

Impulse

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Rated: PG-13

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Summary: A what-if based on the episode “Pheromone, My Lovely.” What if Superman had been affected by the concentrated spray and Lois hadn’t shown much resistance to his advances? Consequences abound. Can this severe misstep be put right, or is their relationship over before it really began? An answer to Bizarro Kerth Challenge #3.

Story Size: 23,464 words (126Kb as text)

An alternative take on the idea is also explored in the author’s [“Restraint.”](#)

ATTENTION:

Trigger Warning 1: Story contains an intimate encounter (non-graphic) where one party is impaired and taken advantage of.

Trigger Warning 2: Story contains sensitive topics which are addressed in a manner that is as honest and respectful as possible.

A/N: This premise is definitely far from what I typically write, but this plot bunny was insistent and I decided to try to stretch myself. Also, to relieve some concerns, like all of my other stories, **there is a happy ending**, it’ll just take some time to get there.

A/N 2: Special thanks to KSaraSara who helped me flesh out the plot and story ^ _ ^

A/N 3: Slight alteration, “The Foundling” episode took place before “Pheromone, My Lovely.”

Chapter 1: Temptation

The police walked Miranda to the patrol car as his boots touched the runway. That had certainly been very close. She had nearly sprayed the entire city with the fully concentrated pheromone. He didn’t want to even imagine an entire city on that at one hundred percent concentration; the Daily Planet on two percent had been enough!

He shook his head, his thoughts straying to Lois as he recalled one particular moment a few days before: when she had been running to him while in that white dress, throwing flower petals.

Dr. Friedman had said that for the pheromone to cause someone to ‘fall in love,’ one had to already be physically

attracted to whomever they were drawn to. That meant Lois was attracted to him, Clark Kent, at least a little bit.

He smiled as he turned, suddenly remembering where he was as his eyes settled on Lois, who had just run up to him and said something. She looked at him expectantly, and his heart swelled.

“I love you, Lois,” he said softly.

He wasn’t sure if she had heard him, but then she slowly approached, her eyes wide with joy.

“Oh, Superman. You don’t know how long I’ve waited to hear you say those words. But —” she grimaced, “— You’re not yourself. So I shouldn’t take advantage of the situation.... Oh, what the heck?”

His confusion was instantly replaced with bliss as her mouth met his and the sound of her heart echoed in his ears.

After a long moment of ecstasy; he tentatively pulled away as a part of him questioned whether or not he was dreaming. Everything no longer felt real as he became aware of someone incessantly tapping his shoulder.

“— Will Miranda be permanently...?” Lex Luthor asked, pointing at the deranged woman being loaded into the patrol car.

Why would Luthor care? he wondered, but he answered anyway.

“No, I diluted it. It’ll wear off before tomorrow,” he said. “There was less than one percent in what she inhaled.”

“I see,” Luthor stated, barely containing a sneer.

Clark ignored him. He was such an evil man. One day he would fall.

He blinked, his mind oddly cloudy as he refocused on Lois still against him.

He needed to return to work. He didn’t want Lois upset with him.

“If you’ll excuse me, Ms. Lane. I’ve got to fly,” he said, smiling down at her before stepping back and launching into the air.

He made it to the Daily Planet with plenty of time to spare, which was fortunate; it gave him time to calm his thoughts and focus on writing up at least the portion of the article he safely could without making Lois question how he knew what he did. He didn’t feel it was worth using the typical excuse of saying he had spoken to Superman. Especially when he was having a hard enough time as it was with the odd pressure in his head. Having to lie and sound convincing didn’t seem within his capabilities just then.

He looked over when he heard Lois’ heartbeat, hearing it before she had even stepped out of the elevator. He

closed his eyes and just focused on that wonderful, soothing sound.

“Hey, partner, ready to write an article?” Lois asked, suddenly right beside him.

“Oh! Yeah. I’ve actually started writing it,” he said, indicating what he had done so far. “What do you think?”

“Excellent!” she said, moving over as he slid back to allow her room at the keyboard.

He slowly inhaled, taking a moment to enjoy the smell of her hair and trace amount of perfume intermingled with her natural scent. Comfort enveloped him, and he had to stabilize himself as a dizzying sensation swirled around him.

Whoa.

Clark stilled. Part of him realized what he was feeling was not normal, but he didn’t care. This felt great! Just being near Lois was better than a full day in the sun! Oh, he wanted to be closer.

He blinked and suddenly realized he was slowly leaning toward her and edging closer to what he knew she would consider too close.

What was he doing?!

He straightened up and forced himself to breathe normally as she shifted back in the chair, oblivious to his growing desire to be closer to her.

“It’s incredible. Love without boundaries, without insecurities or hang-ups or reasoning. You could be swept off your feet by just about... anybody,” she said, rereading the article.

“Not just anybody,” he said softly.

“Anyone you have even the faintest attraction to,” Lois corrected, still not looking at him.

He hummed, but it wasn’t in agreement. His mind was dwelling on something completely different before he mentally slapped himself, which gave him a physical start.

“Clark! Are you trying to give me a heart attack? Why did you jump?” she asked, glaring at him for startling her.

“Sorry. I, uh, something on my clothes poked me,” he said lamely.

He was at work! And even if he wasn’t, those thoughts were not appropriate! What was wrong with him?!

She returned to the article, thankfully ignorant to his thoughts.

“There!” she said, shifting away from him and motioning for him to read what she had added.

He beamed, all previous self-reproach evaporating as he looked over her words.

“It’s perfect,” he said, and it was, other than a misspelled word he quickly corrected with no comment. “I’m so glad Miranda failed and that you’re okay.”

Lois smiled at him, and his breath caught in his throat. She was so beautiful.

“Thanks, me too. This week has been one I’d prefer to forget, but considering everything....” She grew flustered, and he could hear her pulse quicken. “I don’t think I, well, thanked you. You could have....” She looked away with a blush. “But you didn’t. Any other man I think would have with little or no reservations. I guess what you had said when we first met is true, you’re ‘not a typical male.’ So thanks.”

