the cheese soup he ordered into his mouth. He wasn't even hungry, but Scott insisted they get some nourishment. Scott was also still insisting that Clark was Superman, but that his powers had somehow been disabled. It was too difficult to keep from rolling his eyes during that part of the conversation. But the soup was good, and their wait was almost over. Shortly, they would make their way to the house where Lois was held captive.

He picked up another spoonful of soup but was stopped by the beginning of the next song.

A blossom fell from off a tree

This time when his vision began to cloud and his stomach began to turn, he recognized what was happening.

It settled softly on the lips you turned to me

Each experience had been the same, and now he relished the idea that he might understand more, even if it was only a smidgeon of the truth. Thankful to be sitting, Clark dropped his spoon back into the bowl and leaned his head onto his tented hands.

###

May 26, 1995

Clark heard a delighted breath escape Lois as they peeked through the mist. Up here, they were surrounded only by the stars in the sky and the clouds beneath them. He watched her as she looked around, her eyes wide and her mouth slightly open, taking it all in. She held tightly to him, one arm around his chest, the other over his shoulder, and he relished the feel of her. Another breath and he realized something. "You cold?" he asked.

She looked up to his face. "A little," she said, her eyes dancing.

"Here." He reached behind him with his free arm to grab at the edge of his cape and draped it around her; then he did the same with his other arm. Now, she was neatly cocooned, pressed closely against him.

She looked up at the stars in awe. He was sure she'd never seen that many before, and he felt honored to be the one to share this experience with her. "It's so beautiful," she breathed.

"I used to come up here a lot by myself," he explained, "and just... drift. Not part of the stars, not part of the earth, not really knowing where I fit in." He met her eyes then, their faces inches apart. "Until I met you."

"Oh, Clark," she said, moved by what he'd said.

"Lois," he cut in before she could say another word, "I'll wait for you." And he knew he would. Forever if he had to. He looked intently into her eyes, wanting her to see the honesty in his words. "I'll wait for you as long as you need."

Not once did she look away, and it meant the world to him for her to look at him as if he, Clark, was the only one that mattered.

"I want you to know I love you," she said, making his heart flip in his chest. "And you're not alone anymore."

He moved slowly, closing in on her lips as his eyes flicked to hers. His body tingled at the freedom he now felt to express himself to her, knowing he could share all of himself without hiding. He saw the relief, desire, love that he felt mirrored in them. She moved forward to meet him, and when their lips finally touched, he knew he would not have to wait as long as he originally thought.

###

He raised his head and stretched his hands out in front of him before bringing them back to rest on the top of his head with his fingers interlocked.

"Clark?" he heard Scott say.

Clark nodded and said, "Give me a minute." He was having a hard time believing what he was imagining... Remembering? He could feel her in his arms, pressed up against him. She said she loved him. Moreover, they seemed to be in the clouds. And was he wearing a cape?

"Well," he started, "That one makes your claim that I'm—" he looked around and mouthed the word *Superman*, "—seem more... possible."

"That's great!" Scott's barely contained excitement made his voice a little loud, but when Clark looked around the diner, no one else seemed to notice.

"I think I was flying," he explained, "with Lois." Clark would be glad when this was all over, and he could stop feeling a tad crazy. "You sure you have no idea how to restore *my powers*?" Clark asked making air-quotes with his fingers, still unable to take it too seriously. Even if he was Superman, it wouldn't help them much if he didn't have any powers.

"No," he said, "but I wish I did." Scott paused to take a sip of his drink. "You know, it's okay if you don't want to do this. I can rustle up some guys who can help me get her out of there instead."

"If it's me he wants," Clark said solemnly, "it's me he'll get." He didn't really understand why he felt like this was something he *had* to do. Originally, he chalked it up to having nothing to lose, but after considering the few *memories* he'd had, he was beginning to believe there was something else pulling him there.

Scott simply nodded. "Don't worry, once we get Lois out of that house, I'm sure she'll be able to figure it out."

"What makes you say that?" Clark asked in disbelief.

"Because even though I only really knew her for a couple of months, I know she is probably the most brilliant investigative reporter on the planet..." His words faded, and his face fell slightly. "Well, when she is aware there is a problem," he finished.

Clark huffed.

"Sorry we didn't have enough time to get you through all the songs."

"Sorry my brain was so hard to wipe."

Scott laughed at that one, but then his face turned serious. "Look, Hightower doesn't know we're on to his keys. If Lex had him reset Lois, the same key might work."

"So, I have to *sing* to her if she doesn't remember anything?" Scott had no idea what he was asking of Clark, no way of knowing just how bad of an idea that was.

"Yeah, it was *Paper Moon* that worked the first—"

"Do I have to *sing* it?" Clark interrupted, thrusting his hand forward, with a look directed at Scott that he hoped got across just how necessary it was for him to *not* sing.

Scott stared at him with raised eyebrows for a moment before answering with a teasing smile. "I don't know, really. You could try just saying the words and see if that works." He shrugged, and Clark tried to ignore the grin that the other man wasn't hiding as well as he would have liked.

"Can we go now?" Clark asked when Scott was no longer able to suppress his chuckling. With a quick shove backward, Clark stood up and made his way toward the door, thankful that Scott would be waiting outside while he went in to find Lois.

January 24, 1996

Clark Kent was just a blip in her past, someone who came in from nowhere, made a horrible mistake, and then left as quickly as he'd arrived, leaving her career in ruins. Luckily, Lex had been present during the aftermath and helped Lois secure her new job at LNN. Now, she only remembered her anger at his inexperience and what it had cost her but hardly anything else about him.

Everything had seemed so fine and perfect. Why was this happening now? Of course, according to Lex, it wasn't just happening now. She was merely unaware of the situation because he had kept it hidden from her, preferring to take care of it himself instead of giving her cause to worry. Lex painted Clark as an obsessed stalker purposely attempting to make her life more difficult. Apparently, Clark had been following Lois for years, and Lex had thwarted many of his attempts to do something to her.

She was conflicted. On the one hand, it was nice to have a knight in shining armor to swoop in and take care of you. Lex's sincerity and protectiveness were endearing, and she was glad she had someone like him on her side. On the other hand, Lois was perfectly capable of fighting her own battles. How had Lex been able to keep this from her for so long? She didn't understand any of this, and it made her angry.

When he finally confessed what he had heard, she couldn't believe it. Somehow, Clark believed she was in danger and had tried to rescue her multiple times. When Lois asked why Lex didn't call the police, he explained that he did, but they weren't able to do anything without evidence of a threat. Lex felt his only choice was to do something himself and do what was necessary to steer Clark in the right direction.

Lex was adamant that her help in the matter was necessary. By playing along with the charade, she would be able to convince Clark to follow her so that Lex could confront him and end this behavior. He was unsure what time Clark would come for her, but he was certain it would be tonight. After Lex told her that Clark only wanted to take her from him, that she would be perfectly safe, some of her nerves calmed down. She was not terribly worried; being in danger was something she was somewhat used to. And Lois trusted his plan.

Lex had left her alone in the guest suite in the basement of the house after taking her wedding rings for safe keeping. This is where Lex would "keep" her until Clark arrived to "free" her. It was more like a small apartment than a suite, complete with a kitchenette. The lack of windows made it difficult to keep track of time, and the waiting became excruciatingly boring. Not that being anywhere else in the house would help – it was the middle of the night after all.

As soon as she was alone, she made herself comfortable, adjusting the lighting and tossing her shoes aside. The thunk of her shoes on the floor reminded her that she still had the napkin she'd found in one of them earlier that day in her back pocket. She retrieved it and carefully unfolded the note.

She sat down on the edge of the bed to read it. It was a note to Lois... from Lois. But the message didn't make any sense.

Lois,

It is only a paper moon, hanging over a cardboard scene. It's a lot of make-believe, even if you can't believe me. Nat King Cole can help you figure it out.

Lois

The short missive was written in her familiar yet haphazard handwriting that she used when she realized something or discovered something for a story and was in a hurry to write it down. But this cryptic message was unusual, and she had no memory of writing it let alone sticking it in her shoe. Had she been worried someone might find it? Shaking her head at it, she folded the napkin and deposited it back in her pocket as she went about the room looking for something to keep her busy.

Having been "locked in" for only thirty minutes or so, she'd already passed the time alphabetizing the books on the small bookshelf, reorganizing the dishes in the kitchenette, and playing a few games of solitaire with a deck of cards. There was still a large desk in the sitting area she could clean out and organize. Maybe one of the floor-to-ceiling cabinets along the far wall housed a television, and she could watch something.

Choosing to investigate the cabinets, she first opened all the doors to see what was inside. Most of the doors revealed nothing, but there was a very small television connected to a VCR in one and a small AM/FM radio in another. The radio was unable to receive any signals in the basement, and the only video tape Lois found was titled 'Very Silly Kid Songs,' and so silence remained.

Lois then looked in all the drawers. Linens and old decorations filled a few of the drawers but most remained empty. Curious, Lois continued to look through every other piece of furniture that might house something. Many of the drawers and cabinets she looked in were empty, but a few held more linens, and one held several old magazines.

A weary sigh escaped her as she grabbed a few copies of *Inside Metropolis* in hopes that reading could help the time pass more quickly. Propping her legs up over the armrest of the chair she chose in the sitting area, she began flipping through the old magazine dated November 1993. The first few articles were about some of the lesser known local businesses downtown, displaying the services they offered and discussing what made them unique.

Flipping to the next page, Lois felt the blood drain from her face and a queasiness settle in her stomach as an odd sense of foreboding wrapped itself around her. There, staring at her from the middle of the two-page spread was a picture of her and Clark Kent. The Daily Planet sign from the wall of the newsroom served as the background. Lois sat with her legs crossed in a chair just in front of Clark who was perched on a desk. Lois had her arm propped on his knee, and they smiled at the camera, her smile nonsense and his charm.

"Inside with Lane and Kent: The Hottest Team in Town," she read the headline out loud. She skimmed the article that was actually three pages. It detailed how long they'd been working together, highlighted some of their stories, and included the script of a short interview. It was too weird. "What kind of sick joke is this?"

The words of the missive materialized in her thoughts at just that moment. *It's a lot of make believe.* Something wasn't right, but what?

She was about to read through the article more carefully when she heard something in the hall. Quickly tearing the pages out and shoving them in her pocket, then stuffing the magazine under the seat cushion, she stood and looked toward the door.

Chapter 25

He didn't see the upturned corner of the rug. How could he? It was almost pitch black in this hallway, the only light coming from under the door to the room where Lois was held captive. None of the passages he'd gone through were well lit. Some even had dirt or stone floors. How he'd made it this far without stumbling was a mystery.

Clark paused for a moment, to ensure he'd regained his balance before taking the few remaining steps to the door. He pressed his ear to it but only heard his own heartbeat pulsing through his head. Quickly reviewing the plan Scott had concocted, he prepared himself to enter the room.

Taking a deep breath, he tried the door knob and wasn't surprised when it opened without effort. After all, it was a trap. But he couldn't have anticipated what awaited him.

She was standing at the other end of the room, arms straight and held out a few inches from her body, as though she'd stood up quickly. Most likely a result of so much noise in the hall. She was

dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt, her short hair barely tucked behind her ears. Her face was pale with her mouth slightly open, and the look in her eyes was a jumble of emotions. Realizing they were alone, he quietly entered the room and shut the door behind him, pressing himself flat against it with his eyes closed.

He'd done it. He'd found Lois, whether or not she wanted him to. But standing here in the same room with her, even with his eyes closed, he became conscious of this indescribable draw to her. Something familiar, like it had always been there. None of this fit with what he knew, but it did fit with those dreams. Were they memories? Had he asked this woman to marry him? Had she professed her love?

He took a deep breath, opened his eyes, and pushed off the door, taking a step further into the room only to find her eyes locked on his and a frown gently creasing her forehead. The jumble of emotions he witnessed moments ago had settled into confusion; clearly, she wasn't expecting him. He felt her eyes drilling into him, searching. What was she looking for? Was she finding it?

"Clark?" she said his name with a hint of disbelief then stepped toward him, slowly at first, then quickly. "Clark!" she said again this time with relief. But it didn't quite reach her eyes, and he could see her trying to force the uncertainty away. What had happened to make her feel this way?

"Lois," he said as he carefully put his arms around her, his hesitancy a result of the combination of guilt he still carried and his own uncertainty of the entire situation. Hoping she didn't notice his awkwardness, he held her at arm's length and asked, "Are you alright?" She locked her eyes on his, and he could see that she was unsure about something.

"I'm fine," she said, placing her hands on his chest. She opened her mouth to speak, but the words seemed to get stuck. There were questions in her eyes, and her hands burned holes where they rested on his chest. Did she feel it, too? This pull between them? "I didn't know if you'd come," she finally said. "Lex... he said he would stop you."

He could hardly concentrate on anything else as he stared into her eyes. How was it possible that he would have ever done anything to hurt her, to ruin her life? How had he been able to walk away from her, let alone stay away? And in this moment standing here, feeling every point of contact between them, he was sure that those memories were that – memories. He'd spent the past two years trying unsuccessfully to forget her.

Unforgettable. How appropriate.

She looked away first, toward the door and he mentally shook himself, remembering what he was here to do. "It's all right, I'll get you out of here."

She nodded, and he turned them toward the door. He had been so nervous moments ago, but now having seen her and held her in his arms, he no longer worried. Taking her hand, he led her out of the room and down the hall. Years of guilt and shame fought to keep their hold on him, but he easily forced them back when he glanced at their hands.

He stopped at the end of the hall before opening the door and looked at her hand once more, studying her slender fingers wrapped around his. Even if he never remembered anything else, he knew he would never be able to live without her. How he wished he could clearly see her face, but the lighting was only barely enough to know she was there.

Without turning, he reached to open the door but found it locked.

"What's the matter?" she whispered, and the sound of it in this dangerously intimate proximity did things to him that he wasn't sure it should have.

"It's locked."

"I know another way," she said, giving his hand a squeeze as she pulled him in another direction.

He followed her. He'd follow her anywhere.

She began their meeting feeling startled, but there was nothing awkward or uncomfortable about it. Moments after seeing the article, he had entered and leaned against the door, breathing heavily. There was nothing sinister about him. Instead he seemed anxious and just as shocked as she. His face was tense but determined. She stared at him as he stood there with his eyes closed and was filled with the impression that he was so... magnetic, trustworthy.

When he opened his eyes, they collided with hers. It knocked the wind out of her and froze her in place. His eyes were warm instead of cruel, kind instead of callous. She found it impossible to accept this man as the tormentor Lex had described.

"Clark?" she breathed. The name was familiar on her tongue, but with effort, she ignored these misgivings and followed the plan.

"Clark!" she said, going to him, intent on allowing him to rescue her.

"Lois," he said, caution in his voice as he gently embraced her and then awkwardly held her away. "Are you alright?" he asked as she looked into his eyes.

"I'm fine," she said before she began drowning in the deep pools of his eyes. But she made a mistake when she placed her hands on his chest. Her hands burned from the touch. She looked up to see desire in his eyes. It had required even more effort to push out the next words. "I didn't know if you'd come. Lex... he said he would stop you."

It was true, she hadn't known he would come. But standing there in his arms did things to her that were inappropriate for a married woman to be feeling. She felt ashamed and looked away.

"It's all right," he said, "I'll get you out of here."

Once separated, she was able to think more clearly than before. This man was calculating and deceitful, out for his own gain, and she would have to remember that, no matter how she physically responded to him. He was just some handsome, delusional man who needed to be set straight. She and Lex would talk to him and make him see reason. Then she could go back to the life she'd been living.

And then Clark took her hand to lead her out, which was just as big of a mistake, and she swallowed hard. What was wrong with her?

She followed him from the room and down the hall, but just as she knew it would be, the door was locked. She swallowed and began the charade again. "What's the matter?" she whispered into the silence.

"It's locked." His deep, husky voice so close in the darkness was intimate and caught her off-guard.

She swallowed again and pushed her apprehension aside. "I know another way," she said. She gave his hand a squeeze and easily led him in the wrong direction.

Winding through the dark passages, Lois had to focus on trying to remember each turn, but all she could think about was what had just happened when Clark finally arrived. She'd expected meeting him again to be awkward, uncomfortable. Interacting with the person said to be stalking you and playing along could only be awkward and uncomfortable. But that wasn't what she saw in him. How would she ever forget the tingling sensation his touch left behind?

They had nearly reached their destination, and she felt the need to redirect her thoughts. Maybe that was the real danger of this man: he was entrancing her. *Stalker*, she reminded herself. *He wants to ruin your life and take you away from Lex. He has been trying to ruin your life for years, and if Lex hadn't done his utmost to keep it from happening, to protect you, where would you be now?*

"Where are we going?" he whispered, interrupting her

thoughts from a closer distance behind her than she'd expected.

She caught a glimpse of the steps that led to their intended destination. Figuring that it didn't really matter what she told him, she opted for the truth and answered, "This leads to a house at the bottom of the bluff."

"How far is that from the end of the street your house is on?" he asked as she reached the steps and began her ascent.

The question struck her as strange at first, but she quickly justified it when she reasoned that he probably had some plan in mind for their departure. "It's just a block or so away."

"Good. That is where Scott is. We won't have to walk much farther."

"Scott?" She stopped abruptly and spun around to face him, almost losing her balance. "What have you done to Scott?" she spat, forgetting her role.

He pulled back from her with a deep frown etched on his face. She assumed he would know that she was merely playing along. Had he believed her this whole time? Before he had the chance to respond, she turned and was about to begin skipping steps when his words stopped her.

"Unforgettable," Clark said.

"What?" she said breathlessly. She didn't have time to stop the word from escaping her, so shocking was what she heard. She paused on the step. Had she heard him correctly? Had he chosen that word on purpose? Or was it merely a coincidence? *It's a lot of make believe.* The words came unbidden to her mind, and she stood rooted to the spot.

"That's what you are," he finished the first line of the familiar song.

"Nat King Cole," she said under her breath. She turned to look at him over her shoulder and met his eyes, still frowning. *Nat King Cole can help you figure it out.* She opened her mouth to ask why he'd chosen to use those words as light flooded the stairway.

Chapter 26

Papa loves mambo,

Mama loves mambo,

Havin' their fling again, younger than Spring again

Feelin' that zing again, wow!

Jimmy danced with the music but stopped abruptly when he saw Perry glaring at him from behind his desk.

"Let's face it, Jimmy." Perry sounded defeated. "This just isn't going to work. This isn't even his song."

"No, Chief, I don't think it has to be Nat King Cole's song. 'Joe Turner Blues' wasn't by him either. We just have to find the right song."

Just a few hours ago, Jimmy had only been following a story about patients who had recalled their memories after listening to a particular Nat King Cole song, only to find that he himself – and everyone else in the world, it seemed – were part of this story that was growing exponentially with each new piece of information found.

They'd been listening to Nat King Cole for hours now, any song they could find. Jimmy insisted on keeping the music playing, believing that eventually Perry would recover his own memories. Perry was being a good sport, but Jimmy had to admit that only the return of his own memories would convince him that the impressions of the generous, philanthropic, upstanding nature that he'd associated with Lex Luthor were very, very wrong.

Over the past few hours, memories continued to surface for himself and as they did, Jimmy became more and more aware of the predicament they were in. As a result, he had begged mercilessly, and now Inspector William Henderson was on his way. He didn't understand what had happened, let alone how, but if even a smidgeon of what he remembered about Mr. Luthor was true, he at least understood *why*. And that would mean that Lois and Clark, neither of which he'd seen in months, were in serious

trouble.

"Jimmy," Perry spoke, leveling a stern look at him, "There is no way the hard-hitting Editor-in-Chief of the best newspaper in the country has *forgotten* the past two years *and* been duped into believing something else. How could that be true for the rest of the country either?"

If I give my heart to you

Will you handle it with care?

Will you always treat me tenderly?

"I don't know." Jimmy wasn't deterred, but he was interrupted by Inspector Henderson

Dressed in the most casual clothing Jimmy had seen him in and with disheveled hair, the inspector didn't bother to knock before entering Perry's office. "What's this about?" he practically yelled at them. "And how could it possibly be so important that it couldn't wait the few hours until morning?"

"Inspector," Jimmy began, "Lois is in trouble!"

Henderson only raised his eyebrows. "I'm going to need a bit more to go on, Jimmy," he said, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Right." Jimmy took a deep breath, collecting his thoughts before beginning. "Lex Luthor has done something to her, to everyone really, but no one knows. I'm sure he hasn't hurt her, but we've got to get to her and undo it." Jimmy shook his head. That had sounded better in his head, but the look on Inspector Henderson's face left no question about how useless it really was.

"He's tellin' the truth."

Jimmy and Inspector Henderson turned at the same time to face Perry who was still seated in the chair at his desk. His hands were flattened on the desktop and that determined look that Perry got when he knew his reporters were on to something big was spreading across his face.

Jimmy smiled. "You remembered?"

"Only bits." Perry stood and walked around the table to face Henderson. "But I can definitely tell you it's a *big* mess that won't be easy to fix."

"You can't be serious." Henderson crossed his arms over his chest and glared at Perry. "Lane's been married to Luthor for two years—"

"No, she hasn't," Jimmy cut in. "I think everything changed when Superman left."

"He's right," Perry agreed. "That monster has taken Lois, and he's got everything outta whack."

"What's he done?" Henderson asked, leaning against Perry's desk and crossing his feet at the ankles.

"I'm not sure, but everything I thought was true is a bunch of phooey. Up until Superman left, Lois worked here with Clark Kent. She never married Luthor. Instead, we, the three of us and Clark, proved he was behind the destruction of the Daily Planet."

"Who's this Kent?" Henderson shook his head briefly, his brows drawing into a deep frown. "Did you say Luthor destroyed the Daily Planet?"

"I know it's hard to believe and even I didn't until just a few minutes ago. You'll remember eventually, but we gotta send someone to check on her and not let anyone know what we're up to."

"Look, White," Henderson started, and Jimmy felt his hope dwindle, "You have to see how ridiculous this sounds—"

"Boy, you got that right," Perry said under his breath.

Henderson stopped to shake his head and sigh. "But the Planet has always been on our side. I'll give you one car, and you'll need to go with it." He reached for Perry's phone and began dialing.

"Now all we have to do is get him—" Perry thumbed toward the inspector, "—to listen to some Nat King Cole." He chuckled, and Jimmy smiled. "Thanks, kid."

"Ok, car's on its way here. Anything else you need from me?" Henderson asked, walking to the door.

"Yeah," Jimmy said. He walked over to the CD player and

removed the disc. Putting it back in its case and grabbing the others on the shelf, he took them to Henderson. "Listen to these... but *not* while you're driving."

She had been lying to him, playing a part. She was part of the trap. Clark wasn't able to stop the self-deprecating thoughts from coming. They were second nature. He *was* a failure and always would be. All he ever did was mess things up. And it was happening *again*. He'd trusted the wrong person *again*.

But then he caught the quiet acknowledgment of what he'd said. And it changed the direction of his thoughts. Did she know something was up? Even if she didn't have access to those memories, did that single word, *unforgettable*, have a deeper meaning for her?

She turned, and he saw the confusion in her face. She wanted to ask something, but the opening door stopped her and unease settled on her features. And though he couldn't explain it any better yet, protectiveness for this woman surged through him.

Until that moment, Clark hadn't realized how well adjusted to the darkness he'd become or how much he was willing to trust Lois despite the guilt he felt over something he was starting to believe never happened. The light pouring from the doorway behind Lois cast a halo around her, but the expression on her face was anything but that of an angel.

"Lex?" she started, her eyes lingering on Clark before she turned to face the man looming behind her.

"Lois, darling," he crooned. "I was beginning to worry." The man held his hand out for Lois, and Clark saw her hesitate for a split second before taking it. Taking the last steps, she left Clark alone in the staircase to decide what he should do and stood facing Lex as he handed her something too small for him to see. He realized they were rings when, following a nearly imperceptible shake of her head, Lex placed them on the ring finger of her left hand. He then ushered her into the room.

"Kent," Lex sneered, turning to him. "Do come in." He gestured to Clark as if he were inviting him in for tea and light conversation, but his eyes gave him away. Clark wondered if Lois saw it, too, but she had already disappeared into the room beyond Lex.

Clark was out of time, no turning back. With new resolve, he stepped onto the first step of the staircase. The only way this mess would ever be over and done with required him to take risks. Huge, enormous, frightening risks. But after coming face to face with Lex Luthor, he knew Lois needed him. And he no longer cared whether or not she wanted him.

"Luthor," he greeted. He stepped out of the stairway and into a large but cozy and very blue home library.

He stood several feet behind a comfy white couch that faced a coffee table. Plush white chairs formed another sitting area on the other side of the room, and a large oriental rug separated the two sitting areas. Shelves made up three of the walls, with the fourth, to his right, interspersed with windows that looked out into the cold early morning. He could tell the windows faced east from the smallest hint of daylight that edged the horizon and wondered how much time had passed since he entered the house on the bluff. There was just enough light to see a dusting of snow now covered the landscape, detracting from the cozy feel of the room.

Lex was nearly in the middle of the large room with Lois tucked just behind his right side, her hand in his. Clark stood just inside the doorway with his hands ready to fight if necessary. Drawing his attention back to the task at hand, Clark pulled up all the lyrics from Nat King Cole songs that he could remember. He would say as many as he could, hoping one of them would work for Lois. It *had* to work, and he would wait until later to consider what he would do if it didn't.

"It's time we all had a talk, Kent." Luthor's smug smile grated on Clark, but it all but disappeared when he turned to Lois and

said, "Isn't that right, Darling?"

Her wide eyes and slightly opened mouth tugged once more at his protectiveness, and he waited for her to speak, but no words came forth. She looked uneasy, confused. A slight frown took over her face when she looked at the man, and she inclined her head as if to nod.

"It has become clear to me that we can't keep going on like this," Lex began, turning to face Clark and putting himself in front of Lois.

"Answer me, oh, my love, just what sin have I been guilty of?"

Clark said the lyrics, keeping his eyes on Lois. Would Lois recognize it as well? The increase in her frown could have been a yes or a no. *Unforgettable* was a familiar song to anyone. This one was a bit more obscure, a fact he hoped would allow him to continue to spout lyrics without questioning from Lex. Surely if Lex realized what Clark was doing, he would be stopped, and there was no telling which song would do the trick.

"Do not address her in that manner," Lex said, glaring as he assumed a protective stance. "You must give up this fight."

Clark kept his eyes fixed on Lois, wondering what story Lex had fabricated for her. Her face held such confusion and worry, but he could not tell if it was concern for him or concern for whatever lie she'd been told. "I will never give up," he said, realizing the truth of the words as he spoke them. "*To the ends of the earth, I'll follow my star, To the ends of the earth, Just to be where you are.*" And the lyrics meant precisely what he intended to say.

Lois's brows could not be more drawn. Clark was thankful that her position slightly behind Lex prevented the madman from noticing her state.

"I gave you the chance to live your life separate from ours, but you have chosen instead to ruin it."

"What chance did you ever give me?" Clark asked. "*I am dejected. I am depressed. Yet resurrected and sailing the crest.*"

"I'm glad to know that," Lex said with a pleased look on his face. "Though, I had no idea you were such a poet, Kent."

Clark smiled inwardly at the great invitation Lex didn't even realize he'd given. "*Poets often use many words to say a simple thing. It takes thought and time and rhyme, to make a poem sing.*"

Lex narrowed his eyes and moved to step directly in front of Lois. Clark moved his eyes to Luthor and allowed a short, angry laugh to escape him before he continued. "I'm depressed about something that never happened." Then switching his eyes back to Lois, he said, "*You know the feeling of something half remembered, of something that never happened, yet you recall it well.*"

She mouthed the words, 'Nat King Cole,' and rewarded Clark with a small nod and the raising of her eyebrows.

Clark inwardly sighed in relief. She recognized what he was doing, at least in part, and it renewed his resolve to stay the course.

Chapter 27

In her nearness to him, Lois caught the small yet sharp intake of breath from Lex and knew that Clark had said something that had startled him, but she didn't know what. Had he realized that Clark was quoting songs sung by Nat King Cole? Did it mean something to him? Or was it the words themselves about remembering something that took him by surprise?

It all took her by surprise. Standing there, listening to lyric after lyric, she had done her best to keep her thoughts and questions to herself. And she knew she'd been unsuccessful at it. The whole situation was overwhelming, and she was beginning to feel tired from the lateness of the hour and a little nauseated at the stress of it all. Even her skin betrayed her as it was covered in goose flesh. Clark's eyes were locked onto hers, and she could feel him searching for something.

"It makes no difference to me why you were depressed," Lex

sneered as he moved to block Clark once more, “only that you deserve to feel that way after everything you’ve done to Lois.” The hatred Lex had for Clark seeped from every pore of him and into his words.

“Lex, please,” she quietly interrupted, placing her hand in his. “He has not succeeded in any of his plans in over two years.”

Lois didn’t fully understand where the animosity had come from, not knowing the schemes Lex had thwarted or how frequently they’d taken place. But none of them had worked, and she hadn’t even known about them. They could not have been that severe. Surely, Lex’s rebuke was too much.

“I haven’t done *anything* to her,” Clark asserted. “That was you.” When Lois’s eyes snapped to his, she saw his glare fixed on Lex. What did he think Lex had done?

“Everything I have done is because I love her.” Those often-said words warmed her, and she squeezed his hand. As he squeezed her hand in return, he pulled her forward and held up their enfolded hands as evidence. “It should be obvious to you that she loves me and only me. We have been happily married despite you and everything you’ve done.”

Clark looked surprised at his accusation. And, suddenly, she saw it. He knew something she did not. Could he help explain that note she’d found? But why would a person who had been absent from her life for years know something about a note that she didn’t remember writing?

Clark’s eyes spoke volumes in a language she couldn’t comprehend. Though she thought she understood his purpose, she had no idea why or what the end result would be. Was he trying to help her remember something? This was a puzzle she wished she had time to figure out.

“*That’s my girl. Take a look at her. She belongs to me.*” More lyrics.

“No!” Lex shouted, the intended offense successful. He jerked her arm downward as he shouted and squeezed her hand hard enough that she winced. “I will not allow you to ruin this for me. Not after all the work I’ve put into it. Not even our... mutual friend can stop me now.”

Mutual friend? Lois wondered who that could be.

“*Better face the facts, ol’ buddy, and be prepared to take the blow.*”

“On the contrary, it is you who must get ready for the blow.” Lex stepped toward him threateningly, and Lois hardly recognized the man she’d married anymore. Where was the loving, affectionate, devoted husband? “I should have killed you when I had the chance,” he growled.

Lois pulled her hand from Lex’s and leveled him with a steely gaze when he turned to face her, surprise that she’d pulled from him evident in his raised eyebrows. Before she had a chance to call him out for such a statement, she heard Clark once more deliver lyrics from a familiar song.

“*There may be trouble ahead. But while there’s music and moonlight and love and romance, let’s face the music and dance.*”

As the words left Clark’s mouth, Lex watched Lois stop completely, a confused and clouded look covering her face.

“Lois?” The rage having been temporarily pushed aside by this, Lex took her hand back, gently this time, regretting the harshness with which he had jerked her moments ago. She didn’t respond. Her mind was somewhere else. He glanced over his shoulder to where Clark stood, eyes wide. “What have you done?” he growled.

“Only what was needed.”

What an ambiguous remark. Lex was stopped from replying, however, as Lois began to crumble before him, as if her weight was too much to bear while her mind was so engaged elsewhere.

He gently guided her to the chair a few feet behind her and lowered her to it. “Lois?” he called once more.

The only response she gave was a simple shake of her head. He reached to caress her cheek, brushing a lock of her soft brown hair behind her ear. “Darling?”

Her eyes suddenly widened though it was clear that whatever she was seeing wasn’t him. Moments went by like this, all manner of emotions flashing across her face. Then suddenly, her body straightened, and her eyes cleared. They locked onto his and before he could register the emotions in them, she shoved him away hard, knocking him off balance, causing him to list to his right. As he caught himself on the small table beside the chair, she brushed past him.

Had she remembered again?

He smiled when, as she reached Clark, who had come further into the room, the pain brought on by the kryptonite secreted in her wedding rings crushed him. Handing them to her just as she entered the room was brilliant on his part. She hadn’t known it was anything more than a token of his affection.

“It is as I said,” he proclaimed, laughing. “You can’t have her.” He stood up and calmly walked toward the cabinet behind the chair Lois had just left.

“What’s happening?” the pained voice of Clark asked.

“It must be kryptonite,” he heard her explain as he opened the cabinet. “You don’t remember?”

Remember? He paused, looking over his shoulder to watch them. The puzzle pieces clicked together as he played over the last few minutes in his mind. What had just happened to Lois... It had been her memory returning. Was it something Clark had done on the way here? Was it something he said, one of his poetic phrases, that had caused this? Or were those just a distraction to buy time until...

“Not everything,” rasped the pesky fly that wouldn’t go away. Lex would enjoy ridding himself of the irritant.

“*Don’t you remember when I met you?*” she sang quietly, reaching to touch his face. He cringed, and she drew her hand back but continued the song, “*Didn’t the moon look big that night?*”

Why on earth would Lois be singing to Clark? This needed to end as quickly as possible. He would kill Clark and have the procedure done once more. And then everything would go back to the way it was supposed to be. Lex with his Lois and their happy family.

He thrust his hand into the cabinet only to find it empty. Pushed beyond the limits of his patience, he released a yell and slammed the door of the cabinet closed with enough force to break it.

He stood and turned to face them in time to see that same clouded look in Clark’s eyes – a memory returning, how had it happened? – and Lois removing the rings from her finger.

He stormed toward her as she put them in her pocket. This would end now.

She reached for his face again. Despite the agony he was feeling, Clark turned his face toward her hand and brushed his lips on her palm as his vision began to fog and that nauseating sense of falling warned him of what was to come. Clark knew the signs of another memory returning and closed his eyes, thankful she was with him and wishing he were anywhere but here for this.

####

November 20, 1995

He stood facing Lois. He had prepared physically for the impending trip but not mentally. He’d avoided thinking about it instead. Knowing he would be leaving her unprotected and alone was too much. She was just inches in front of him now, her hands warm on his chest, admiring the ring on her finger.

“I’ll miss you,” she said quietly and leaned her head forward to rest on his chin. He could hear the anguish in her voice, and it broke his heart.

"I know," he responded. He had to be strong for her. This would just be another thing to get through. He brought her further into an embrace and kissed the top of her head. He breathed in the scent of her, committing it to memory, as if it wasn't already there.

"I wish I knew how long you'd be gone," she said as she reached her arms around him and laid her head on his chest. "That would make this so much easier."

"I know," he said and squeezed her tightly to him. He couldn't agree more. Not knowing how long this trip would take or what he would find when he got there filled him with anxiety, and he hid it as well as he could.