He wanted to kiss her right then and there, but they were at work, in view of their coworkers, and she had just praised him for having self-restraint. He smiled softly at her, a pleasurable sensation coursing through him as he allowed her thanks to fill him up.

“I could never take advantage of you, especially in that way. Caring for someone means putting them before yourself. Be that someone a friend or more,” he said, continuing to stop himself from reaching out to her.

“And when you offered yourself once I woke up?” she asked teasingly, her eyes soft.

“Everyone has their limits,” he said, heat suddenly rising in his cheeks.

She laughed and playfully hit his chest with her hand.

“So you lied earlier. You *are* attracted to me,” she said pointedly, but there was no heat in her words.

“Any man with a beating heart should be,” he said before he could process, let alone censor, his words.

She blushed so hard her ears went pink, and she hurriedly returned her attention to their article. “Okay, sending.” She clicked the mouse and sent it to Perry.

“Well, I think we can definitely call it a day,” she said, standing up.

He nodded as he allowed his eyes to run over her back when she turned away from him. He imagined his hand brushing against her smooth skin, down from her shoulder, along her spine to her —

What was he doing?!

He closed his eyes and turned his head away.

“Yeah, I need to get home. I have a few things I have to do this weekend,” he said gruffly.

He needed to get away from Lois before he did something she wouldn’t like!

Lois nodded as she faced him. “Me too.”

Did she look disappointed or relieved?

Both?

He blinked. “Have a good weekend, Lois.”

“You too,” she said.

He made a beeline to the stairs. He couldn’t risk being in an elevator with Lois right then. Who knew what he’d do?!

He needed to cool off.

After making sure no one could see, he shot up into the sky, blurring into his uniform. There. He was now away

from Lois and away from any chance of making a fool of himself or somehow hurting or upsetting her. He did not want to disappoint or frighten her by displaying unsolicited advances after she had just thanked him for not being a typical male!

He needed to go talk to his parents because something was happening to him. Could he have been affected by the spray? He hadn't been before, but then that had been such a tiny concentration. Maybe he could go someplace and sleep it off?

He glided numbly over Metropolis, flying much slower than his norm.

What was he doing again?

He wondered what Lois was doing. Did she have any plans this weekend? He should have asked before he left.

Maybe he could drop by and say hello. She liked whenever he came to visit her, and after the day/week she'd had, maybe it'd be best to check and make sure she was really okay. Even though she faced death more often than most didn't mean she was used to it.

She had almost died.

Again.

If he hadn't heard her in time...

He felt sick and changed course.

He approached her building and allowed his senses to stretch out, quickly triangulating on her location.

She had just entered her building and was on her way up to her apartment. Eagerly, he waited for her to close her front door before he shot to her window.

Tap-tap

He didn't have to wait long for her to hurry to the window and open it for him.

Lois was still a little frazzled by her conversation with Clark, but she figured it was to be expected. She wasn't used to such compliments, and on top of that, the past few days had been rather turbulent.

It was a good thing it was the weekend. It would give them both a few days to put the awkwardness behind them.

She unlocked her front door and stepped in before turning back and re-locking all the bolts.

One could never be too careful.

Tap-tap

She instantly recognized the sound and inwardly squealed in glee.

She hurried to the window.

"Hi, Superman," she said shyly, instantly thinking about their recent kiss.

"Hi, Lois," he said, stepping in as she closed the window behind him.

He sighed softly as he looked at her, and she was struck by the emotion in his eyes. Completely unguarded and earnest.

"Is everything okay?" she asked.

Was he upset she had kissed him?

"I wanted to see you. Earlier, if ... if I hadn't heard you, you would have...." He frowned and shook his head. "I just wanted to make sure you were alright after everything."

She blinked at his concern. "I'm alright, thanks to you." She smiled. "Again."

He smiled briefly before growing serious. "I don't know what I'd do if anything happened to you, and I don't think I can continue to hide from you."

Lois couldn't believe what she was hearing. It was a dream come true! But.... She frowned as Superman looked down and rubbed his forehead.

"Hide from me?" she asked, confused.

"How I feel. I love you so much!" he said, stepping toward her and touching her shoulder as he leaned forward.

His lips met hers, but instead of the intense, shearing kiss they had shared before, this was soft and gentle, tender and loving.

He pulled back and smiled dreamily at her.

She gaped at him as she came to the only conclusion she could. Holy.... He was still affected by the pheromone!

"Superman, I think the pheromone ... Miranda's one hundred percent solution must be affecting you," she said, growing nervous.

She could remember bits and pieces of herself under its influence. She had grown more and more insistent with Clark and, from what she could recall, had even become rather forceful. What if Superman lost complete control of himself like she had with Clark?! Unlike Clark, she wasn't stronger than the one attracted to her!

Of course, it wasn't as if she was opposed to his affections, but what would happen when the pheromone wore off?

She wondered for a split second if she should tell him to leave, but then realized that was a horrible idea. The world couldn't see Superman like this!

Superman blinked, straightening. "What? It is? But I've always loved you. It's not making me love you, I promise!" he declared, mortified.

She hesitated. Hearing him re-declare his love for her was like a dream ... but....

"I believe you feel that way, but — gosh, I can't believe I'm saying this! — it's not real. You've essentially been drugged, Superman. The same stuff that made the Daily Planet drunk on love has affected you as well —

probably because it's at its most concentrated form. I need you to try your best to fight what you're feeling, or at least do all you can to push it down. Acting on what you're feeling while you're not yourself..."

"Fight what I'm feeling? But I've loved you since the moment I first saw you, Lois! I can't fight what I've been doing for months!" he said fretfully.

"You've really loved me for that long?" she asked, now confused about what to do.