She looked up at him then. The anguish in her eyes spoke volumes without a single word. She knew he had to do this. She had been encouraging him. But she was sacrificing her own peace of mind for him. And he loved her even more for it.

"Lois, I will never stop thinking about you." Looking straight into her eyes, he needed her to know without a doubt that he was speaking from his heart. He put everything he could into his next words. "You will be what keeps me going, what keeps me grounded, what pulls me home." He leaned toward her, needing to be closer.

She met his eyes and reached for his face.

He pulled her in as close as he could, enveloping her in his arms, locking eyes with her. "I love you, Lois," he breathed.

"Clark—"

He cut her off. Words were useless now; only something physical could possibly say what he needed to. The way she responded told him she felt the same way. He didn't want to let go, couldn't let go, she was safe as long as he had her in his arms. How could he do this?

As if reading his thoughts, her breath caught, and a sob escaped her lips as she pulled back. "What if you can't get back?" He could hear the fear, see it in her eyes. "Clark, I—"

"No, Lois." He shook his head. This kind of thinking and worrying would not help anything. He needed to be strong for her. They could do this. "Don't think like that. I will be back, and we'll live out the rest of lives together; you as my wife and me as your husband. We'll start a family. And grow old together."

She stared into his eyes, and he stared back willing her to understand, to see it in him. As she relaxed in his arms, he knew now was the time.

"I have to be going now," he said.

"Please," she begged, lowering her head. "Just a few more minutes."

He could never refuse her, especially now. He brought her chin up with his finger and looked deeply into her eyes.

"Anything," he promised and pressed his mouth to hers one last time. He lifted her up as he poured as much of himself into her as he could.

But it was time. He pulled himself away, and the breath rushed from him as he watched her slowly close her eyes and take a deep breath, fortifying herself. He gave her hands one more squeeze before he released them and turned toward the opening door. Applause filtered in, and he stepped toward it.

Her sob broke what pieces of his heart were left. He turned and mouthed, 'I love you.'

####

The physical pain of the kryptonite made the emotional pain of the memory that much more real to him and as the sensations of the returning memory released their grip, he squeezed his eyes shut.

His eyes flew open when Lois's hand suddenly left his cheek. He heard her frantic cry and saw her being pulled away from him and tossed like a rag onto the floor on the other side of the coffee table. The pain eased slightly, but it was only momentary, worsening as Lex pushed him down flat on his back. Quickly taking the dominant position, Lex straddled him and pinned his

arms to the ground.

Clark was no match for him in this state. But what he lacked in strength he more than made up for in grit. He would never give up fighting this monster. No man who would treat a woman that way could ever claim to love her.

Despite the pain, Clark struggled against his captor, stilling only when a blow to his cheek brought stars to his eyes. A second blow to his jaw brought the taste of blood with it.

"I should have killed you when I had the chance," Lex hissed, hatred dripping from his words as he pulled back his fist for another hit.

As if in slow motion, Clark watched the fist come toward his face but miss its mark as the heel of a woman's shoe attached to a woman's leg pushed Lex's head to the side, knocking him off balance and releasing Clark from his attacker.

Lex lay where he landed, motionless. Clark rolled his head to see Lois resume her stance and wondered how severely she'd hurt Lex. She dug into her pocket and pulled out something he couldn't quite see as she walked across the room to the windows lining one wall. A soothing draft of cold, crisp air rushed over him as she opened one of the windows, threw whatever it was out, and pulled it closed again.

Chapter 28

Deep breath, she thought. *It's over now.* Lois calmed herself while she stood at the window.

It had been in her wedding rings. Lex had put kryptonite in her wedding bands. She shouldn't be surprised. Had it been in there the whole time? If it had been, she was lucky she had removed them that first day they were in Columbia, or she never would have been able to get as close as she had to Clark.

The rush of memories that assailed her moments ago brought back an incomplete picture of what had happened, but she knew Clark's powers had somehow been disabled. Removing the kryptonite from the room would not solve that problem, but it would help.

It was the only thing that weakened Clark. Each exposure reduced him to a writhing infant, powerless and weak, and with it, pain consumed him. And that was certainly what had just happened. But exposure to it wasn't how his powers were disabled for these months they were apart. How had Lex done it? Did he still have more kryptonite on him now? She would have to find it and get rid of it as well.

She heard movement behind her and assumed it was Clark but was surprised to instead hear Lex. "This is far from over," he said in a voice she hardly recognized.

She whipped around and found him hunched in the doorway that led to the rest of the house, leaning on it for support and glaring at Clark. His eyes shifted to her. Anger seethed from them before he stepped back and pulled the door closed.

The click of the lock echoed through the room. Lois stood there unable to move, shocked. The mistake she made was opening the window. Of course, the cool air had revived him. And now she couldn't begin to guess where he went or what his next step would be.

She stared at the closed door a moment longer, his malicious expression burned into her memory. This side of Lex was new to her, but she couldn't be certain with her memory riddled with holes as it was. All she could remember at this point was love and caring strangely mixed with manipulation and control. But now it was as though something had snapped in him. Had she ever seen him lose control like that before? Had this rage always been there, lurking beneath the surface?

She took a deep breath and prayed she would have enough resourcefulness to escape this nightmare before he returned.

She quickly made her way to Clark, kneeling at his side. He hadn't moved from his sprawled position on the floor and lay there

with his eyes closed, breathing slowly and evenly, his face just beginning to swell under the red marks left by Lex's fists. Relief at having this moment to be alone with Clark washed over her.

"Clark," she whispered, gently caressing his face with her hands.

Inhaling deeply, as if relaxing at her touch, his right hand came up to cover hers. "Lois," he breathed. His fingers wove between hers as he turned his head and kissed her palm in an intimate gesture that melted her.

"We have to get out of here." Moving her left hand to his shoulder, she felt him shaking. "Can you get up?" she asked.

Without releasing the hand he still held to his face, he used his free arm to assist him in sitting up. As soon as his weight was balanced, his free arm came up around her waist, and he pulled her tightly to him. His right hand released hers and gently embraced her neck. He kissed her as if he wasn't sure he'd ever get to kiss her again... the way he kissed her before Superman left.

His splintered memory of her confused him, but he was unable to stop himself from pulling her into this embrace, pressing his lips to hers. And this, the feel of her, this was right. Despite all his doubts and the jumble of conflicting beliefs, there could be no denying it.

In his arms was where she belonged.

She pressed into him, and her soft sob escaped between them. When he pulled back, her eyes were filled with tears, and he brushed away the one that escaped with his thumb. The amount of passion and sadness in her eyes tore at him, and he was still powerless to do anything about it.

She leaned forward and pressed her lips to his, gently, lovingly. "Are you okay?" she murmured against him. This amazing woman who had once drugged up every unpleasant feeling inside him was affectionate and concerned about him. How had he been so worried?

A noise from the stairwell behind them startled them both. Clark tensed, expecting the worst, and protectively shifted Lois away from the threat as he turned.

There, leaning in the doorway, standing a few steps down, was Scott. His breaths came fast and relief flooded his face as he quickly glanced around the room. Immediately, Clark relaxed.

"Scott!" Lois nearly squealed, and Clark smiled at her excitement.

"Where's Luthor?" he asked hurriedly.

"I don't know," Lois answered as she stood up.

Coming into the room, Scott hastily checked the door, finding it locked and began peering through the windows at the lightening sky. "Are you guys okay?" he asked as he turned to face them.

Clark lifted himself from the floor to sit on the arm of the couch near the door to the stairwell. Even after only a few minutes away from the kryptonite, he felt better. He was no longer in excruciating pain, at least. Lois came to stand beside him, infusing strength into him with her touch.

"For now," he answered. "How did you find us?"

"I told you I'd come in if you hadn't come back out in twenty minutes." He began looking in the drawers and cabinets as he continued his explanation. "I followed the passage you went through until I found it locked. After I jimmied the door open, I found the house empty." He paused to look at them. "When this all started, I was worried about what Luthor would do when he figured out I helped Lois's memories come back. So, I put trackers in all of her shoes."

"Brilliant," Lois stated.

Scott huffed. "We're not out of this yet."

"No, we're not," Clark agreed.

"I can drive us straight to the police. They'll take some convincing, but with the three of us, it ought to be enough to at least get an investigation started." Scott began walking back

toward the doorway through which he'd just entered. "Let's head out this way," he began, indicating the stairway while turning to face Lois and Clark. "Luthor won't—"

His sentence was cut short. Clark watched helplessly as a syringe was quickly raised and, before he could react, plunged into Scott's neck. As his body crumbled to the floor, Clark froze.

There, blocking their intended exit, stood Lex Luthor, crouched over his victim like a coiled cobra waiting to strike.

Chapter 29

Lex locked the door despite knowing they would be unable to leave. Clark was in no position to go anywhere fortunately and though Lois would argue, she lacked the ability to get him out of there on her own. But he could not afford to take any chances.

Already someone had let him down. The device he'd had made especially for this was supposed to be placed in the cabinet, but the phrase, 'If you want something done right, you better do it yourself,' seemed to apply here.

The two houses, this one and the chateau on the bluff, were connected by a long, mostly finished tunnel. That feature, along with the view and several other secrets the chateau held, were his motivations for procuring the two as his own. The tunnel branched out at several points leading to different places in this house. Perhaps the person who had been tasked with the job of stashing the device placed it in one of the other rooms.

The first room he had checked did not have cabinetry large enough to hold the weapon. He was pleased, however, to find that it was the room where Dr. Hightower had stored his supplies. In anticipation of performing the procedure on Lois once again, he had selected a pre-filled syringe and tucked it into his pocket.

He had checked two of the other rooms that featured an entrance to the tunnel before finding in the third the weapon he would use to kill that wretch. It was a large device, larger than he would have liked, but Montgomery had affixed a strap to it that he put over his shoulder. He made a mental note to make the person responsible for this flub suffer for his inadequacies before heading toward the door.

He stopped abruptly before leaving the room and decided that approaching from an unexpected direction may be of some use, especially if Clark had recovered any. Even as a child, Lex had learned that it is always best to increase your advantage, even if only slightly. He made his way through the passage to the tunnel and then back up the stair well.

An unexpected voice caught his attention as he started up the steps, causing him to pause. Hoping he hadn't been noticed, he listened in.

"I followed the passage you went through until I found it locked. After I jimmied the door open, I found the house empty."

Ferguson. Of course he would be there. He was responsible for making sure that Clark had arrived. Albeit late. At least he could be counted on to follow through, even if not on time. Lex considered himself lucky as he took the next few steps.

"When this all started I was worried about what Luthor would do when he figured out I helped Lois's memories come back...."

Whatever Ferguson said next, Lex didn't hear. Stunned by the shocking realization, he stood motionless, narrowing his eyes and watching Scott walk toward the staircase. In the blink of an eye, he came to a decision and quickly and quietly ascended the remaining steps. Pulling the syringe from his pocket, he readied it and was relieved when Ferguson turned just before Lex revealed himself.

"Let's head out this way. Luthor won't—"

Lex injected the serum intended for Lois into Ferguson. He made no effort to help the man. He didn't watch him crumple to the floor. Instead, he watched the expressions on his least and most favorite persons change as they realized what had happened.

His dislike of Clark was so strong he could taste its bitterness

in his mouth, and his nose wrinkled at the unsavory flavor. He aimed the gun at him and laughed when Clark put himself in front of Lois. Ever the protector, he would be powerless to stop what was coming.

“You have taken her from me for the last time,” Lex said coolly as they both backed into the center of the room. “I realize that the moment all this began, really truly began, I should have done away with you when I had the chance. It would have been easy. You were an unconscious heap when you were pulled from the water. Weak. Helpless. But instead, I was selfish. I wanted to see you suffer, and I did. It was glorious for these last two months. Not only,” he emphasized, “were you a bumbling idiot filled with self-pity over something that never happened, but I,” he smiled and sought Lois’s eyes over Clark’s shoulder, “I reaped the rewards.”

“You monster!” Lois spat at him, moving to step around Clark. Clark stopped her with his outstretched arm, preventing whatever action she would have taken against him.

“Lois, everything... *everything* I do is because I *love* you.” Lex paused as he looked into her eyes.

“Love is a word you’ve only heard,” she sneered, “and can’t begin to know the meaning of.”

Her words cut through him. She couldn’t possibly understand it right now. All she could see was the animal she believed him to be. But he’d proven to her before that he was worthy of her love, and she had freely given it. He was determined to have what he was in danger of losing and not even her angry face could stop him.

“But, I must,” he began. “You never doubted my sincerity even once.”

Lois watched as Lex came further into the room, a bruise expanding on the cheek she had planted her heel into earlier. Lex’s steely eyes and wicked smile made her blood run even colder when she realized he was carrying a weapon. He kept the gun aimed at Clark. It was large enough to require a strap, making Lex look like he belonged in some sort of action movie. Those cold eyes left no question that he was intent on killing Clark. And given all that had transpired to get them to this point, she knew he had the capability.

“Love does not boast,” Clark said, surprising her, “and it is not proud or self-seeking.” He turned to look directly at her. “Instead it is patient and kind, rejoices in truth. And always protects.” He turned back to Lex. “What have you done that is so loving?”

“I have nothing to prove to you, Clark,” Lex taunted. “I had her love once, and I shall have it again.” The corners of his mouth slowly stretched higher. “But there is something I want you both to know before I end this.”

She stepped closer to Clark and slipped her fingers into his hand. As he squeezed her hand in return, she braced herself to hear whatever Lex would throw at them.

“Tell me, Clark,” he said casually, as if starting a conversation between friends, his eyes set on Clark’s. “When she found you, did she tell you she’s carrying my child?”

Standing behind Clark made it difficult to gauge his reaction, though she felt his hand stiffen in hers. She hadn’t been able to get close enough to Clark to do any more than sing to him from a distance, let alone tell him of the ruse she’d invented, before Lex had kidnapped her.

“It’s not true,” she denied, pulling Clark’s stiff hand in an effort to get him to look her way. He turned his confused eyes to her. She shook her head vehemently as he searched her face.

“Oh, but Darling, it is true,” Lex said simply. In her periphery, she saw him step closer but kept her gaze fixed on Clark. “I’ve watched your symptoms for a while now. I wasn’t at all surprised when you told me the day after our anniversary.”

“No,” she asserted. “He’s lying.” Lex lowered the weapon a

tiny amount, and Lois saw an opportunity. If she could just get Clark to see it, too, they might be able to get the gun from him. Sending signals with her eyes, she prayed Clark would understand what she meant.

“Really?” Lex asked. “And how do you explain your moods? The morning sickness?”

She looked from Clark to the weapon and back, widening her eyes at just the right time. She was relieved when she saw the faintest of nods from Clark. “When I realized what was going on,” she started, “I was repulsed by you and ashamed at what I had allowed to happen. I was disgusted by myself, and every time you did or said anything, I was overwhelmed by it. But I was afraid, and I couldn’t have said the real reason why I was behaving the way I did. It was the first thing that came to mind.” She took a deep breath and closed her eyes.

It was the truth. She hoped Clark would see that. But there would be time later for them to work this out. There would be much more to work out...

A squeeze from Clark’s hand brought her out of her thoughts. “Either way,” he said, looking directly at her, “she’s mine now.”

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Lex take another step forward, putting himself nearly beside Clark. Clark tilted his head slightly away from Lex. As she realized what he meant by the gesture, time slowed down.

She took a step away as Clark released her hand and lunged sideways toward Lex, his hand coming up to knock the gun away. Lex’s eyes were on her, but as he caught sight of Clark’s movements, he stepped back and swung the barrel of the gun in Clark’s direction.

His first move ineffectual, Clark’s other hand came from behind and slammed downward on the gun. Clark followed through with the motion, dragging the gun as well as Lex toward the ground, slamming the barrel of the gun into the floor.

A thunderous crackle sounded, and a blinding golden flash filled the room for a split second as the barrel of the gun split open and pain once more gripped Clark. As he fell backward to lean on the couch behind him, his ears were assaulted by what could only be an alarm wailing. Unable to tell where the piercing sound came from, he looked around the room to see Lois crouching beside Scott before meeting Lex’s eyes head on as red and green sparks flew from the damaged weapon he still held. The widening of Lex’s eyes told Clark that something was very wrong, and, with an angry growl, Lex pulled the strap from his arm and ran toward Lois.

Clark squeezed his eyes closed and focused all of his energy on ignoring the all-encompassing pain. The malfunctioning weapon continued its noisy protest and, despite the fact that he wanted nothing more than to relax into the pain until it subsided, Clark pulled himself up and stumbled toward the window.

The sun peaked just above the horizon, glinting off of the snow and casting a faint glow in the room. Using his elbow, he shattered the glass of the window and cleared the shards still protruding from the frame. The cool air rushed in, recharging him, and he turned to see Lex dragging Lois toward the locked door as she fought to free herself from his grasp.

When he was but a few steps away, Lois freed her arm and turned to him with fear in her eyes. He reached for her and took her hand as Lex grabbed her arm.

“The window!” Clark shouted over the racket of the weapon and its alarm. Mercifully, Lex relaxed his grip and followed them to the window where Clark did his best to help Lois through.

Once outside, she turned her pleading eyes to him.

“Run!” Clark yelled to her. “Go! I’m right behind you!”

And for once she listened.

But he wasn’t right behind her.

Scott was still in there.

Turning, he ran into Lex, who said something he couldn't make out. Surely adrenaline served as the source of strength that suddenly filled him and, grabbing Lex by the arm and dragging him along, he reached Scott's still limp body that had fallen behind the couch.