Sure, the pheromone had made her exaggerate her feelings toward Clark, but they had never made her lie or concoct stories about how she felt or did before the pheromone. So ... maybe his love was genuine.

He nodded, pleadingly.

"Oh." This changed things. It made them much more complicated, but somehow simpler.

"You had to have known," he said softly when silence began to stretch between them.

"Well, I suppose I had suspected and certainly hoped ..." she admitted.

And then he was right there. She felt his warm lips on the back of her hand before planting kisses up her arm and to her neck!

She couldn't believe this was happening.

It felt so wonderful, and, pheromone or not, his declaration of love echoed gently in her ears.

"Super-Superman," she gasped.

He pulled back, and she could see concern in his eyes.

"I'm sorry, did I move too fast?" he asked.

"No, no, you just took me by surprise," she said, straightening up while realizing he was kneeling beside her chair and holding her hand. When had she sat down?

The scene was very surreal if she was honest. With his cape fanned out behind him, resting on the tile floor, he was gazing up at her and waiting.

"Why don't we move to the couch?" she asked, even as she silently questioned herself.

What was she doing?

Before she knew it, they were on the couch, kissing for all they were worth. They flopped over, and she found herself on top of him. He gasped as her weight settled on him.

She was surprised she had elicited such a reaction from him, and she felt a surge of power that was as addicting as it was pleasing. She kissed his exposed neck, nipping at his skin, and she was astonished when she felt goosebumps instantly pepper his skin as his breath quickened.

"I hadn't expected you to be so ... sensitive," she breathed.

"My sense of touch ... it's just like my ... other senses," he said, even as his hands rose up to touch her.

She smirked, ideas blossoming. "Oh?"

"It's also ... because it's you," he said, closing his eyes. "I can identify you by your heartbeat alone or find you in the midst of a thousand people by just the smell of your perfume and shampoo. And I can quickly spot you across a busy street," he explained, opening his eyes, now dilated with need. "I don't know why. It's not like this with anyone else."

All thought was focused in that moment, sparing no care for tomorrow or awareness of the hours before. What could compare to this?

"Oh, Superman, I don't know what to say," she said, unable to fully believe this was real. He was more romantic than her wildest dreams!

They kissed again, and she was suddenly struck with a thought.

"You never did answer me before. About your name. What were you called on Krypton?" she asked, even as they continued exploring. "Can you tell me?"

He slowed down his movements, and at first she was concerned that she shouldn't have asked, but then he smiled. "Kal-El. That's my Kryptonian name."

"Kal-El ..." she said, testing out his name.

He shivered in pleasure and she wasn't sure of the cause. Surely it wasn't simply because she had said his name?

"Later, I'll show you the globe my parents, Lara and Jor-El, left me," he said.

"The globe? The globe that had been stolen?" she asked, instantly recalling that mysterious object.

He nodded. "I'll show and tell you everything. Everything I keep secret from the world. I promise," he said, sealing his promise with a kiss.

And from there all conversation vanished, and a pinnacle of bliss mingled with mounting pleasure overtook all sensation.

Chapter 2: Demoralizing

Lois woke, glancing at the clock on her nightstand. It was 4:23 a.m. It was still dark, but her vision was sharp enough to see around her bedroom, and she was more than awake enough to make out the quiet, steady breathing beside her.

The red and blue uniform was draped across the dresser on the opposite wall. The cape was on the floor.

She was afraid to turn her head. Afraid to look upon the one sleeping beside her.

The hours before had been the most sensual experience of her life. All previous expectations she had had about Superman and being with him had been completely blown out of the water. As amazing as she had envisioned it all (and she had envisioned a lot!), it had been even better. Superman, Kal-El, had been better.

Though, how could he not be? He was Superman!
But other things had also been very different from what she had expected.

He had been so gentle, almost nervous, despite all his strength, and while he demonstrated his super advantages throughout the night, he also revealed how some of his abilities could be exploited into ... vulnerabilities. Who knew his super sense of touch could cause him to become severely short of breath? So much so that she had actually become concerned ... before ... !

But all of that was secondary to one fact.

She had been his first.

At the time, she had felt honored, blessed....

Special.

But now....

Now the reality of what had happened and what she had done was settling upon her.

Superman hadn't been in his right mind. She could try to deny or convince herself otherwise, but that wouldn't change the truth.

She had taken advantage of the situation.

She had taken advantage of Superman. Kal-El.

How could she have done that?!

She had done exactly what the men she hated did.

But her self-flagellation paled in comparison to her fear of how Superman would feel once he woke. How he would react.

But there was nothing she could do now but wait.

Wait and wallow in despair over what she had done as she tried not to imagine what the fallout would be.

She didn't go back to sleep.

O o O o O

He woke up with his head pounding and instinctively dreaded what the day would bring. He shifted on the bed and was instantly aware of the fact he was wearing no clothing. He opened his eyes and squinted up at the ceiling.

He wasn't in his apartment.

What happened? Where was he?

He slowly sat up and immediately spotted his uniform lying haphazardly on the dresser against the wall and his cape on the floor in a heap.

The pain in his head was instantly secondary to the alarm that suddenly seized his heart as he also realized he was not alone.

Lois.

He was with Lois ...

Alone and bare ...

Unquestionably as Superman ...

In her bed.

This had to be a nightmare. He had to still be sleeping!
How could this be real? How did this happen?

He sat up and held his head, trying in vain to get a hold of the situation.

The last thing he could remember clearly was feeling strange when he had returned to the Planet after handling Miranda. And then all but fleeing from Lois for fear of doing something to offend her. But things began to get murky after that. The only other thing he could recall with any confidence was ... flying toward Lois' apartment and tapping on her window.

Oh Lord.

There wasn't a curse word strong enough for this situation.

He could hear Lois' heart beating wildly, and he knew she hadn't moved an inch since he had woken. Almost as if she was ... afraid.

His mind went through a dozen scenarios, and his heart clenched in fear at the thought of what he might have done while under the pheromone's influence.