They awkwardly worked together to lift Scott, and with Lex shouldering his right side and Clark on his left, they went for the open window. An increase in the volume of the terrible sound coming from the machine warned of its impending destruction with little time to prepare for it.

The ensuing explosion was deafening.

The blast propelled the three of them through the window, tearing them from each other. Clark twisted his body around to see a colorful fireball expanding exponentially from the gun as it split into pieces, flinging him along with debris out into the cold morning.

Chapter 30

"Run!" Clark yelled to her. "Go! I'm right behind you!"
And for once she listened.

She ran as fast as she could, the blood rushing in her ears, drowning out all other sounds. It wasn't until she registered a loud roaring behind her that she stopped and turned to see Clark wasn't there. As she looked toward the window he'd helped her through, a thunderous boom resounded as a fireball of color erupted before her. She felt the pressure of the shockwave pass, tossing her hair.

She stood horrified, her heart stopping as she watched the flames dissipate to reveal a massive, rough-edged hole in the side of the house. No blue walls to be seen. Only debris and remnants of what used to be a library strewn about.

As if she were observing instead of participating, she saw herself running toward the site, a thousand thoughts running through her head. Where was Clark? Why hadn't he followed? Was he okay? Could he have survived the blast without his powers?

As she neared the house, she spotted Scott sprawled in the snow. The sun's horizontal rays provided enough light to see that he appeared mostly uninjured. She carefully placed shaking fingers on his neck to check for a pulse and let out a breath when she confirmed he was alive though he remained unconscious, his limp state likely saving him from more severe injuries.

Rising to continue the search for Clark, she noticed several gravel-sized chunks of red and green. Kryptonite. Red *and* green?

She spotted Clark a few yards away face down in the snow and rushed to his side, landing on her knees. His shirt was in tatters and a dark shape beneath the strips of fabric caught her eye. Ignoring it, she gently pressed her trembling hand to his throat.

A pulse.

Relief filled her, and she couldn't stop the sobs that came with it. Choosing to investigate the shape she saw first, she tore his shirt to reveal a tattoo. An intricately drawn phoenix stretched its head below fiery wings, its long tail feathers arching down the middle of Clark's back. Only a few inches long, what struck her was the tattoo's coloring – reds and greens that sparkled. She breathed out. *That* was how they'd disabled his powers.

Pushing aside her own shock, she grasped his shoulders and with great effort rolled him to his side. His glasses sat askew, broken. She straightened them and realized how useless it was. Tears streamed down her cheeks, and she grabbed his face with both of her hands.

"Clark?" she sobbed. "Clark, wake up." She leaned forward and touched her forehead to his. "Please," she begged, "I need you."

Nothing.

She could feel his breath on her chin and took comfort knowing that he was still alive. But what kind of damage was done? She continued to carefully roll him over onto his back and

gasped when she saw a huge gash across his chest, right where the S would have been. She gently peeled back the fabric that was near it. She pulled out the napkin – the one with the note she wrote to herself – and pressed it to his chest, then covered the make-shift bandage with pieces of his shirt to hold it in place.

Through her tears, she checked over the rest of his body and was relieved to not see anything that caused her more concern. But she knew the shards of kryptonite surrounding them only added to his pain that, thankfully, he wasn't aware of yet. Pressing her hands to his face again, she stared at him.

At the moment, she was a useless puddle of mush, which wasn't helping anyone. Quickly taking control of her emotions, she focused her mind on doing whatever she could to help. Standing, she said a quick thank you for the risen sun and carefully collected all the shards of red and green kryptonite that surrounded them.

A soft moan came from behind her, and she turned to find Lex lying on the ground. She stiffened. That same mix of affection and hatred assailed her, and with it the nausea she'd experienced before. Taking a deep breath, she forced herself to check on him.

He couldn't stand it. Hearing her heart-wrenching cries. Being incapable of comforting her.

He could feel his own life slipping away. It wouldn't be much longer.

Everything had been going so well. For years, he had successfully overcome insurmountable circumstances and wormed his way out of impossible situations. He'd even come back from the dead, thanks to his dedicated physician.

Superman had prevented him from ending it all months ago, and he took complete advantage of every moment he'd been given to devise a plan to get exactly what he'd wanted. It had been so successful that for just over two months he'd lived the life he was destined for. And it was everything he'd dreamed it would be.

Having Lois love him and be with him, laughing with her, crying with her, fighting with her... He'd known from the moment he laid eyes on her that she was perfect. His prize. And he was willing to win her.

But she didn't want him back then. That alien cad stole her from him, and then it was that foolish reporter partner of hers. Just his luck that they would turn out to be one and the same. He really should have rid himself of that affliction when he'd had the chance. But his lofty aspirations of vengeance would prove to be his end.

And it was bittersweet. Himself mortally wounded. His nemesis unconscious, presumably dying without superpowers to aide him. His beloved crying over his enemy instead of him.

And here he was alone in his final moments, forced to listen to it.

The pain in his gut suddenly intensified, and he groaned as he rolled his head toward the sound of her movements. She must have heard him because she paused and looked at him. He wished she would come to him, yet he wanted her to stay away. When she began walking toward him, he closed his eyes to consider what his last words to her would be.

"Lex," she said softly, as though she cared.

He opened his eyes to see her kneeling beside him, her tear-stained cheeks red in the sunlight. The sun's rays came in at such a low angle that it made her face glow as if she were an angel. "My darling," he started, "I am sorry."

She was carrying something and when she emptied her hands into her lap, he saw the red and green shards. She was working to give his enemy a fighting chance. The thought sickened him, and he grimaced as he turned his head away.

Her hand on his shoulder felt like fire to his already warm body. Despite the pain it caused, he reached to cover her hand with his and ignored her flinch, squeezing her fingers with as much of

his affection as he could give to her in these last moments.

Opening his eyes once again, he beheld the sunrise in all its glory. The bright orb slowly ascended toward lines of high clouds. The fresh snow glistened.

"I know that you really did love me, Lois." He rolled his head back to see her, a far better sight to be his last. "For a time," he added.

She frowned as her eyes shimmered in the sunlight, and he allowed himself to pretend the tears were for him. But the anger and pain behind them made that difficult.

"Lois, I want you to know that everything... everything... I did was because... I love you."

"What you did had nothing to do with love," she spat at him. "You were only ever thinking of yourself. If you had loved me, you would never have done *any* of that."

It would have been better if she'd remained silent. How could she doubt him? He could feel the life slipping from him. He would never have the chance to prove himself to her, to fix that frown on her face. "I was... selfish... I am sorry. Please... do not hold anything... I've done against... our child."

"I'm not pregnant," she said, breathless, twisting the knife in his already failing heart.

"But you are," he whispered. Why didn't she believe him?

"I hate you!" she yelled.

She continued speaking, but he couldn't concentrate on her words. He looked deeply into her eyes one last time but only felt the burn of her anger and confusion. He wanted to reach up and smooth the worry from her brow, erase the hatred from her eyes. If he could only make her see, but his time was running out. He squeezed her hand once again, thankful she hadn't pulled it from his grasp, before he surrendered to the darkness enclosing in on him and closed his eyes.

"I hate you!" she yelled. "How could you do this to me? You say you love me, but you tear me away from everything important to me and ruin my life with your insane plans!"

She stopped her rant as she felt his grip on her fingers tighten and then relax. His eyes closed, and his body relaxed. He was gone. The lump in her throat made her all the more angry.

"How dare you!" she yelled through hot tears at his lifeless body. How would she ever find any closure from this nightmare?

She turned away from him and emptied her stomach, overwhelmed by her mixed emotions. Was she pregnant? How could he know? Was he lying even in the last moments of his life? If only he could tell her how he knew.

The sunlight winked off of one of the pieces of kryptonite in the small pile she made, and she pushed aside her feelings to get back to a task far more important than stewing over the ravings of a deceased madman.

Rising, she took the pieces she'd found and began throwing them, the physical motion destroying what hold she had on her composure. Overcome by anger and anguish, she screamed as she threw one of the stones as far as she could, releasing as much emotion as she could with the exertion. Again, she threw another rock with a resounding scream. She continued until she had no more stones to throw.

Standing there with her hands now empty, she felt numb. Staring into the distance, she heard the faint sounds of emergency vehicles and was thrust back into the situation at hand. She quickly turned and ran back to Clark.

He hadn't moved at all, but the slow rise and fall of his chest confirmed he was still alive. She knelt at his side and took one of his hands in hers. With her other hand, she caressed his face, hoping for a sign that removing the kryptonite from his presence had helped. Looking at him now, she could tell that he seemed to be breathing easier and more deeply. His face was more swollen and bruised from the punches Lex had landed. She checked the

gash on his chest and saw that it had stopped bleeding. What else could she do?

Tears came again, and she could only lay her head on his chest, grasping his shoulders. Her tears turned to weeping, and she reached her arms around him in an awkward embrace. The enormity of the ordeal engulfed her, and the emerging sobs shook her.

Questions filled her head and threatened to push her beyond her limits. Was Lex telling the truth? How could he know? Would she be able to bring his child into the world if she were pregnant? How would Clark react? Could she do this if Clark chose to be done with her?

She startled when she felt his arm come up to touch her shoulder, stopping her brooding. She pulled away quickly and stared into his face. His eyes were barely open. "Clark!" she breathed, "You're awake!"

Using strength he didn't think he had, he reached his arms around her and pulled her into the embrace. Her sobs shook him. He held her as tightly as he could, pressing her firmly to his chest. He didn't care one bit how much it hurt him to do so. She needed the closeness as much as he did, more so even.

"Lois," he whispered. It was all he could say. There was so much he wanted to say, but there would be time for that later. Right now, he just wanted to hold her and never let go, and she seemed to want the same thing.

It felt like minutes passed before she was able to relax and breathe more evenly. He reluctantly released her, moving his hands to grasp her arms as she propped herself up, hovering over him. Tears streamed down her face, but her smile was so genuine and heartfelt.

He reached his thumb up and brushed it across her cheek before dropping it back to his side. "*Brush those tears from your eyes, and try to realize, that the ache in my heart is for you,*" he said quietly, smiling up at her.

Her half sob, half laugh tugged at his heart. "Clark, you don't need to do that anymore. I *know*." Shifting her weight to one hand, she brought the other up to brush the hair from his forehead.

"What do you know?" he asked in a whisper, allowing his eyes to drift closed.

"Everything... I think," she said, placing her hand on his cheek. He relished her touch and wished he could remember it all, too. "Are you okay?" she asked.

"I'll live," he said. It was then he remembered how he'd gotten to this spot, lying in the grass beside a severely damaged house with debris strewn about. His eyes flew open as he remembered the others that were with him. "Scott?"

"He's still unconscious," she answered quickly. "But I think he's okay." She looked over her shoulder, but he kept his eyes on her. When she turned back to him, her face was drawn, and she looked shaken. "Lex is dead."

Lois was strong; he knew it even without having access to all his memories. But this was a lot for anyone to go through. He could see she hadn't been hurt by the explosion of that weapon. But how long had she moved around in the aftermath? What had she witnessed?

She sat back on her heels as he tried to sit up. He winced at the pain he felt and reached up to feel his chest, brushing his fingers over his shirt. Carefully pulling his shirt open, he found a napkin that had something written on it pressed to his chest.

"It's all I had," she whispered.

He looked up to meet her eyes, took her hand in his and squeezed it. "It's enough."

When he looked back down at the napkin, he gently lifted it from his skin to see the gash below. No longer invulnerable, he'd been hurt several times over the last two months, but this was no simple abrasion. A shard of glass or some other debris must have

hit him. He pressed the napkin back on top and took a moment to look at it.

The wrinkled and blood-stained thing was difficult to read, but he could still make it out. “Lois,” he read out loud. “*It is only a paper moon, hanging over a cardboard scene. It’s a lot of make-believe, even if you can’t believe me.*” He paused and glanced up at Lois who looked intently at her fingers as she twisted them in her lap. “*Nat King Cole can help you figure it out. Lois.*”

“I wrote it when we made a stop on the way here.” She looked up at him then, still shaken. “I was worried Lex would... do that thing again... which he did... I found that in my shoe yesterday and read it a few minutes before you arrived. And when you started quoting Nat King Cole songs, I started to think you knew what that note meant.”

“Oh, Lois,” he said, shaking his head. “I know what the note means, but I don’t know much else.” When she frowned at him, he continued, “My memories are locked under layers... I didn’t even believe they were *memories* at first. I thought they were dreams.”

She tilted her head to the side, like a curious puppy, and it made him chuckle. “What do you remember?” she asked.

“I remember asking you to marry me.” Her smile was infectious and encouraged him. “I remember you were dead – or dying – and I tried to revive you. I was sure both of those were dreams.” He gave a half-hearted laugh. “I remember how the Platt story *actually* went. I remember floating in the clouds... with you.” He reached for her hand and caressed it, feeling her slender fingers, then weaving his fingers between hers. “I remember leaving you.”

He tried to squash that old guilty feeling that came up as he lowered his head. Only this wasn’t guilt over something that never happened.

He had left.

And that was what had allowed all of this to happen. He would make sure that never happened again... if she would let him.

“Clark,” her soothing voice touched him as she gripped his hand, “don’t do that. Don’t blame yourself. Neither of us knew what would happen.” He looked up to her eyes that held such warmth and love and gave her a weak smile. “You came for me, to help me, without even knowing why.”

He huffed. “I thought you didn’t want me to come.”

“And you rescued me... again. Now it’s my turn to rescue you.” She smiled that captivating smile once more and he was mesmerized. “*Non dimenticar means don’t forget you are my darling,*” she sang, her voice like honey, “*Don’t forget to be, all you mean to me.*”

He grinned at her. “I already tried that one,” he said. “But I can see now that getting my memories back will be an enjoyable endeavor.”

“*Bend a little my way,*” she sang, leaning closer to him. “*Lean a little my way.*”

He leaned in to meet her, their lips barely touching when shouting erupted from the side of the house.

Chapter 31

The house was well-lit on the outside despite the sun getting ready to peak over the horizon. A light covering of snow blanketed the building along with everything else, but it would likely melt before the day was over. As the police car pulled up to the enormous house, Jimmy felt a sense of awe. He’d never live in a house like this, but he wasn’t sure he wanted to. He liked his job and life, and if that meant he didn’t live this kind of high-class lifestyle, then so be it.

He just hoped Lois was still here. A few days after the anniversary party, Luthor apparently decided they needed a vacation and came to this house. The history of this house was interesting as well. A string of crime bosses had owned it throughout its history, meaning, of course, that it was exactly the

house Luthor needed. Or at least what he understood Luthor would need now that he was fully aware of the kind of monster they were dealing with.

Henderson had allowed him one squad car with two cops to see what they could find. Perry and Jimmy rode in the back on the way to the house. When the car stopped near the front entrance, he had to wait until one of the cops opened the door for him.

Jimmy was worried about what would be waiting for him when he knocked on the door. To make things easier, he chose to leave his camera in the police car. He envisioned an angry mob of Luthor’s minions coming after him with the intent to silence the one who could bring them all down. But, knowing his friends were in danger, he pushed it aside and followed one of the cops up to the door while Perry and the other cop walked around the side of the house.

The cop’s knock was assertive, but there was no answer. They waited a few seconds before he knocked again. Just when they were sure no one would answer, a man dressed like a butler opened the door. Jimmy’s eyes widened in surprise. A butler?

“Can I help you?” the man asked eyeing first the cop, then Jimmy. He even sounded the way a butler sounded in Jimmy’s imagination.

Jimmy swallowed before asking, “Is Lois Lane here?”

“I’m sorry, it is much too early for any interruptions at this time,” the butler answered in a polite yet stiff voice. “Perhaps you’d like to return at a more reasonable—”

“We have reason to believe she’s being held here against her will,” the cop interrupted.

The butler looked affronted as he took in a sharp breath. “I beg your pardon, sir, but no such thing would ever take place here.”

Jimmy rolled his eyes. “Can we please just talk to her?”

The butler turned his flinty eyes to him and opened his mouth ready with some retort when a thundering blast shook them all. Looks of surprise and concern covered all of their faces, and the cop ran quickly back to the squad car.

Jimmy heard him radio for back-up and spout off the address as he looked in the direction he was certain the sound had come from. Running through the snow to the edge of the property that butted the top of an escarpment, Jimmy peered down the frosted slope at what was most likely the point of the blast.

The land below was a floodplain, flat and shimmering with snow that the rising sun now illuminated. A house much smaller than this one sat with a gaping hole in the back side. An area of melted snow shaped like a sunburst surrounded it. He spotted three figures laying lifeless in the snow and a fourth standing some yards away. Unable to tell who any of them were, he knew one thing was certain.

He was too late.

If only he’d figured this out earlier.

“What happened?” Perry asked, breathing hard as he came up to stand beside him. “Oh my God. You don’t think...”

Jimmy looked over at this man that had always served as his father figure and knew that he was thinking the same thing. “How do we get down there?” Jimmy asked in a panic.

The two ran back to the cops who were climbing back into the cop car. “Wait here!” one yelled to them with his hand up as they approached.

“No!” Jimmy shook his head adamantly, refusing to stop. He opened the car door when he reached it and climbed inside despite the officer’s protest.

“You have to take us with you,” Perry asserted. “Lois is our friend! If you don’t take us with you, it’s Henderson you’ll have to answer to because we all know I won’t let this go.”

The two officers exchanged a look before one nodded. “Buckle up,” he instructed, doing the same. “But once we get there you two will have to stay in the car until we secure the area.”

Jimmy opened his mouth to protest but was silenced by the

hand Perry placed on his arm.

The cop continued. “After we’ve checked on any victims and preserved any evidence and know that another blast isn’t coming, one of us will come back to let you out.”

Perry nodded. “We understand,” he said, turning to glare at Jimmy.

“Yeah, okay.”

The car ride over was short and fast. Jimmy prayed that Lois would be alright. That they would find her, undo whatever it was Luthor had done, find CK and put everything back to normal. As they came down the street and pulled into the drive, Jimmy saw the flashing lights of emergency vehicles off in the distance. Relief that help was on the way washed over him.

“I hope she’s okay,” he whispered.

“I’m sure she is,” Perry said. “She’s the strongest person I know.”

Jimmy fidgeted with his camera as he tried his hardest to wait patiently in the car. After what he was sure were hours, one of the cops came back to let them out. “I think your friend is around back,” he said. “Keep away from anything marked.”

Jimmy nodded his agreement, dropped his camera on the floor of the car, and took off sprinting around the house, shouting Lois’s name.

When he came around the corner, two figures sat near the edge of the melted snow. One of the figures was most definitely Lois, and she was nearly embracing the other. Anxious to get to her, he kept running and shouting. As he neared, he recognized the other person as none other than Clark. He stopped a few feet in front of them, looking first to Lois and then to CK.

“CK?!?” Jimmy couldn’t keep the surprise from his voice. He had been sure he would have to wait to be able to see his best friend again, *after* getting Lois back to normal. But here he was. Jimmy shook his head. Leaning his hands on his knees, he took several deep breaths before he tried to speak. “What did...? Why are you...?”

“Jimmy, calm down.” Lois smiled as she put her hand up and patted his arm. “What are you doing here?”

He looked around at the scattered debris and the paramedics and firemen moving about the scene. “I came to save you,” he answered. He looked at her then and realized he sounded like a lunatic. Shaking his head, he tried again. “I mean, I thought you were in trouble.”

“Is everyone here alright?” a paramedic interrupted, tossing a blanket around Lois first, then Clark.

“Lois!” Perry called from behind him. “Clark?!?” he said with the same surprised confusion Jimmy had expressed. “Great shades of Elvis! What are you doing here?”

Jimmy looked to Clark who, along with the bruising on his face, appeared to be in some pain as he moved his arms to grab the blanket. “I think CK is hurt,” Jimmy said to the paramedic, trying to be helpful, kneeling beside him.

“It’s okay,” CK said, waving the paramedic away. “It’s just a scratch.”

“We can give you a lift to the hospital to get you checked out,” the paramedic suggested.

“No!” Lois and Clark shouted in unison.

Jimmy smiled and looked from Clark to Lois. Everything would be fine.

Lois reached to squeeze Clark’s hand reassuringly. “No, he’s fine,” she told the paramedic in as calm a voice as she could. “I’ll take care of him.”

The paramedic nodded and left, and she was relieved at having dodged the need to answer some difficult questions. She was sure, now that she understood the nature of Clark’s... condition, that they would be able to find a way to get him back to his version of normal. Then, any injuries he had right now would be history.

She let out a breath and watched Clark as his eyes followed the firefighters and paramedics. Turning her own eyes to the scene, she saw what a bleak picture it was. Some first responders were putting out the small fires that remained in and around the house. Others were moving debris. Two policemen were laying a blanket over Lex’s body. Three paramedics were working on putting Scott on a stretcher.

“Hell’s bells! What in tarnation went on here?” Perry asked, looking around as well.

“A... weapon exploded,” she said simply. Remembering Jimmy’s comment about why he was there, she looked in his direction and asked, “How did you know we were in trouble?”

“I didn’t know *both* of you were in trouble,” he said as he reached a hand out to Clark to help him up. “I can’t believe you’re here, Clark.”

“To be honest, Jimmy, me neither,” Clark admitted with a chuckle.

“Lois,” Jimmy started, looking back at her as Perry helped her to her feet. She could tell he was nervous about what he was about to say. “I don’t know how to tell you this,” he started again, “but Luthor is a monster, and he kidnapped you, and I don’t even know what all he’s done...” He stopped when she tossed her head back and huffed. “You know? How?”

“Scott,” she said.

“Your cameraman???”

“Yeah.” She had no intention of explaining further now, but she could tell Jimmy was dying to know. “How do *you* know?” she asked, deferring his next question.

“It was an accident,” he said, shaking his head. “I was investigating a medical malpractice case and remembered everything yesterday.”

“The kid insisted I listen to Nat King Cole all night until it worked on me, too,” Perry added, looking sideways at Jimmy.

“I don’t know if Henderson found the right song yet,” Jimmy finished. Lois saw Jimmy glance at his best friend. “Are you guys okay?”

“We’re fine, Jimmy,” Clark said. “We’ve been through a lot just now, and I still don’t remember everything yet.” Clark smiled, but Lois could see right through him. She naturally moved closer to Clark. She felt his surprise but was comforted when he wrapped his blanketed arm around her. Nestled at his side, they walked behind Perry and Jimmy up the steps beside the house.

“Do you remember that you guys are married?” Perry asked, looking back over his shoulder.

She felt Clark stiffen, and they both stopped moving forward.

“What?” Lois asked. She shook her head. She knew there were holes, but how could she not remember an event that important? Why hadn’t it been one of the first memories to return?

“It was the week before Superman left,” Jimmy explained.

“But I remember him leaving.” She frowned.

“You really didn’t remember that?” he asked, looking from one to the next.

“I found rings tucked into the wallet Scott gave me,” Clark said. She quickly looked at him as he continued. “He was trying to convince me, but I didn’t believe him... until he showed me the wallet.” Turning to face her, he added, “It had a picture of us. You were wearing one of them in it. I only thought maybe we had been engaged. Being married would explain why there were two rings.”

She didn’t remember that either. All she could do was stare at him with her mouth open.

“I guess you guys got sick of waiting,” Perry said with a smile on his face. “It all happened very fast right after we’d all thought Bad Brain Johnson had killed Lois and Superman. Nice little ceremony near that fountain you’re so fond of at Centennial Park. Just a few of us there.” He and Jimmy turned to continue toward the front of the house. And she felt Clark pull her along.

Married? Stunned by this news, she looked around at the

scene as they ambled slowly. She saw countless emergency vehicles parked at odd angles in odd places. The chaotic arrangement resembled the jumbled mess in her mind, and she suddenly felt overwhelmed by everything. She stumbled, and Clark caught her.

Just like he always has.

That thought only exacerbated the problem, reminding her that things hadn't been that way for two months, and the familiar queasiness she'd felt the first time her memories came back assaulted her. Would he still be there when he found out?

She stumbled again and this time, Clark looked at her. The look in his eyes was uncertain, and she wondered if he had similar thoughts coursing through his head. What had happened to him while they were apart? It couldn't be nearly as devastating as her story. Could it?

"Perry? Jimmy?" he called to them. "Would you mind letting the police know we're going to go over there and sit for a bit?" He nodded his head toward a snow-covered bench down a path that led to what was probably a beautiful garden in the spring.

"Sure, Clark," Perry said, nodding.

The crunch of the snow wasn't enough to distract Lois from her worries. She clung to Clark for both warmth and strength. But she wasn't sure she would be able to talk about any of this yet. Not when her stomach was in knots. She hadn't even had a chance to think things through on her own.

When they reached the bench, Clark used his other blanketed arm to brush the snow away, and they sat side by side. Clark leaned closer and draped his arms and blanket around her. He held her like he was afraid that she would disappear or leave if he let go. And while it felt amazing to be close to him again, there was so much standing in the way.

And they were *married*?

"Oh Lois, I'm sorry," he breathed into her hair. Tears immediately began welling in her eyes. "I'm so sorry. I never should have left. It was a trick, and I didn't see it." She felt a small shake of his head. "None of this would have happened if I hadn't left. I'm so sorry," he whispered again.

"No," she interrupted, her voice cracking, "I told you to go." She wiped at the tears streaming down her face and shivered but couldn't tell if it was from the cold or something else.

"And... seeing as we're *married*..." Clark began with a smile, but it changed to a frown as he pulled back slightly, "I have to be honest with you about something."

Lois frowned, afraid of what he was going to say.

"Lana..." he said.

"Lana?" Lois repeated. Clark's old girlfriend from Smallville. She couldn't imagine why he would be bringing her up. Unless... Her stomach roiled.

"She's been..." Clark began, looking ashamed, "staying with me. We just happened to be in the same place and... But *nothing* happened." He shook his head adamantly before he closed his eyes and let out a sigh. He looked towards his feet and chuckled. "Lois, she had been staying at my apartment, up until just before you showed up in Columbia. She... heard me talking to you... in my sleep. I didn't understand it then, but I do now."

"Clark—" she started to say but stopped, choking on the words when she realized what *she* would have to say. She looked away from him at the long shadows the rising sun was creating on the snow.

They still had holes in their memories. They still needed to put the rest of the pieces together and make sense of everything that happened. Clark was making an effort to be honest with her, but she hadn't yet told him what had happened to her. And, while she knew she needed to, she wasn't sure she could do that.

"Lois?" he said so gently it hurt. "I'm sorry, I had no idea what was going on. I am just relieved. I was so... miserable myself... that I didn't want..." He turned her face toward his with

a caring finger and looked directly into her eyes as fresh tears slid down her cheeks. "What is it?"

How could she tell him she had been *married* to Lex? Did he already know?

Did he know that, in every sense of the word, she'd been *married* to Lex? Worse, according to him, she was carrying his child. How would they get past this? She closed her eyes in an effort to curb the nausea, but scenes from the evening just played over and over in her mind. She was unable to stop the fresh sobs that came forth.

Clark pulled her close exactly as she needed him to. "Tell me? Please?" he asked.

But she couldn't say it.

"It's nothing," she lied. "I'm just so glad I finally have you back." She still couldn't stem the sobs that seemed to be worsening.

"This doesn't seem like nothing, Lois," he said. "What is it?" He released her and held her at arm's length, but Lois lowered her head to keep him from being able to see through her. She didn't know how to tell him.

"No," she cried, pushing Clark away. She felt intense guilt and a need to get away from Clark before she hurt him again.

Taking deep breaths, she got up as quickly as she could and stepped away from him. But there was nowhere for her to go. The fight left her. It was all too much. She sank to the ground and wrapped herself tightly in her blanket.

Chapter 32

Clark was stunned by her sudden rejection but quickly got up and followed her, pushing away the thought that she didn't want him to do so. He approached her slowly, like he would a scared animal that he didn't want to frighten away, and knelt beside her, peering at her face. "Lois, is it Lana?" he asked.

He felt a small bit of relief when she shook her head. He placed his hand gently on her knee to comfort her, but she swiped it away. His heart ached. "Lois," he said as compassionately as he could, "what is it?" He needed to know and knew she needed to tell him, but he didn't know what was preventing her from doing so.

She turned her head to the side and cried even harder. He made a quick decision he hoped he wouldn't regret. The small gasp that escaped her told him that she was surprised he had picked her up.

She struggled against him. "Let go of me!" she cried. She pushed and flailed, but he was stronger. Even without superpowers and with injuries, he still had the strength of a normal man. He held her tightly but gently as he walked back to the bench. "Let me go..." she demanded again.

"No," he said assertively, "I won't let go." She continued to struggle as he sat down. He held her in his lap and felt her began to tire. If she was worried about how he would respond to whatever it was she needed to tell him, he could allay some of her fears. "Lois, listen to me," he started. She stopped struggling, but her breathing remained fast. "I don't care what it is. Whatever it is or was, it wasn't your fault." He spoke from the heart and allowed every bit of sincerity he had within him to soak his words. She seemed to calm down, and he continued, "Especially if it happened in the last two months. Neither of us were ourselves." He took her chin and turned her face to his. The fear in her eyes was palpable. "*Nothing* will change how I feel about you. I *love* you, Lois."

At this she relaxed. He held her eyes with his and did everything he could to let her see the truth of his words. *Please believe me.*

She closed her eyes tightly, squeezing tears out that ran down her cheeks.

When she opened her eyes, he could see the pain she was

feeling, sense her fear. He wanted to fix it for her, to fix everything, to go back in time and change every last thing to the way it used to be. “Tell me, please,” he urged. “Whatever happened,” he assured her, “we’ll work through it. There isn’t *anything* that would be too much for us. Even without all of my memories, I *know* that is true.” The fear in her eyes seemed to dim a little.

She took a few more deep breaths, further calming herself. He relaxed his arms but couldn’t let her go. He suspected she needed confirmation that he meant what he said.

She looked down at her fingers that she was wringing in her lap. “Clark...” she began slowly as if she were weighing her words before saying them. “I – I was...” she swallowed. “Lex made me think I was married to him.”

“I know,” he said simply. “I don’t care. That wasn’t you.”

“He said I’m pregnant,” she reminded him, finally looking him in the face while biting her lower lip.

“I know that too. You said it was something you made up.”

“I thought it was.” She slipped herself off his lap to sit next to him instead, leaving a cold emptiness in her place. He reached for her hands, suddenly worried she’d run away again. The fact that she didn’t pull away and instead squeezed his hands eased some of his concern.

“After the explosion, when I was trying to get the kryptonite pieces away from you,” she continued, turning her face away from him. “He was still alive.” She shook her head. “He told me I *am* pregnant.” More tears slowly fell down her cheek.

“How could he know?” Clark asked gently as he reached to wipe one away.

“I don’t know.” Lois shook her head. “I don’t know,” she repeated. She quickly looked at him with trepidation. “What if he’s right?”

Instantly, he was filled with rage, wishing he had access to his powers and that Lex wasn’t already dead. He let out an angry yell as he looked heavenward.

How dare Lex do this to them? He stood up, considering what this meant. He understood that for the past two months, they had been living lives not their own. He could see the devilish sneer on Luthor’s face as he delivered the cruel blow. For that psychotic lunatic to leave her with such a monumental piece of information in a situation like this made his blood boil.

“Clark?” Lois called to him. He still had one of her hands in his and felt her gentle pull. When he looked at her face, he saw the worry in her eyes. She hung her head, defeated, but he quickly pulled her up to stand in front of him.

Startled, she looked for any sign of what might be going through his head. Unexpectedly, his expression became understanding and regretful. Was he struggling to find words to tell her he couldn’t be with her anymore? That this *was* too big for them to get through?

“No, Lois,” he said, shaking his head and pulling her closer. “I’m not angry at you.” With that he brought her hands to his chest, holding them tenderly. “You didn’t... This wasn’t...” He took a deep breath and closed his eyes. When he opened them, he looked directly at her. “I remember when we were in the clouds, and you told me that you love me. I don’t doubt it at all. I don’t think for one minute that you’d ever do anything like this – cheating or having an affair or whatever you’re thinking you did. That is not what happened here. I *know* that.”

He gently kissed her fingers, and the familiar flutters it caused warmed her. How did he know what she’d been thinking? If only that were the only problem here.

“But if I am pregnant with—”

“Lois, I just found out we’re *married*,” he interrupted, “and I am never giving that up.” His face lit up with a smile, and he wrapped his arms around her. “We’ll get through this, all of it,

together. Just like we’ll work to get our memories all in order. And just like we’ll deal without the superpowers.”

She tried to blink away the tears filling her eyes. She’d forgotten about the tattoo she had seen when she first found him lying in the snow. “Clark,” she half sobbed, splaying her fingers on his chest. “I think I know what happened to your powers.”

His eyes grew wide, and he pulled slightly away from her. “What?” he said, his brows drawing into a frown.

“When I found you, you were on your stomach and under your shirt I saw a tattoo.” She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand as his mouth slowly opened. “In the sunlight, it sparkled red and green. I think they tattooed you with kryptonite.” She sniffed the last of her tears away.

“What did it look like?” he asked quietly.

She smiled at his unexpected question. “A phoenix,” she said. “Lex always thought of himself that way.”

Clark shook his head. “He really was a monster, wasn’t he?” He took a deep breath and drew her closer. “Don’t worry, Lois. It will all work out. It always does.”

And she believed him.

He leaned closer to her as if he might kiss her but stopped suddenly, smiling at her. It was then she heard the approach of a group that she would be willing to bet money included Jimmy.

Perry’s own mind still struggled to keep up with everything that had happened. It was all so unbelievable. The *Daily Planet* would have headlines for weeks out of this. He and Jimmy walked with Inspector Bill Henderson around to the side of the house where Clark had said he wanted to talk with Lois. The sun was continuing its ascent above the horizon now and, though it promised an increase in temperature, they needed to leave this mess and get somewhere warmer.

Perry saw the two love birds standing in the snow, heads together, and slowed his pace to give them more time alone. He could only imagine what they must be going through. He knew things couldn’t go right back to the way they had been, but he hoped the connection they had, which he had watched grow between them from simple partnership to a budding romance to the real deal, would be able to weather this storm... this category five hurricane.

“So, you’ve remembered everything, Henderson?” Perry asked, stalling. He gripped the rail next to the steps and hobbled slowly down them, trying to make it seem like he just couldn’t go any faster.

“Mostly,” the police inspector replied, slowing as well. His face held a stern expression, though Perry hadn’t ever seen it any other way. “I still can’t believe Luthor got away with so much. We’re going to be cleaning up this mess for a while.”

“Is he really dead this time?” Jimmy asked. He was behind Perry and stood waiting a step up for Perry to get to the next. The glint Perry saw in Jimmy’s eye as he watched Lois and Clark in the distance told Perry he understood the real reason for the slow pace.

“Yeah. We’re going to let the local police take care of that here.” Henderson may have smiled at that, or, at least, the stern expression relaxed. “Less chance of Luthor’s hands being... having been in the pockets of these guys.”