There was no doubt how **far** they had gone, but **how** had they gotten there?

Had he ... forced her?

Had he hurt her? The fear of losing control was one of the many reasons why he had never crossed that particular threshold before. Could he restrain himself at all in that state?

He quickly turned his attention completely on her, scanning for any sign of injury. Any bruises, any physical signs of harm. There were some areas of inflammation, a few of which would have made him blush if he wasn't so concerned. But he could detect no bruises. No sprains or broken bones. He felt a fraction of relief, but he was still afraid.

"Lois? I — I don't know what happened. Please, I'm sorry if I hurt you. Did I hurt you? I — the last thing I remember is Miranda's airplane and snippets after I landed. Everything after is ... fragmented. Please, I'm so sorry! Please forgive me," he said, his words bleeding with regret.

"Kal-El, S-Superman, you didn't hurt me," she interjected, but her voice was strained.

"I'll leave Metropolis if you want. I can't believe that I did this to you. I'm so sorry!" he continued, not processing her words as he scrambled out of the bed and away from her while covering himself with a sheet to spare whatever shred of dignity he had left. "I would never consciously force —"

"You didn't force me!" she cried, appalled he would think himself capable of such an act.

"I — I didn't?" he asked, hesitating to hope.

Lois quickly shook her head even as tears filled her eyes.

He slowly frowned, processing what she had said while silently asking ... ‘Then how did we get here?’

“Wait,” he whispered.

He knew he hadn’t exposed her to the compound. When he had sent the chemical back at Miranda, he had been careful to clear off any remaining residue with his ice breath into the atmosphere.

So that meant....

“I’m sorry, Superman, I know I shouldn’t have — ” she began, but his entire awareness snapped in on itself so hard he couldn’t make out her next words.

She had let him....

His relief at learning he hadn’t hurt or forced her was instantly replaced with confusion and disbelief.

Had she even tried to stop it? He knew how infatuated she was with Superman, but surely she respected him enough to not let him cross that line when he had no control over himself, right? Apparently not.

But he had to be missing something. It couldn’t be as bad as it appeared.

How long had he been out of it? How long before she gave in? Surely more than one day. He, himself, had withstood over two days before he had caved. Considering the circumstances, if it had been more than a day, he felt he could at least understand. Sure, it would still be bad, but it would be understandable.

“What day is it?” he asked, interrupting her tearful pleas.

“Saturday,” she answered swiftly.

“The third?” he asked, making sure it had only been a day as his emotions began to churn.

She nodded tearfully, surrendering to her fate.

Less than a day, less than twelve hours, technically (according to the clock near), and likely far less than that when the hours they must have slept were excluded.

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry!” she wept.

Her fear and trepidation suddenly made sense to him.

His pain morphed into fury, if only because it hurt a little less.

“I can’t believe this. Did you even try to stop things? If you did, how long did you try? Maybe a few hours? An hour? Was it less?”

She wilted, and his heart shattered even further for what it meant.

“It was less. Half an hour? Fifteen minutes, five?! I was beginning to trust you. I was hoping to — after everything?! You knew I — ” He was so angry and hurt, he started shaking. He couldn’t even talk straight. His voice cracked. “I don’t even — why? I — no, I don’t even want to — ”

In less than a breath, he snatched his uniform and cape up and disappeared.

His sonic boom echoed violently behind him.

He wondered for a split second if he should go to his parents as he shot up into the stratosphere, but then he decided he couldn’t. Everything was too raw and embarrassing.

Demoralizing.

Besides, he wouldn’t even be able to voice what had happened. Wouldn’t be able to explain how he felt. Heck, he couldn’t even completely identify his current emotions to himself.

He was certainly stunned and hurt, mixed with varying degrees of anger, disappointment, disbelief, and sorrow, but it didn’t end there.

He knew he was feeling ashamed, but what troubled him most there was that he didn’t quite understand why.

He felt so exposed, vulnerable.

He closed his eyes as he floated as high as he could while still staying low enough in Earth’s orbit to breathe. Now nearly weightless, he couldn’t help but think back to the few things he had heard Lois say before he furiously fled.

Lois had said his name. His Kryptonian name. He must have told her at least a little about himself before....

He had had no control, and he had told her things, but he couldn’t remember any of it!

And that scared him.

What else had he told her?

All he could remember were extremely ... well, he’d rather not think about it.

He’d rather not think about any of it or what it now meant.

His chances with her were now over. How could they ever get together now after this? Everything was broken.

He wasn’t sure how long he drifted, but when he returned to his apartment, it was early afternoon.

He was so emotionally spent he just fell into bed, trying not to think about Monday, when he’d have to see Lois again.

It was over. Everything was over.

She had never felt so guilty. So broken and self-disgusted. So demoralized.

She had hurt him.

She had seen it in his eyes and heard it in his voice.

She had no doubt that his declaration of love from before had been true. It was why her actions had hurt him so much.

If only he had reacted like other men! After all, how many men would have been perfectly fine with what had happened? Even proud!

She quickly shook herself, reprimanding herself even more.

She felt the way she did toward him exactly because he wasn't like other men. Wishing he had responded differently was wrong, and even if he hadn't been upset, it wouldn't have changed how wrong her actions had been.

She desperately wished she could go back in time. Change what she had done.

Why hadn't she been stronger? She had just thanked Clark for having self-restraint and not taking advantage of her after forty-eight hours, FORTY-EIGHT HOURS, of relentless advancements from her, and she couldn't even do half of that for Superman!

Superman was right to be angry.

She was angry with herself.

But as angry as she was with herself, as full of self-loathing, her despair was heavier. More suffocating.

How could she make this right?

Was there a way to make this right?

She would do anything.

But everything told her there was nothing she could do.

She had utterly, irreparably, messed up.

Monday finally came.

Clark trudged into work, forcing himself to keep his emotions buried. He couldn't reveal a hint of how torn apart he felt.