“Good idea.” Perry begrudgingly reached the bottom step and was forced to walk a little faster.

Lois and Clark shifted to stand next to each other, facing the approaching crowd. He could tell Lois had been crying, and they both looked tired as hell. Perry’s heart went out to them. He would be there to help them in whatever way he could, though. He’d get his top reporters back and do everything in his power to get things back to whatever their new normal now was.

“Lane and Kent,” Henderson greeted, reaching out to shake their hands. “I have to admit, I am very glad to see both of you

again.”

“Thanks, Henderson,” Clark said. His hand worked its way out from under the blanket to shake the proffered hand before going back underneath. “Any word on Scott?”

“He’s still unconscious. They’re about to transport him to MetroGen,” Henderson answered.

“Is he going to be okay?” Lois asked.

“They need to rule out head injuries and run some other tests. We don’t even know what was injected into him yet.”

Perry could see the concern on both of their faces and once again wondered what happened to get them all here. It must have been quite an adventure.

“What do we have to do to get out of here?” Clark asked.

“Well, we will eventually need your statements,” he explained. “But White here says he’s not letting you talk to us until you’re ready.” Henderson eyed Perry which only made Perry smile. “No more than 24 hours,” he added.

“My two best reporters need to take care of themselves first,” Perry asserted. “I’ll take them home.”

Chapter 33

Perry didn’t take them home. How could he? Neither of them really had a home any more. Lois had no interest in ever setting foot in Lex’s house ever again. And Clark no longer lived in Metropolis.

Instead, Perry dropped them off at his fishing cabin that just happened to be on the route back to Metropolis, and he offered to make them some lunch before heading back to town.

Lois spent much of the time since they left the house at the bottom of the bluff crying silently while Clark held her hand as they rode in the back seat of the borrowed car. Every time she thought she’d pulled herself together, more tears would come. She hoped she would have more control over her emotions once the shock of everything that had happened that morning wore off.

They stopped a few places on the way to the cabin to get a few necessary items that neither of them had at this point. Clark kept a tight yet gentle grip on her hand as they shopped for necessities – clothing, toiletries. Nat King Cole CDs.

A pregnancy test.

And Clark. Clark was a constant source of strength, and though she didn’t understand how he managed it when everything was so muddled, she needed him to be strong. Maybe it was his Smallville upbringing, the resiliency that his parents had instilled in him. Maybe it was the innate goodness he possessed that pushed him to help in a situation he thought he shouldn’t be in and didn’t understand. It didn’t matter why. What mattered was that he was there.

What can I say, dear, after I say I'm sorry?

What can I do to prove it to you, I'm sorry?

I didn't mean to ever be mean to you

If I didn't care I wouldn't act like I do

As they drove to the cabin, Perry played the new CDs in the car. None of the songs seemed to have any effect on Clark, but they did bring up all sorts of memories for Lois, from her childhood to this morning's misadventures. The mind-boggling onslaught of memories threatened to overwhelm her. She snuggled against Clark's side, staring out at the passing landscape, trying to think instead about the safe haven she found in his arms.

They reached the cabin just before lunchtime. Perry ushered them in and gave them a quick tour of the tiny getaway. Lois wasn't able to pay attention. She numbly followed them around as Clark politely asked questions and then directed her to the bathroom. Perry went to make lunch for them.

The cabin featured a small sun-room that faced west. Barely large enough to hold the two Adirondack chairs and table, it was at least warm despite the wintry conditions outside. Lois relaxed in one of the chairs, her feet tucked under her, staring out at the

snow-covered landscape. Clark lounged in the other beside her. He had moved the small table out of the way, pulled his chair up next to hers, and intertwined their fingers.

They waited in awkward silence for what surely would be the longest five minutes of her entire life.

The stars would cry in the blue if you said no

Their tears would fall like the dew if you said no

The fragrance of the flowers would fade if you turned away

And the warmth of the summer day would leave me so cold

“Are you okay?” he asked quietly, squeezing her hand.

“Um... yeah,” she responded, not sure if it was the right answer.

“Lois,” he said, drawing her eyes to him. “It will all work out.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Yes, I do.” He looked into her eyes as he brought her hand up to kiss and then tenderly caressed her fingers.

She leaned her head back, unsure. Her nerves were in shambles. She’d replayed everything in her mind that would have indicated she was pregnant. It was really only the nausea and vomiting. And the fact that she really couldn’t remember the last time she’d had a period. But there was so much she didn’t really remember that she couldn’t be sure if it had or had not happened. Her stomach groaned now, but it was still empty and the stress of waiting surely played a role in that.

The countless stars in the heavens are trembling above

So don't say no, I beg of you, don't say no to my love

She glanced over at Clark. He held her hand to his chest, and she could feel his strong and steady heartbeat. He leaned his head back on the chair and let out a deep breath while closing his eyes. His face was relaxed, and even without a smile, he looked happy.

“What are you thinking about?” she asked.

“You,” he said without moving, without hesitation. The corners of his mouth rose. “How we’re married. How much I love you. How lucky I am to have you back.”

“How can you be so calm right now?” she asked, shaking her head.

You're my everything

Underneath the sun

You're my everything

Rolled up into one

He slowly rolled his head toward her, but his unfocused eyes and frown told her he was remembering something. She sat up, welcoming the distraction, and faced him. Seconds later, he shook his head and saw her. A smile grew across his face.

“What is it?” she asked, eager to know what he now knew.

“Our first date.” He reached for her face and caressed her cheek. “You slammed the door in my face.” He chuckled then, and it lightened her heart. “Do you remember?”

She nodded as she smiled. Her heart had been a jumble of emotions then, feeling so much attraction toward her partner, but not understanding him. “I didn’t know what to do with myself. I was so scared.” She laughed then too, and the weight on her shoulders continued to lift. She took a deep breath, feeling like she might be ready to face their future together. “How much time do we have left?” she asked.

Slipping his fingers to the back of her neck, he pulled her closer and gently pressed his lips to hers. “All the time in the world,” he said.

She smiled at his non-answer. “No, I mean the test.”

As if on cue, the digital timer that sat on the table Clark had moved out of the way dinged, and Lois felt her heart stop.

“It can wait,” he said, kissing her again. “I don’t care what the answer is.”

She smiled, and then she whispered against his lips, “But I have to know.”

He kissed her once more before sitting back in his chair. He could see the tears threatening to spill from her eyes, and it made his heart ache. He wished he could take it all from her. He wished he'd never left. He wished he still had his powers. He'd do anything to fix this for her. But he couldn't play the 'if-only' game. It was the way it was. What he could do was be there, supporting her, loving her.

"Do you want me to check it?" he asked.

She nodded, and a tear escaped. He released her hands to stand up and watched as she swept them away.

"Come with me," he said, holding his hand out to her.

She looked at his outstretched hand and took it as she raised her eyes to meet his. Her hand trembled as he tucked it under his arm. They walked slowly together through the cabin, the smell of chicken and dumplings in the air. Perry wasn't paying any attention to them, thankfully. He was in the equally small kitchen off of the main room, humming Elvis tunes as he cooked.

A few steps and they would be there at the threshold of the bathroom – the threshold that would determine the rest of their lives.

"No," she said suddenly, tugging on his arm, stopping him. "I don't want to know anymore." She shook her head and tried to back away, but he kept hold of her hand.

"Lois, it will be okay," he soothed.

"No, it *won't*!" He could hear the panic in her soft voice. She yanked her hand from his arm and began gesturing with them as she explained, "If I am pregnant with that slime ball's evil spawn, I'll have it months from now—"

"Lois..." he tried to interrupt.

"—and you're going to leave me once you figure out that you don't want anything to do with it or me—"

"Lois," he tried again, putting his hands on her shoulders.

"—and then I'll be alone and have to take care of it by myself—"

"Lois!" he said, lifting her face to his. "Stop!"

Her rant stalled. Her eyes were wide with worry, her brows raised. "I can't do it," she cried.

"Yes, you *can*, Lois," Clark started, determined. Grasping her face gently with his hands, he continued, "I will *not* leave you. So what if you are pregnant? That baby will be half you and *anything* that comes from you will be amazing, and I'll love it just as much as I love you. No matter what."

He paused and dared to smirk at her, sliding his fingers to the back of her neck and into her hair. "Besides, according to Perry, we were married for a whole week before I left. You couldn't possibly think we wouldn't have..." He let the idea float between them and smiled as he saw understanding dawn on her face in the form of a blush.

"Clark," she started, but he didn't let her finish.

"I hate that I can't remember it right now, but there is no doubt in my mind that it happened. Maybe you were already pregnant." He hesitated a moment, considering whether he should reveal his next thought. But if it alleviated any of her anxiety, it would be worth it. "And... if you weren't and you are now... Well, maybe it's a blessing in disguise. I'm not human. What if this is the only way..."

Her hand on his cheek stopped him. Her eyes fixed on his, and he took a breath to steady himself.

"That's how I've been able to remain calm through all this, Lois – I have hope. And I refuse to let that *slime ball*, as you put it, ruin our life together. It's a choice." He kissed her then, there in the hall outside the bathroom of the cabin they would stay in for a few days while putting their life back together. "Choose me," he pleaded as they separated.

She pulled back and looked up into his eyes again. "Okay," she said softly. And he accepted this as a small victory, the first of many to come.

"Okay," he repeated. Releasing her, he took her hand once

more as he opened the bathroom door and picked up the pregnancy test that lay face down on the counter. He turned to face her, keeping it face down between them. He gave her a reassuring smile before turning it over.

"Positive," they said in unison.

"Hey, you two!" Perry called from the kitchen as Clark smiled at Lois. "Soup's on! Get yourselves comfy on the couch, and I'll bring it to ya."

Lois, her eyes wide and face pale, didn't seem to hear the announcement or see Clark's reaction. Standing there with her mouth open, he'd never seen her look more beautiful. However this had happened, he really did see it as a blessing.

Clark pitched the pregnancy test into the trash and led her to the small living room. He sat next to her on the couch, her hand still in his, as Perry came in from the kitchen carrying a bowl for each of them.

"Lois?" Perry asked when she didn't reach for the bowl.

Clark took the bowls from Perry and set them on the small coffee table in the middle of the small room. While he was bursting at the seams to tell everyone, truly embracing this as he said he would, he wasn't sure if Lois wanted to tell anyone at all. So, he waited for her to answer.

"What's the matter, honey?" Perry asked as he sat on the corner of the small coffee table.

"I'm pregnant," she said. She squeezed Clark's hand and looked to him with just barely a smile. Clark couldn't stop his smile and reached his other arm around her.

"Oh...well..." Perry stammered, sitting up straight.

"Looks like we'll be starting our family sooner rather than later." She turned to face Perry and smiled. A genuine, if reserved, smile.

"I guess congratulations are in order?" Perry asked. At her nod, he patted her knee and reached to shake Clark's hand.

"Thanks, Chief," she said, letting out a deep breath.

"It's a lot to take in," Clark admitted.

"Of course, it is." Perry chuckled. "I guess I'll get out of here so you two can... uh... take it in." He placed his hands on his knees and pushed himself up to a standing position. Gathering his things, he continued, "There's a truck parked out back, and the keys are in the kitchen drawer. You guys stay as long as you need. We'll get everything worked out later."

"Thanks, Perry," Clark said.

They stayed seated on the small couch, and Perry shut the door behind him. Clark's eyes never left Lois. He knew she was still in shock over everything, just as he was. "You told him," he said.

"I'm sorry. Every excuse I thought of was lame, and I couldn't think of anything else to say, and you know he would have just seen right through it anyway. Hell, he probably knew before we got here," she babbled, pausing to catch a breath before looking at him. "You don't mind, do you?"

"No," he said, his smile growing.

"I'm glad you're so happy about all this," she said, her sarcasm evident. "What kind of weird family are we going to make?"

"I don't care," he affirmed, raising his eyebrows. "It will be *our* family."

Lois shook her head. "How can you be so happy? I mean, I get what you said earlier, but... So much has happened in the last twenty-four hours. All I feel like doing is screaming and weeping and throwing things and laying on the floor staring at the ceiling and you—" she paused and poked him in the chest, "—*you* are almost grinning ear to ear, and I just don't get it."

"Lois," he began, dropping the grin and turning to face her, "I have literally just crawled out of a hole that had me questioning why I was even alive. Even though I haven't remembered much, I know enough. After I saw you this morning, once you touched me

..." He took her hand and began tracing circles on her palm. "I knew that everything I thought I knew about you had to be wrong. And now, I have more than I thought I'd ever have a week ago." He paused and shrugged, allowing the smile to return. "Maybe I'm on some kind of high, but I hope it doesn't wear off anytime soon. You are worried enough for the both of us."

Lois frowned, and Clark watched her mouth open and her lips twist as she decided how to respond. He had the distinct impression he'd seen that exact look before and wished he could remember it.

"You questioned why you were alive?" she said softly.

"I was completely miserable." As he leaned in, he traced her jaw with his fingers and ran his thumb across her lower lip. "I'm lost without you."

"Me too," she breathed, leaning closer to him and meeting his eyes.

Her eyes glistened as her lips begged him to kiss her. Oh, how he missed her. "I love you," he whispered before kissing her. Something in the way she responded was so familiar and yet so new, and he savored it.

Chapter 34

January 25, 1996

"One more," Clark said, pushing the eject button on the stereo in the borrowed truck. They were nearly at S.T.A.R. Labs in Metropolis. The first stop in their new reality would be at Dr. Klein's office. And an interesting meeting it would be.

"Thank God," Lois said, raising her hand up as she veered around a slow-moving car on the highway. She knew that, to an outsider, it might have looked as though she suffered from road rage, but instead she was merely relieved.

"It's really just the last CD we *have*, not the last one," Clark pointed out as he inserted the CD into the slot. "We'll have to get more."

"Oh," she said sheepishly, taking the exit ramp that would lead them almost directly to the parking garage at S.T.A.R. Labs. It wasn't that she didn't like the songs. In fact, she really enjoyed spending all that time yesterday cuddled with Clark at the fishing cabin, listening to romantic music and reminiscing every time another memory emerged. Laughing at one, crying at another, she felt closer to him now despite the missing puzzle pieces that remained.

*It was just one of those things, just one of those crazy flings
One of those bells that now and then rings, just one of those things*

"We don't have to listen anymore," Clark said nonchalantly.

"What?" Lois asked, taken aback. Looking over in time to see Clark snap the CD case shut, she also caught the tiniest bit of a smile at the corner of his mouth. "Did you have something else in mind?" she asked as she turned into the parking garage.

Clark twisted his face in thought. "Well, making new memories sounds a bit cheesy." He chuckled. "So that's not it." He smiled as he turned to look out of the window.

Lois couldn't stop the giggle from escaping and wasn't surprised when Clark joined in. They continued listening to the end of the song as Lois found a spot to park. They exited the truck and began walking toward the building hand in hand. "Seriously though," she started, "I wish I could remember our wedding."

"And the time between it and when I left..." Clark said as he looked sideways at her. His free hand came up to lightly brush her arm, and it sent shivers through her.

She felt the blush creeping up her neck and tried to ignore it as she pulled open the door, stepped into the lobby, and walked up to the front desk. It wasn't long before they were checked in and riding the elevator up to the floor that held Dr. Klein's lab.

*And if I can make it there
I'm gonna make it anywhere*

It's up to you, New York, New York!

"Hm, sounds like they might have more songs for us to listen to here," Lois commented.

"I don't think Nat King Cole sang this one."

"I know, but it fits doesn't it?"

Clark chuckled and pulled her in close. "Like this?"

"Like this," she breathed. Reaching up to meet his lips, she vaguely registered a familiar intro as the next song began and closed her eyes.

Moon and mist, Make rainbows in your hair

When I see your smile, There's sunlight everywhere

Clark's hold on her changed fractionally to something more alarming. She opened her eyes to see that familiar clouded look and watched as expressions flitted across his face. The return of his memories was short lived each time, but it was an IV drip, never releasing more than a few memories at a time. She steadied them as he staggered toward the wall of the elevator, hoping that the elevator ride would last until it passed.

The elevator slowed as he shook his head. When she saw his eyes focus on her, he smiled. The elevator doors opened just then and as he ushered her forward, he whispered, "Now I've got a secret."

She glanced at him over her shoulder. "What did you remember?" she asked quietly.

"Our wedding." He knocked on the door to Dr. Klein's lab, preventing her from asking more questions, and then opened it to enter.

"Dr. Klein," Lois said as she entered the office.

"Just a moment." Dr. Klein stood at a lab table covered in equipment that included a laser and a centrifuge. He finished marking something down on a clipboard as he looked back and forth between it and a small display on the centrifuge. As he finished writing, he stood up and turned toward them.

"Miss Lane!" His excitement was tangible as he eagerly greeted her. "Oh, I mean Mrs. Kent!" The correction surprised Clark and, judging by the look on Lois's face, it surprised her as well. "Wait! You haven't remembered that yet?"

"I've been told, but no, I don't remember it yet," Lois answered quietly. "This is..." She smiled at him before continuing, "my husband, Clark Kent."

"Dr. Klein." Clark smiled at Lois and reached to shake the grinning scientist's hand. That was the first time he'd been introduced as her husband, and he found he loved it. He also wondered how the scientist would react to the news they were about to share with him.

"Mr. Kent!" Klein seemed just as excited to meet Clark as he was to see Lois, but the shock on his face when he looked at Clark made Clark chuckle. "Wow! You really took a beating, didn't you?"

"You should see the other guy," Clark said, laughing.