He glanced around and was relieved that everyone around him seemed oblivious.

And actually, everyone seemed rather subdued themselves.

Considering the previous week, it wasn't a surprise, now that he thought about it. No one had come out unscathed from Miranda's toxic disaster. Everyone was coping with their own personal fallout and too concerned with their own lives to pay much, if any, attention to anyone else. Small mercy.

Still, even now, he was tempted to quit. So tempted.

But then he'd have to explain his reasons to his parents and Perry — or come up with a valid excuse, since he obviously couldn't tell them what Lois had done to Superman.

He supposed he could use the pheromone as the reason, and he wouldn't be lying. However, almost everyone in the newsroom experienced something horrible during it, and his experience, as Clark, was actually pretty tame in comparison.

There was also the risk of Lois trying to figure out why he was quitting.

He could not have her figure out the truth on top of everything else!

Granted, there was just as much risk with that in staying.

How was he going to keep working alongside her?!

But he had to stay, for the simple necessity of financial needs. His rent would not pay itself, and he had just finished paying back his parents, so he had no emergency fund yet — and he wasn't about to ask them for another loan. Thus, he had no buffer to allow him time to immediately quit and start yet another job hunt. He needed to keep working.

And so he would. He would force himself to act as normally as he could. Hopefully people, including Lois, would assume any difference in behavior was due to what happened with the pheromone and not inquire further.

Lois went to her desk and risked a glance at Clark's back as he went to the storage room. He had kept to himself for most of the day after mutely giving her a cup of coffee, which had become a part of his morning routine.

She looked away, not wanting to risk catching his gaze.

She felt extremely self-conscious and was certain her guilt was as blatant as a bright red stamp on her forehead. Part of her was glad Clark seemed to be off that day and not striking up conversation, but then it also caused her to sweat even more than she already was.

Had Superman talked to him?

Did he know what she had done?

Of course, it wasn't like she could ask. And a large part of her didn't want to know.

The day passed extremely slowly, but at least the work was easy, and she wasn't the only one going through the motions in a daze. Even Perry was subdued, although fortunately Rahelia had dropped the sexual assault charges.

Lois wondered how long she would feel like this. How would she ever not feel this agonizing guilt and despair?

And how was Superman ... Kal-El doing right now?

Chapter 3: Admittance

The first week had been the worst, but the following weeks were not much better.

Lois bounced between a state of turmoil and denial and could only do her job decently well when in the latter. Unfortunately, those moments in time were brief.

She eventually, and inevitably, was called into Perry's office.

"Lois, I don't know what is going on, but you need to figure it out and fix it. You have not been going after the stories the way you used to, and your condition is rubbing off on Kent. He's been trying to pick up the slack, but I doubt he can carry himself and you for much longer," Perry stated. "Now, this seems to have started a few weeks

ago. Did something happen with that pheromone you're not telling me, honey?"

She almost caved right there. Almost confessed and blurted out her transgression.

However, thankfully, she contained herself.

"I'll get it together, Chief. It's just some personal stuff. I didn't realize it was affecting my work so much, but it's now clear to me that it is," she said, forcing down her turmoil with herculean effort.

"Okay. Good," he said, clearly not confident in her promise but deciding to leave it alone.

She left Perry's office, hoping she would find a way to get it together before too much longer.

He knew his mom knew something was wrong. He knew his dad did too, but what could he say?

Unfortunately, he knew his parents, especially his mom, would not allow him to stay silent much longer, no matter how he felt about it. He supposed it was just as well. He knew his misery was blatantly obvious to them and that he hadn't been himself for a while. He couldn't blame them for being concerned, so he wasn't surprised when his mom finally became insistent and all but cornered him.

"Clark, I know something has been bothering you for weeks now. Are you going to tell me what's going on or do I have to guess?" she asked, setting down his hot tea before him.

It was Friday night. Yet another week of torture had been completed. He was grateful to be away from Metropolis, even if it meant risking this inevitable conversation.

"Mom, I don't know. It's ... it's hard to even think about. I don't know if I can even discuss it," he stated honestly, looking down at the dark liquid.

"What happened between you and Lois?" she asked, sitting down across from him.

He winced, but wasn't surprised his mother had figured it out on the first guess.

"You haven't mentioned her once for the past three weeks. Whatever happened, you can't continue as you have. It's consuming you. It's not healthy. I think you know you need to talk about it at least, if only to figure out what to do next," she said, knowing he wasn't quite ready to answer. She went on. "Would you prefer to talk to Dad? If it's a father-son discussion, I understand not wanting to talk to me about it."

He blushed, and a snapshot of that night overtook his vision before it was immediately followed by a flash of thick emotional pain.

"No, no. I'd prefer just you. It's ... I feel ashamed enough as it is."

"Ashamed?" she asked gently.

"I know I shouldn't, but it's how I feel."

"Why don't you just tell me what happened?" she asked.

He sighed and sagged, dejected, in his chair.

"Did you read about the pheromone compound made by Miranda Fairchild?" he asked.

His mom grew still, undoubtedly already connecting the dots.

"Yes. Such a horrible thing to create and use," she said.

He nodded gruffly in agreement.

"Well, when I stopped her from spraying the city with her one hundred percent solution, it ... well, it affected me."

Martha's eyes widened as he continued.

"I lost complete control of myself, and I've only been able to remember snippets of what happened, though I now remember more than I did before."

"Honey, what happened?" she asked.

And so he told her.

Starting from his confused state after landing Miranda's plane to him snatching his uniform and bolting out of Lois' apartment the following morning. It all just poured out of him, although with the barest amount of details as possible for varying reasons.

Fortunately, Martha was smart, and he didn't have to spell it all out.

"Oh, honey," she said sympathetically, looking torn between wanting to hug him and taking the next flight to Metropolis to give Lois a piece of her mind.

"I just ... I can't believe it happened. I've never felt so ashamed and helpless. Why couldn't I stop? I'm Superman, for crying out loud. Why did I even go to her? Why didn't I just go home and sleep it off? Go to Smallville, even? And I can't believe, after what had happened before, she would turn around and do what she did to me!" He put his face in his hands.

"What happened before?" Martha asked.

"Earlier that week, Miranda had sprayed the Planet with her two percent solution, and Lois ... she ... I was the one she fell in love with. Clark me, I mean. She threw herself at me over and over again. Mom, she came over to my apartment in a get up that — " He cut himself off. "But I resisted. For two whole days of her incessantly offering ... insisting ... It was torture. Only on the third day did I surrender, and thankfully by then she snapped out of it."

"I see. And she said you hadn't forced her?" Martha asked, gently seeking verification from his initial rundown.

"When I learned what had happened, I feared that I had, but she said I didn't. And ... and now with the little I do remember, that's one thing I'm certain of. She was completely willing," he said, pinching the bridge of his

nose. "I think ... I don't think it would have been so bad if I knew she had made a serious attempt to resist, you know? A day, heck, even just one night! At least then I wouldn't feel ... feel so ... gah! I can't even describe it. Betrayed? Used? I don't want to say violated, but it's.... I don't know, Mom."

"What you're feeling is entirely understandable, Clark. And actually, if you weren't feeling what you are, I'd be concerned."

"I wish I wasn't feeling this at all."

"I know. But just remember, you won't feel like this forever. I know it doesn't feel like that's possible, but trust me," she said.

"I hope you're right," he said with a shuddering breath. He closed his eyes.

"I told her my Kryptonian name," he admitted. "I'm not sure what else I told her, but I know I promised I would tell her 'everything I keep secret from the world.'"

His mom frowned, but quickly pushed it away.

"Try not to worry about what you might have told her. She hasn't printed anything, and from what I managed to glean from what occurred before you left, I doubt she ever will," Martha assured.

"I really hope you're right. I hope you're right about everything," he said before sipping his tea.

He grimaced and quickly zapped the liquid with his heat vision.

"But either way, I don't know what to do." He looked away. "I don't know if I even want to stay in Metropolis anymore, but I can't just quit. I've been at the Planet for less than six months. If I quit now, that will make it harder to get hired elsewhere, especially since I doubt Perry would give me a good recommendation after I just up and quit. There's also the question of Superman. I suppose he could stick around Metropolis a bit so his relocation doesn't coincide with mine."

"Clark, before you continue down that vein, and as much as I imagine you don't want to think about this, how is Lois?" she asked.

"Quiet. We interact as little as possible, just enough to get our work done, and that's only just. I think she believes Superman talked to me about what happened. Pretty ironic, huh?"

"Do you think she regrets what she did?" she asked.

"Probably. She was apologizing soon after I woke up, but who knows if she's sorry for the right reason or not," he said tiredly. "But at this point, does it matter? Knowing Lois, I should be happy I got any apology."

Martha looked at her son sadly. He wouldn't have been so cynical a month ago.

"Just as it's wrong for a man to take advantage of an inebriated woman, it's just as wrong the other way around.

What Lois did was undeniably wrong and inexcusable, and you are completely justified in being angry with her. I'd love to box her ears myself right now, to be honest. However, I don't want you to hold on to that anger indefinitely."

Clark laughed. "You're saying to forgive her?"

"Forgive her, or let what she did go. Those are two different things, and one is certainly better to do than the other, but they both set you free. Both take time, of course, and are not easy to do. But neither is living bitterly, and that's what'll happen if you let it fester," his mom said earnestly.

Clark nodded hesitantly. "I'll try, Mom."

"I know," she said. "In the meantime, give yourself another week. Think about your options. If you need to come back to Smallville, Dad and I are here, but also remember you have other paths you could take."

"Like what?" he asked, somewhat curious.

"Well, I'm sure if Mr. White learned you were unhappy for whatever reason, he'd be willing to relocate you to a different division. They have one in Europe, right?"

"They do," he said thoughtfully. "I suppose that wouldn't be a horrible choice."

"It wouldn't, but don't rush into any decisions. Be calm and settled, whenever you decide. You had no control over what had happened, but you have control over what you do now."

Clark nodded, a little more at ease. "Thanks, Mom."

Lois couldn't stand it anymore. She had to at least try to get her friend back, heck, even if just as a coworker. The way they had been walking on eggshells around each other for weeks, and now that Perry was on her case for not 'pulling her weight'.... Something had to change, or she would break.

Break even more than she already was.

She glanced up as Clark entered the bullpen. She had come in earlier than she normally did, wanting to get there before he did. That, and she wanted to show Perry she was making an effort.

She refocused on her computer, and, like clockwork, he set down her coffee.

"Hey," she said, just as he was about to walk away. "Um."

Her brain froze. She had planned this whole discussion and had decided what she would say and do for a hundred different scenarios but it all went out the window when he looked at her.

"Yeah?" he asked.

He looked like a kicked puppy.

“Um. I know things have been ... I mean, since the Miranda story, I’ve.... I’m sorry, could we talk?” she fumbled, her cheeks aflame.

Clark didn’t answer immediately, and she feared he would walk away, but he finally, thankfully, nodded.

They went into the conference room, and when he closed the door behind him, she felt as if they were in a cabinet instead of a wide open room.

“I know things have been different for the last few weeks. I know I’ve been different,” she began, keeping her side to him.

She couldn’t face him, but turning her back to him felt wrong for some reason. So she kept herself turned so her right arm was always closest to him. She watched him from the corner of her eye.

He nodded quietly.

“I’ve been — it’s personal. It’s nothing you’ve done, I trust you know that. I just haven’t been able to deal with ... something. I can’t tell you what exactly, but ... god, Clark, I did something so *horrible* to someone.”

She wasn’t sure how she had formed the words, but she had, and now that they were out, more were begging to surge forth. Tears welled up in her eyes.