"And have you remembered everything?" Dr. Klein asked.

"Even less than Lois," he answered.

"What a shame," Dr. Klein said as he shook his head. "I'm sure it will come back to you soon enough. The details from this Dr. Hightower's machine are fascinating, but it seems as though it was never meant to be long term."

"I'm sorry?" Clark asked, not sure he heard the doctor correctly.

"It was never meant to be long term," the doctor repeated. Clark lifted an eyebrow as he looked at Dr. Klein until he caught the meaning. "Oh, well, you see, it was a bit like hypnosis with the keys that undo the changes they made, but the process he used to change the memories left them completely intact. It was only a matter of time... months or years... before the brain would right itself." He smiled at them as he finished his explanation. "Brains really are very fascinating."

"That's good to know," Clark said, looking at Lois who smiled at him. "I wonder if Hightower knew that was the case."

"Dr. Klein," Lois started, turning her attention to him, "we have some other things we wanted to talk to you about today. Two actually."

"Yes?" He smiled at her, raising his eyebrows.

"It's about Superman," she said.

Dr. Klein's face fell. "You haven't remembered that he left. Oh, Miss Lane—" He quickly cleared his throat and continued, "Mrs. Kent, he went to discover whether any other Kryptonians survived the destruction of his planet. Just before all of this happened, I came to tell—"

"No, Dr Klein," Clark interrupted. "We know all that. It's just that..."

"Superman didn't leave," Lois put in.

"He did, Miss...es Kent," Dr. Klein started, correcting himself again. Clark surreptitiously moved to close the door to the office, thankful they were alone. "You were there, I was there. I don't know where Mr. Kent was." He blinked as he said the last part.

"I was there, too," Clark said, meeting Dr. Klein's questioning expression. "I'm Superman."

"Please, Mr. Kent," Dr. Klein said, rolling his eyes. "And I'm The Atom." He turned back to the materials he had on his work bench and continued whatever he was doing before they arrived.

"Who?" Lois asked.

"Dr. Klein," Clark cut in to prevent an explanation of who The Atom was, "I know it's hard to believe, given my face and the circumstances, but it *is* true. I *am* Superman. I don't have any powers right now, which is why we're here." The scientist stopped what he was doing and turned to face him. Clark watched as Dr. Klein's brows drew together, and he seemed to be inspecting Clark for a few minutes before he spoke.

"But you did go," Dr. Klein argued. "I prepared you to go, with help of course, and I watched you leave."

"It was all part of Lex's plan," Lois explained. "He staged *all* of that."

"But I saw the data myself," he pointed out, taking a seat on the lab stool nearest his table. "The readout on the computer as you left Earth's orbit."

Clark shook his head. "After Superman flew away from the dock that Monday last November, Luthor used kryptonite to bring Superman... me down. I'm sure the tracking device was destroyed then. I fly... flew pretty fast so it would be easy to believe it would seem as though I left."

"And you don't have *any* powers?" Dr. Klein asked with disbelief written on his face.

"None," Clark confirmed. "But we think we know why, and we're hoping you can help."

"Of course," Klein seemed to shake himself out of his thoughts. "I'll do whatever I can."

"Yesterday," Lois began, "when I found Clark on the ground, I saw this tattoo on his back that sparkled red and green."

"You think it's Kryptonite?!" Dr. Klein exclaimed.

"Yes," Clark said.

"Green *and* red?" Klein mulled over out loud, rubbing his chin with his hand. "Yes, the combination of the two in close proximity and with just the right amount..." He stood and began pacing in the lab, stopping abruptly to face Clark. "And you are... normal... now?" At Clark's nod, his eyebrows shot up. "How fascinating. May I see this tattoo?"

"Yeah." After removing his coat, Clark pulled his t-shirt over his head, exposing the bandage on his chest.

Dr. Klein motioned to the lab stool he'd been sitting on moments earlier and collected a few items before coming over to examine him closely. Clark felt the doctor's gloved fingers poking and prodding the skin between his shoulder blades as the scientist made various thinking noises.

Clark was surprised at how quiet Lois was being during the exam. He looked at her to see concern on her face, her eyes glistening. He reached his hand out to her, and she came to him to grasp it.

"Well, it looks like this will be an easy fix. It appears to be a simple tattoo. With special ink, of course. The design is a good one though. I'm afraid, though, that laser treatments are not going to work with this one." He came around to face Clark and Lois.

"We'll have to remove the entire tattoo... the old-fashioned way."

Clark grimaced. Lois squeezed his hand, and he let out a long sigh. "Okay."

"How long do you think it will take him to get back to normal?" Lois asked. "Well, *his* normal."

"I can't say. After the tattoo is removed, and I see just how much kryptonite is there, I'll be able to make a better estimate."

Lois nodded at this and squeezed his hand again.

"Can we do it now?" Clark asked.

"I don't see why not," Dr. Klein said as Lois's eyes widened. The scientist took a few steps away and then stopped abruptly and turned back to them. "You said there were two things you wanted to talk to me about," Dr. Klein added.

"Yes. There's another thing we may need your help with," Clark started. "We're not sure yet, though."

"Name it." Dr. Klein leaned back on his lab table, listening.

"Lois is pregnant," Clark said as he glanced up to Lois. She stood there, looking at him with loving eyes, biting her lower lip. With his help, she was becoming more comfortable with the situation, but she still needed time. "The baby could be mine," he quickly added.

"Oh." Dr. Klein's eyes went wide. "*Could be?*" he repeated.

"The baby might also be Lex Luthor's," Lois said, a grimace on her face.

"I see."

Clark chuckled at Dr. Klein's awkward look. "I assume that since I'm not human, if the baby is mine, the pregnancy could be complicated."

"You're right," he agreed, nodding. "I'll have to run some tests. I could take some samples from you while I'm removing the tattoo. And get some from Lois before you leave?"

Clark nodded as he squeezed Lois's hands. As Dr. Klein scurried off, Clark prepared himself mentally for what was about to happen.

Clark sat in what looked like a massage chair, with his face centered on the hole in the head rest and his eyes closed. They'd moved to a different room on the top floor of the S.T.A.R. Labs building, which offered quick access to the roof. Dr. Klein insisted that they be able to get Clark outside quickly when the procedure was over and expressed his relief that the day was proving to be sunny even though it was still cold. He had brought into the room a small chunk of kryptonite in a thick lead box that sat open to further weaken Clark for the procedure.

Lois gently massaged Clark's fingers as she held his hands in hers from her seat on a footstool placed just in front of him so that she could see his face. She was wrapped in a very heavy, leaded blanket that covered her from her neck to her knees. Dr. Klein insisted it was a necessary precaution if she wanted to stay in the room. From her vantage point, she could also see Dr. Klein scurrying about the lab, collecting the equipment he would need. She tried not to think about what was about to happen, but it was hard to ignore.

She watched Dr. Klein approach with a tray and set it on a stand just to the side of the chair. "I'm going to get started now," Dr. Klein announced. "It shouldn't take too long." He paused and looked at Lois. "Are you sure you want to be here for this?"

"Yes," she answered, her voice shaking. Dr. Klein nodded and sat back to begin. She squeezed Clark's hands.

“Lois,” Clark whispered.

“What is it?” she asked, leaning closer. She stopped herself from asking if he wanted her to tell Dr. Klein he changed his mind. That wouldn’t be it; his mind was made up.

“It was a Monday.” His voice was faint, but he didn’t seem to struggle to say the words.

“It’s good for him to be distracted, Mrs. Kent,” Dr. Klein whispered over Clark’s shoulder to her. “Ask him more questions.”

“What was a Monday?” She frowned, wondering if the kryptonite was muddling his thoughts.

“Our wedding.”

She peered up at his face to see a weak smile on his lips, his eyes still closed. “Which Monday?” she asked.

“November 13th,” she heard Clark say. He gasped then as he flinched, but no other sound came from him. Tears sprang to her eyes, and she squeezed his hands even harder. “It was at Centennial Park,” he breathed. “Near the ... fountain.” His words sounded like they were being forced through gritted teeth, but he continued, “That pavilion... just to... the north.”

She tried to blink away the tears with little success. Without relinquishing his hand, she brought hers up close enough to use her wrist to wipe at her face. “Who...” Her throat was clogged, and she swallowed to clear it before continuing. “Who was there?” she asked.

“You.”

She gave a half laugh. “Who else?”

“I don’t know...” He drew in a sharp breath. “All I saw... was you.”

“And what did I look like?” His hands squeezed hers, and she rubbed his white knuckles before looking back to his face.

His eyes remained closed. “Beautiful...” he said, the corners of his mouth curling up even as his eyebrows were knitted in pain. “Sad... and happy.”

Lois opened her mouth to speak, but a lump wedged itself in her throat, making it impossible for words to escape. Only a muffled squeak made it through. Dr. Klein made a noise behind Clark, drawing her attention.

“Sorry,” he said. “Almost done now. Just a few more minutes. Keep him talking.”

“You...” he started before she could say anything, “came down the... sidewalk... with your father.”

“I thought you said you didn’t see anyone else,” she whispered.

“It’s in the ceremony... ‘Who gives this woman’... I heard his... voice.”

“Oh,” she managed to say. “Do you remember our vows?”

“I found mine ... tucked into my wallet.”

“The wallet Scott gave you?”

“Yeah.” He squeezed her hands again. “I didn’t... know that’s what it was... at first.” He winced again. “It’s weird, you know.”

“What is?”

“I don’t remember meeting you... or falling in love with you... just bits and... pieces. But I know... I *know* I love you... more than anything.”

She leaned forward and kissed the top of his head.

“I hate to interrupt,” Dr. Klein started, “but I’m going to cover the area with a special polymer that will bind to the wound and behave like skin until he’s healed.” Dr. Klein turned away from them as he spoke. When he turned back around he addressed Clark. “This will hurt.”

Lois braced herself and wondered how Clark was even managing to stay awake through all of this.

“You...” he said, breathless, “are the... most...” He stopped as he flinched in pain. Lois brought his hands up, holding them in front of her chest before he finished his choppy sentence, “Beautiful... thing I’ve ever... seen.”

“All done,” Dr. Klein said. He turned and began piling utensils on his tray.

Lois released the breath she was holding and kissed Clark’s fingers. As Dr. Klein closed the lid to the kryptonite box and began wheeling his cart out of the room, Lois stood and pressed another kiss to the top of Clark’s head.

Clark released her hands and attempted to sit up. He braced himself with his arms on the head rest and raised his head to meet Lois’s face.

She placed her hands on either side of his face and kissed his lips gently. “Even without your powers, you are amazing,” she said as she pulled away, making him chuckle.

“Only because I have you.”

“Let’s get you outside,” the doctor ordered as he came back in.

Together, Lois and Dr. Klein helped the still shirtless Clark out onto the sunny rooftop patio. He immediately felt relief as the sun touched his skin. They staggered to the table placed near the middle of the area, and he dropped into a seat, leaning forward to rest his arms on the table. Lois took the seat next to him, and Dr. Klein sat across from them.

“Thank you,” he said, his voice already feeling stronger. He took a deep breath, feeling more energized than he had at any point these last two months.

“You’re welcome,” Dr. Klein said, inclining his head.

“So how long do you think it will take him to get back to normal?” Lois asked.

“There wasn’t much kryptonite there, so the length of the exposure plays a bigger role. Given that,” Dr. Klein paused, doing some calculations in the air, “a few months? Less, if he gets plenty of sun.”

Clark breathed a sigh of relief and hung his head. With the Kryptonite no longer in his system, he would finally be able to get his powers back. And with the exception of some very important differences, he could see his life going back to normal soon.

“Regarding the pregnancy, I can recommend an OB,” Dr. Klein’s eyebrows rose in question. At Clark’s nod, he smiled. “Dr. Jackson. He’s a friend of mine. Very good. In fact, I’m pretty sure he knows everything... about everything.” Dr. Klein laughed before turning serious once more. “If it turns out the baby is Superman’s, I’d trust him to help with that.”

“I’d see anyone who could get us in before April,” Lois said, rolling her eyes. She crossed her arms and sat back. “They make a big deal about getting in to see a doctor as soon as you can, but no one has any open appointments for two months. It’s ridiculous!”

“I’m sure I can pull a few strings. He owes me one.” Dr. Klein winked at them. “You two certainly have a lot to cope with. I’m sorry it all got so out of hand,” Dr. Klein said, a sad smile on his face. He sighed and added, “and it’s a shame you weren’t able to make it to Krypton this time around.”

“That was just part of the ruse,” Lois answered, shaking her head. “Lex planted all that information.”

“Oh, but there was *real* data,” Dr. Klein said. “That chunk of Krypton is out there.”

“What?” they said in unison. Clark felt his jaw drop.

“Several other observatories around the world have shared their data with us, some just in the last few days,” Dr. Klein explained, his eyebrows high on his forehead. He seemed to register their surprise suddenly. “Oh, this is big news for you. Really big. I’m sorry. I should have waited to say something.”

This was too much for Clark to take in. He raised one hand up to run over his face and reached for Lois’s clasped hands with the other. He looked to her and read the plea in her face.

“I’m not going,” he stated. “I can’t go.”

“Of course, you can’t,” Dr. Klein agreed. “That window closed a long time ago. The next time we’ll be in the right location for you to use gravity assist won’t be for another 10 months or so.

But you don't have to make that decision now," Dr. Klein assured them.

Epilogue

January 25, 1996

Perry still couldn't believe it. Any of it. It was surreal. Somehow, a feat which he only partly understood, Lex Luthor had changed history. Not all of it, though. Just enough to put himself where the egomaniac had determined he should be.

Everyone in Metropolis had *forgotten* that he was a malicious narcissist that had committed suicide once he was caught. Everyone had *forgotten* the destruction he wreaked on the Daily Planet in his efforts to control not only the media, but Lois Lane herself. Instead, everyone *knew* that he was Metropolis's most famous philanthropic humanitarian. Everyone *knew* that he and Lois were married and living their happy lives among the elite. Everyone *knew* the destruction of the Planet had been caused by a freak weather accident. And everyone *knew* that the Luthors had rebuilt it to save something that was so important to the city.

And no one had reason to suspect that anything was wrong.

It was flawless. Or nearly so, since the man responsible for carrying out much of that fantastic plan had, on a whim, planted a key of sorts to undo what had been done. With the cooperation of radio and television stations nationwide, the keys had been given to the public and gradually the masses were beginning to remember the truth of things past.

On the first day following the revelation of Luthor's trickery, those who had remembered on their own had begun coming forward. Many of them had brushed it off as some strange dream they'd had, given that no one else believed it. It was a lot to cope with. Thankfully, putting things back to the way they had been previously was not as difficult as Perry had expected.

The facility Jimmy had been investigating that started their involvement in all of this had been shut down, permanently as far as anyone knew. It was apparent that nearly all the employees that worked there were none the wiser, and the ones who had participated in the unethical experiments had been arrested and charged. It was also true that once Dr. Hightower was found, his punishment would be swift and severe.

It was not clear what was in store for his assistant. There were still questions regarding what would happen to Scott Ferguson, Lex Luthor's employee tasked with guarding Lois while disguised as her cameraman after completing his job with Hightower. Instrumental in both the implementation of the scheme in the first place as well as its demise, no one yet knew how his punishment would be dealt with. The lawyer hired to defend him was confident his change of heart and following actions would see a reduction in charges and whatever sentence he might have coming.

Luthor had so cleanly inserted himself into the places he wished to be by merely replacing the person who rightfully belonged there with himself. All that was needed was to put that person back. There were also several instances where it was discovered that some questionable folks had been placed in positions of power by Luthor and surprise didn't quite describe how others reacted to learning the truth about those they worked with.

The last bit of the puzzle, the inconceivable number of record changes, proved to be difficult though. The young woman, Anna Seville, tasked with changing them was nowhere to be found. Of course, if Scott hadn't recalled her name, they wouldn't even know who to look for. She was good, had encrypted everything she'd worked with, and S.T.A.R. Labs had a team of engineers working to unravel it all. Once that was done, everything would return to normal.

Everything except Lois and Clark.

They couldn't go back to the way things had been. They were *married* now and *expecting*. Their lives would never be the same

again. But Perry wasn't concerned. He'd watched them grow and get to know each other, fall in love. If anyone could handle the strange turn of events, it was them.

They came to Metropolis this morning and gave their statements to the police. He was there, supporting them. It was difficult to hear more of what they had endured during all of this. But they were going to work through it as they always had. They ran an errand he didn't ask about, and then he joined them for lunch. It was good to see them together, to catch up.

They sat at the same restaurant where they'd met after the real destruction of the Planet, the one just across the street with seating outside. It was a seasonably cold day in Metropolis, but Clark had insisted on sitting in the sunniest spot they could find. The waiter looked at him as if he'd lost his mind, but Perry just eyed him curiously and smiled inwardly as they ordered and chatted. Now, Clark sat, leaning forward, his back straight and his face relaxed despite the bruising – the only visible evidence that anything was unusual.

"So, you've remembered the wedding," he said, nodding to Clark, who inclined his head in response. "And you haven't," he said, nodding to Lois.

She gave a weak smile as she shook her head. "He's told me about some of it."

"Not all of it? You mean to tell me he's already keeping secrets from you?" Perry joked.

"Well, I don't remember it completely... yet," Clark defended himself.

On their way to the cabin after everything that took place the morning before, Clark had explained that his memories weren't locked by just one key, but under layers of them. He was not surprised by any of that, but his excuse of having a "strong mind" made Perry chuckle.

"And we would have all remembered it eventually anyway?" Perry smiled at them.