“I did something I never thought I’d do, never thought I was even capable of. I feel so horrible, so guilty. I wish I knew how to apologize, how to make it right, but I don’t think that’s possible.” She took a deep breath. “And even if I managed to go to them and beg for forgiveness, I’m pretty sure it would only make things worse. If I were in their place, I don’t think I’d ever want to be near someone who —” She closed her eyes. “And I’m certain I wouldn’t ever be able to forgive.”

She wiped her eyes, the knot in her throat so large she could barely breathe.

“Anyway. I just ... I just wanted to clear the air and tell you that I’ll leave my personal stuff at home. I know I haven’t really been present lately, and you’ve been picking up the slack, and that hasn’t been fair to you. With how I’ve been acting, you’ve treated me far better than I could ever ask for, especially with how I treated you when you first started here.” She cringed, still unable to face him. “I’m sorry, for everything. I guess I’m finally seeing myself — been forced to look in the mirror and take account. And I guess, what I’m trying to say is that I’ll do better. I just wish I could undo what I’ve done.”

Lois looked at the floor, hoping Clark would say something, anything, but also terrified of what he might do after hearing her muddled confession.

“Sincerely regretting a mistake is important for any hope of reconciliation,” he finally said. “Maybe ... maybe if you get the chance to ask for forgiveness, they’ll accept your apology if they see that.”

Lois choked back a sob. “I don’t deserve it,” she muttered so quietly she might as well have thought it.

She forced herself to calm down.

“Well, I hope you’re right. For now, I suppose we should get to work ... partner,” she said, still too nervous to meet his eyes.

“Okay. Partner,” he said softly.

Lois wanted to burst into tears more than ever before, but she bit her tongue and squelched the throb begging for release.

She would cry tonight.

They had work to do.

Chapter 4: Priorities

His mother was right. As usual, his mother was spot on. Of course, he knew this and, through experience, trusted she was right even before he could see any evidence of it.

But for some reason it still surprised him when he obtained proof.

It had been over a month, nearly two, since Lois had expressed her immense remorse to him.

That moment would forever be etched in his mind.

He had been astonished by her words and vulnerability. He never thought she would allow him, as Clark, to see her so weak and broken. But that was only part of it.

Seeing her sincerity and remorse had enabled him to peer beyond his own pain. It allowed him to step back and separate himself from the raw agony he had been stewing in for weeks, if only for a moment. But it was the first step in what he was certain was his healing.

It was slow, and he knew it would take time. However, what he hadn’t expected was how he began to feel watching Lois.

He knew since her confession to him that her own turmoil had lessened, but she was still heavy with guilt. Every time an image of himself (as Superman) appeared on the television, she would turn her eyes away and stop breathing. And whenever Superman was brought up in conversation she would slap on a forced smile and latch onto the first change of subject like a lifeline. It was a wonder no one other than him noticed.

Watching her hurt, *hurt*.

He was relieved that she seemed to be improving as time went on and as they continued working together, but occasionally he would see a snippet of remorse or a flash of pain, and his own hurt would reignite for that instance.

Maybe he could ... ?

He would have to go to her as Superman, but would he be able to handle that?

Would she?

He needed more time.

Lois could breathe again. Things were not back to normal, and she knew they never would be, but they were better than they had been. It was almost two months since she had ‘cleared the air’ with Clark, and they were working as partners again, going after stories and making Perry happy. She couldn’t say they were good friends again, but the eggshells were gone. They were amiable coworkers, which is more than she imagined to be possible and far more than she had dared to hope.

Clark never inquired about what she had done to feel so guilty, and while she was grateful, deep fear and suspicion of him knowing exactly what she had done continued to ebb in her mind. But there was also confusion. If she had been in his position, having to pick up slack at work, she would have ripped into him from one side to the other before stomping on the remains.

And that was before including the horrendously horrible decision outside of work. If he knew, Superman must have told him, and, if he knew, why had he still been so nice to her during those first weeks of torture? Granted, nice was a relative term. He hadn’t spoken much at all to her during that time, but he had still given her coffee and had actually given her what she needed most — space and time to wallow in her thoughts.

Lois sighed. There was no point in continuing down this path. She had tortured herself hundreds of times since returning to work, wondering if Superman had told Clark or not, and what Clark would do if he ever learned ... assuming he didn’t already know.... On and on it went until she would mentally slap herself and accept that she had no control over any of it. Unfortunately, that was usually after finishing a whole pint of chocolate fudge ice cream.

It was whatever it was. Dwelling on it would not help her either way. She could only move forward and do her best to never make such an agonizing mistake again. Not to mention just try to do better overall.

She had taken a good long look at herself after that night. After Superman had shot out of her apartment, she felt so disgusted with her actions that she set to work on examining every aspect of herself, including Mad-Dog Lane.

In the end, she didn’t like what she had found.

She was selfish. She was bullheaded. Overconfident to the point of being borderline conceited at times. She was ruthless, which, while not always bad, definitely meant she didn’t mind running over people emotionally or otherwise.

She recalled how she had treated Clark when he had first arrived.

So many mistakes, mistakes that all pointed to one thing: she almost always thought of herself before others, and even in the instances where she thought of the other

person, it eventually curved back around to focus on herself.

Sure, she thrived on investigating cases that brought down the bad guys and helped the underdog, and she hated corruption, but she couldn’t confidently say she was a good person. Not anymore.

She just hoped she was getting better.

After all, she doubted she would ever be able to fix what she had done. It wasn’t like she could just go to Superman and say, ‘I’m so sorry I did it! Can you ever forgive me?’ and for it all to suddenly be okay.

It would never be okay.

The best that she could hope for was for Superman to one day see she wasn’t the same person who had hurt him anymore. Maybe then he wouldn’t hate her as much as he no doubt did.

She took a slow deep breath before crossing the street as the light turned green.

Suddenly, a thunderous crack shook the air and everyone looked up.