"Yep," Lois confirmed.

"We've been wondering if Hightower knew that or planned it," Clark said. "Seems like there had to be a reason it would be that way."

"Great shades of Elvis," Perry said, shaking his head. "This is gonna fill the front page for weeks to come."

Lois took a sip from her drink as Clark took another bite of food, and Perry took it to mean they weren't ready to talk about it yet. Changing the subject, he started, "Look, I know things are a mess, and you two have a lot to work through. Hell, lots of adjustments are going to be made." He waved his hand in a wide arch. "But you two can stay at the cabin as long as you need, and once you're ready to get back to work, your jobs will be waiting for you."

"Thanks, Chief," Clark said.

"And if you need help finding a place in town, let me know."

"Thanks, Chief," Lois said.

"And if there's anything else you need help with, you can count on me."

"We know." Clark smiled at Lois, and Perry smiled at the picture he saw before him.

Years ago, when the cynical, demanding Lois Lane interrupted his interview of the sensible, down-to-earth Clark Kent, Perry had seen the look on Clark's face. It took Lois quite a bit longer to realize it herself, but once she did, Perry wasn't surprised at all. These two were meant for each other.

"So, when does Superman intend to make his return?" he asked, raising his eyebrows and pointedly looking between them.

"Uh... We have no idea," Lois answered as Clark tried to keep his last bite of food in his mouth.

"You sure?" Perry asked, smiling at Clark. "Because I know you two had the inside scoop on that guy. More than anyone. And since it turns out Luthor had his grubby hands in that phony trip to

space, too... Well, I'm just not sure what to expect..."

There wasn't much color in Clark's face to begin with, but what was there disappeared. Perry winked at him and saw Clark's jerk of surprise when he realized what Perry was getting at.

"The trip wasn't phony. We all saw him leave, Perry," Lois pointed out. "They said he wouldn't be back for five years or so."

"Now, Lois," he said, turning to face her, "you and I both know that *that* part of the story isn't true."

She sat up straighter, her eyes taking on that threatening glare he'd missed these past two months. Her defenses were up. "I'm not sure what you're getting at, Chief."

Perry lifted his eyebrows, watching her and waiting for her to acknowledge what he was insinuating. Clark reached for her hand and grasped it. They had a silent conversation between them that Perry imagined would have involved some amount of yelling had it been out loud.

"I don't know, Perry," Clark finally answered. "He's... not sure when his powers will return or how he'd explain his absence."

The surprise he should have felt was already tempered by the shock of having seen him at the house when they arrived looking for Lois. He'd known something must have happened to Clark, but he assumed there would be more searching involved. Then when he'd noticed the kryptonite shards on the ground as they walked back to the front of the house, he knew the situation was more severe.

Perry nodded his approval of the admission. "I've got some ideas on that front."

"How did you—" Lois began.

"Lois," Perry interrupted, "I did not become editor of a major newspaper because I can yodel."

Clark ran as fast as he could. The dogs barked and growled and howled ferociously as they chased him. How many were there? Six? Ten? His legs felt like lead weights as he struggled to move them. Any second they would be on him, snapping at his heels. The gate signifying his freedom came into view as he rounded the corner. His legs became even heavier, the growling closer. He opened his mouth to scream as he pushed himself with all he had, but no sound came forth. Something snatched at his hand, pulling him down. He tried to jerk it away but was suddenly paralyzed.

"Clark?" he heard a soft, familiar voice call to him.

His eyes flew open.

It was a dream.

He was uncomfortably squished into a stiff chair near a window in a small hospital room, bright afternoon sunlight streaming in on him. Scott lay asleep in the bed. Lois crouched next to Clark. It was her hand that gently held his. She looked at him with concern in her eyes.

Reminding himself of what the day had already held — relaying the sad tale to the police, removing the only remaining hold of Luthor with Dr. Klein, an enlightening lunch with Perry — calmed him further and relieved the panic from the dream. He closed his eyes and stretched as much as he could in the tiny space and without releasing her hand. "How long was I asleep?" he asked as he opened his eyes to look at her beautiful face.

"Maybe half an hour?" Lois answered. "What were you dreaming about?" she asked as she stood up. He kept his hold on her hand.

"Being chased by some angry dogs." He huffed at the dream. Then he sat straighter, glancing toward the motionless figure in the hospital bed. "Any change?"

She looked over at Scott and shook her head. "No, but the doctor thinks he should wake up within the hour now that he's off the meds they gave him." He nodded as she turned to him and squeezed his hand. "How are you?"

He smiled and pulled her to sit on his lap. She giggled as she sat down, her laughter chasing away the remnants of his dream. "I love you," he said as he nuzzled her ear.

"I love you, too," she whispered as she turned to press her lips to his. Ever soft, they left him wanting more, but the sound of movement from the hospital bed put an end to it.

He reluctantly released his hold on her as she stood but was pleased when she returned after she realized Scott had only moved. She sat back down on his lap, keeping her eyes on Scott. Clark wrapped his arms around her, intertwining their fingers, and asked the question he hadn't thought to ask until now. "Do you know why he helped us? I mean, I know he worked for Luthor. But why did he... switch sides, so to speak?"

Lois sighed and leaned her head back on his shoulder. "His sister."

Clark frowned. There was so much he didn't know about Scott. Clark simply trusted him because he seemed to know what was going on. Scott held out a life-preserver when Clark was flailing, and Clark latched on to it. He'd been surprised to hear that Scott was part of it all. Perhaps this was the person to whom he'd made the promise that he had spoken of back in that hotel room in Columbia.

"Samantha," Lois continued. "I met her a few times. Very sweet and young. Innocent. She died about two weeks ago." She looked toward Clark. "Pancreatic cancer. Just before she died, she remembered what Hightower had done to her and told Scott."

"He changed her memories, too?"

"More than that." She squeezed his hands and looked away but didn't expand on that, and Clark didn't push her to. "That was when Scott realized what kind of monsters he was working for. Hightower. And Lex."

"He told me about his promise to end it. I was too caught up in my own misery to think to ask," Clark admitted.

"That treble clef he wears belonged to her. When he first started singing to me, I thought it was because he missed his sister. She loved Nat King Cole."

A groan came from the hospital bed, drawing both Lois and Clark to the bedside. When they reached it, a dreary eyed Scott looked up at them.

"Hey," he said, his voice scratchy.

"Hey," Lois said. "Thank you," she added, hugging him. When she sat up from the hug, she smiled at Scott. "You're okay, aren't you?" she asked despite having been assured multiple times by multiple people. Clark couldn't blame Lois for not being sure until she saw for herself.

"I'm okay," Scott confirmed, smiling back at her. "Sore, but okay. And you guys? You two are okay?"

"Yeah," she said as she reached for Clark's hand.

"And it's all over?" he asked.

"Yeah," Clark answered.

Scott sighed as he leaned his head back on the pillow. "What happened? The last thing I remember, we were still in the house at the bottom of the bluff trying to figure a way out."

"Lex knocked you out with something in a syringe when he came back with his... weapon," Lois explained. "It broke as they fought over it, and then it exploded."

"Lois got out before then," Clark amended. "We were trying to get you out of the window when we all got blasted out."

"We?"

"Lex and I," Clark admitted. "I don't know why he helped, but I'm glad he did."

"He died," Lois added, a hint of grief tinging her voice. If he hadn't understood everything that had happened over the past two months, Clark would have been angry, but even he still felt the guilt planted by that madman.

"What about the rest of them?"

"The police have everyone but Hightower and Montgomery,"

Lois answered. “Apparently, I was the last person to see them two days ago.”

“And Seville?”

“No one even knows where to look for her,” Clark said.

“She’ll probably be hard to find. I never even saw her.” Scott took a slow deep breath. Clark saw the lines of strain and could hear the guilt in his sigh. It was all too familiar.

“Scott,” Clark began, “none of us would be here right now if it weren’t for you. You vowed to stop that monster, and you did. Lex is gone. Hightower won’t be able to show his face anywhere without getting arrested. The weapon Montgomery made is destroyed, and everyone’s getting back to normal.”

“He’s right,” Lois said, nodding. “Perry tells us the lawyer he found thinks things won’t be too bad for you.”

“It’s fine,” he said solemnly. “I’m ready to accept the consequences. I’m just glad I was able to help end all of it.”

“And you were right,” Clark said, nodding to Lois. “She knew exactly what to do.”

Lois looked at him then. “What did I know?”

“How to get his powers back.” Scott smiled at her then. “I didn’t even know how they’d been turned off.”

“Well, they aren’t back yet,” Clark corrected. “But they will be.”

February 1, 1996

“How long do we have to wait here?” Lois asked, exasperated. She leaned back on the sterile pillow and threw her arm over her head.

“Just a few more minutes,” Clark assured her. She felt his fingers slide into her open hand and interlace themselves with hers.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” she asked. “Are you feeling any more *normal* yet?”

“I’m fine,” he said, squeezing her hand. “Don’t worry about me.” Opening her eyes, she met his as he sat in the doctor’s chair beside the examination table. “What exactly is supposed to happen here, anyway?” he asked, looking around at all the equipment filling the room.

She smiled at his attempt to distract her as she sat up. “Well,” she started, fiddling with his fingers in her hand, “they’ll ask me a bunch of questions that I won’t know the answer to. We’ll feel incredibly awkward about it. Then they’ll see what they can tell with the ultrasound.”

“What questions are we not going to know the answers to?” he asked with a hint of mischief.

“The date of my last period.” She held up her hand and shrugged. “Whether anything unusual has happened the last few weeks.” She rolled her eyes. “Who the father is...”

“Me,” he said, squeezing her hand. “I’m the father.” He kissed her fingers then and smiled up at her. That genuine smile always made everything fine even in the worst circumstances. Despite everything that had happened, he was so obviously happy they were married and starting a family, and she drank it in. She needed it. “What are they going to be able to tell us with the ultrasound?” he prompted.

She was certain he knew the answer to this question. Even though he didn’t have his superpowers, he still retained all the information he’d learned... ever. But she answered his questions anyway. “Well, we should be able to hear the baby’s heartbeat—”

“*Our* baby’s heartbeat,” he corrected.

She smiled as she continued, “They should be able to tell us how far along I am—”

“How far along *we* are,” he corrected again.

Her smile grew. “A due date.”

His eyes twinkled.

“This is all so weird. I don’t even feel pregnant,” she said, shaking her head. “Shouldn’t I be having cravings or be sick or...

something?”

“You have been sick,” Clark reminded her.

“Yeah, but only when I’m thinking about... everything that happened.”

Clark squeezed her hand as he smiled sympathetically at her.

“I haven’t gained any weight, either. Shouldn’t there be a bump or something? Oh, God! What if something is wrong with the baby?” she thought out loud, bringing her free hand up to cover her mouth.

“Lois, you’re jumping to conclusions.” He scooted the chair closer to her and pulled her hand from her mouth. “You can ask the doctor all these things when he comes in.”

A knock at the door stopped their conversation and was followed by the entry of the doctor. “Hi, folks!” the entirely too chipper man said as he came in. “I’m Dr. Jackson.”

Lois flinched at his entrance, but Clark didn’t move.

“Clark,” he introduced himself, a half smile on his mouth.

“Lois,” she said, smiling back at Clark. The doctor cleared his throat, bringing Lois’s attention to him. Clark stood from his seated position and moved to stand beside Lois, across from where the doctor now sat on his chair.

“Nice to meet you both,” he started. “Dr. Klein tells me I have to take *extra special care* of you two.”

“You came very highly recommended,” Clark acknowledged with a nod, though Dr. Jackson couldn’t know just how highly recommended he was if Dr. Klein would trust him with Superman’s baby.

“And I’ve heard quite a bit about you two in the last week. Is it all true?”

Lois was saved from her snarky response by Clark, who merely responded, “As long as you didn’t read it in a tabloid. Could we just get on with the appointment, please?”

“Certainly.” Dr. Jackson had the decency to look chagrined as he flipped through the pages on his clipboard. “Before we get started I have just a few questions that the nurse didn’t get from you.” He paused and flipped back to the first page. “What was the date of your last period?”

“Given that you’ve heard so much about us already,” Clark nearly snapped, “you probably know there’s a lot we don’t know.”

Lois bit her lip to keep from smiling. “The last period I remember was November 2nd,” she supplied. “I don’t know if there was one since then.” She appreciated his protectiveness, but she leveled Clark with a look that she hoped told him to calm down.

“Right,” the doctor said, making a note. “And we already know plenty of unusual things have happened recently, so we’ll keep an eye out for any ill effects.” He looked up and smiled at Clark, lifting his eyebrows. “And you’re the father?”

“Yes,” Clark answered confidently, but the look he was giving the doctor surely would have vaporized him had he had his powers back already.

“Actually...” Lois started, knowing it had to be said, “we... can’t be sure. We’re hoping you can shed some light on that.” *This is embarrassing*, she thought as she leaned back on the table. She was a perfectly responsible adult, in charge of her own life, making reasonable choices, living within her means. Well... at least up until two months ago.

She had accepted that she was pregnant for the most part, even if it wasn’t under the circumstances she would have liked. First, it would have been nice to remember her wedding. Second, she had imagined she and her husband would think about it and plan for it. Third, and the most frustrating difference, she assumed there would be no question about the identity of the father. Not knowing who the father of your child is was a problem for someone else. Not her.

“Interesting,” Dr. Jackson said, thankfully with no judgement in his voice. “So, you might have been pregnant before you were

abducted two months ago?”

“It’s possible,” she answered.

“Well, let’s get started then,” Dr. Jackson said as Clark took a seat on a stool at Lois’s side, “and see what we can find out.”

The doctor had Lois expose her abdomen while she reclined on the table as he positioned the machine beside him, turning the screen to where Lois and Clark would be able to see it. He gave a quick rundown of what he was going to do, squirted cold gel on her smooth and still flat belly, and touched the transducer to her abdomen.

Lois couldn’t tell anything from the picture. It looked like static on a TV when it’s tuned to a channel that doesn’t exist. Lightly pressing at first, he moved the transducer around until he found what he was looking for.

“Okay, here we go,” he said flipping one of the many switches on the machine parked beside him. A faint thump could be heard over the speaker. As he pressed harder, the beat became louder. Strong and quick.

“I really am pregnant,” she said under her breath, a heavy weight settling on her.

When she looked at Clark and saw his dopey grin, she felt some of the weight disappear and laughed. His happiness over the situation did much to calm her nerves. The longer he kept acting this way, the more she believed it.

“152 beats per minute,” the doctor said. “Sounds fantastic. Let’s see how big the little guy or gal is.” The doctor began pressing even harder and clicking buttons while Lois watched.

Clark leaned closer and whispered in her ear, “Can you tell what we’re looking at?”

“No,” she whispered back. “Can you?”

“Well, I thought I saw a head and some arms there for a minute.” His dopey grin had returned.

Lois quickly turned her head to him. Head and arms? Should it have a head and arms yet? This was happening just a bit too fast for her.

“Alright. This right here,” Dr. Jackson said as he pointed to a fuzzy blob on the screen, “is your baby. Here—” he moved the image on the screen, then pointed to a smaller, wiggling blob, “—is your baby’s heart.”

They sat in silence for a few moments. Lois and Clark looked at the screen while the doctor jotted something down on the clipboard resting on the counter behind him. Watching the small, wiggling blob keep a steady pace made everything even more real.

This was happening.

“Looks like you are measuring about twelve weeks,” the doctor interrupted her thoughts, “which goes well enough with the date you gave of your last known period...” His voice trailed off as he looked back at his clipboard, and Lois turned her attention to Clark who sat beaming at her. “That puts your due date somewhere in the first week of August. It’s too early to tell the gender, but we can definitely look at that at your next appointment if you’re interested.” He looked up then, his face serious.

“Unfortunately, since we can’t know the date of conception from this, and you were abducted near the time conception would have been most likely, this isn’t enough information to say either way. We’d have to run a paternity test, which can be—”

“No!” Clark said quickly and firmly, a weary look in his eyes. She understood his reluctance perfectly. Perhaps this would be something Dr. Klein would have to handle for them.

“No,” she repeated more calmly. “It doesn’t matter. As long as the baby is healthy.”

“And it is.” The doctor stood and smiled at them. “Are there any questions I can answer for you?”

“Lois was wondering why she hasn’t had any symptoms of pregnancy,” Clark asked after Lois didn’t offer the question herself. “Is that normal?”

“Every woman experiences pregnancy differently,” the doctor

offered. “The level of severity of symptoms and when they appear depends on a great many factors. I wouldn’t be concerned at this point since the ultrasound shows a healthy fetus. We’ll certainly keep an eye on things though.”

“Thank you,” Clark said shaking the doctor’s hand.

“No problem. I’ll give you two a few minutes in here and see you in a few weeks.”

Lois only nodded as she felt tears begin gathering in her eyes. As the doctor left, she cleaned off her abdomen and felt the first tears begin to fall. She swiped uselessly at them with her free hand, but she wasn’t able to stop them from coming. She couldn’t even say why exactly she was crying.

Clark chuckled and handed her a Kleenex from somewhere. Then he pulled her into a loving embrace, lifting her feet from the floor as he spun her around. He slowed as he kissed her before planting her feet back on the ground. “So,” he said, his smile wide, “it looks like we are having a baby in August.”

His happiness was contagious, and she smiled through her tears. “We are,” she agreed.

“See, I told you it would all work out.”

“How can you say that?” she asked, frowning. “There is still so much we don’t know.”

“Lois,” he said, “All I need to know is that I love you. Whatever happens, happens. And it will be unforgettable.”

THE END