A massive fireball streaked through a puffy cloud high in the sky, disturbing the pristine morning like a dragon blasting through a herd of sheep.

People around her either froze in terror or screamed and ran. Someone bumped into her as another loud sound rocked over them.

A sonic boom.

Her eyes remained fixed on the ball of fire, her brain trying to reconcile what she was seeing as another shape shot into view.

A red and blue form.

Her heart stalled in her chest as the two collided a split second later.

The blazing mass exploded, and a shockwave rippled over the city, shattering the windows of skyscrapers directly below the blast and slightly beyond. Thankfully, Lois was far enough away from any falling shards of glass, but she still had a direct line of view of the cause of the explosion.

What she could only assume was a satellite, or possibly a meteor, had shattered and was now raining down over Hobbs Bay, deflected away by the well timed and perfectly placed impact. As for the red and blue form, he had only tumbled in the air for a split second before stabilizing and hovering in the sky, his gaze focused up.

She hadn’t personally seen Superman since that horrible morning, but in that moment, it felt like no time had passed at all.

She watched him stare at the trajectory of the crumbled meteor before he flew away a second later.

“That was amazing!” someone shouted beside her, making her jump.

The crowds resumed their normal travel but became much more talkative. A few hurried to nearby payphones to call loved ones or the like, which reminded her: she needed to call in the story!

Thankfully, she managed to snag a payphone without needing to be rude. With her newfound conscience, she didn't want to revisit some of her earlier tendencies.

After calling in the story, she set off to City Hall.

She suspected they would be giving a statement soon, or at least they'd better if they wanted to keep the public calm. Already, she could hear varying degrees of asteroid theories among those she passed on the streets.

Clark was trying to calm his pounding heart as he flew back to his apartment.

He had just met with General Zeitlin and Professor Daitch as Superman.

An asteroid was coming.

An asteroid was coming, and he was their only real hope.

The world needed him more than it had ever needed him before. Failure wasn't an option.

He stepped into his apartment and slowly walked to his bed and sat down, still in the suit.

He could die doing this.

He had never seriously contemplated his mortality in this way. For as long as he could remember, he knew, *just knew* he would outlive his parents. Imagining anything else never happened, especially when the scope of his abilities came to light.

He had always accepted the *certainty* of his longevity and had avoided thinking about the strong likelihood of outliving others. He had always feared and expected he would eventually have to say goodbye to a lot of people he knew because, well, he wasn't human.

He didn't even know if he would continue aging. Even now, at twenty-seven, he had noticed his peers were not as they were at twenty-one, while he still looked like he had at the start of college, and he had only gotten stronger. The only thing that separated him from his younger self, appearance wise, was his hair style and fashion sense.

But now it seemed all of his concerns might be moot.

He might not make it back from this. Worse yet, he might not succeed.

But he already knew he had to try.

If he didn't, the world was doomed.

He could tell from the strain in the General's voice and the change in the man's heart rate that he wasn't confident in the Asgard rocket at all.

So it was up to him.

He bowed his head.

"What am I going to do?" he asked out loud.

He stared at his hands, and suddenly things that had mattered a fair amount didn't matter at all anymore, while things that he had been trying to ignore or hadn't felt necessary to address right away were right in his face.

He couldn't leave things as they were, but he also didn't have the luxury of time to do them the way he might have preferred.

He stood up and retrieved a pen before putting his thoughts down on paper.

After he was done writing, he would go see his parents.

Lois couldn't believe what she was hearing.

There was a massive asteroid, seventeen miles across, heading toward Earth. The scientists and officials had named it Nightfall, and, with Superman standing beside them, they outlined their plan to address it.

Success all hinged on Superman.

Standing with the officials during the press conference, he was as stoic as always, but, as she continued to watch him from the press pool, she couldn't help but recall how human he had been with her.

He wasn't emotionless. He was just very good at hiding how he felt, unless he was, for whatever reason, completely comfortable with expressing himself. She fought back a blush and refocused.

She wondered how Superman was really feeling while standing there as the world's beacon of hope and salvation.

How confident was he that he would succeed? Did he have anyone to support him? To talk to?

What if ... what if he didn't come back?

Not for the first time, she wished there was a way to make things right, but that desire was greatly overshadowed by her fear of Superman not returning. For his sake and, if she was honest, hers.

Jotting down quotes and snagging a brief statement from one of the scientists at the end of the conference, she hoped to catch up to Clark on her way back to the Planet. And hopefully she would have enough time to catch a snack. No doubt due to stress, she had found herself snagging crackers and fruit whenever possible lately.

She got back to the Planet before he did, surprisingly enough, with a snack to boot, so quickly set to work on the article.

She was halfway through when she heard him approach.

"Uh, Lois?" Clark asked.

She inwardly frowned. He sounded nervous. Had he learned something else about the asteroid?

"Yes?" she asked, turning toward him.

He looked around and was clearly relieved when no one was in earshot.

“I, uh ... Superman asked me to give this to you,” he said quickly but quietly, holding out an envelope with her name on it.

“Oh.” Her heart was suddenly in her throat.

She carefully accepted it, and her eyes traced the letters of her name, written with such perfect font she would have needed a stencil to accomplish it herself, but the smoothness of the pen strokes indicated freehand.

Superman had written this.

She brought it close to her chest, too pained to speak. She nodded her thanks instead. Thankfully, Clark seemed to understand and asked no questions as she put it in the inner front pocket of her dress suit, unopened.

They finished their article on the press conference in silence, taking turns writing their portions while also reviewing the other’s and adding bits where needed. She made no comment on the corrections he made.

They submitted the work to Perry, and Clark glanced her way after returning to his desk before taking a deep breath and heading to the elevator.

She felt both relieved and saddened by his departure and once again wondered how much he knew. He must know something. How could he not? But she knew he would never say, and he knew she would never ask.

She gathered up her things, the envelope still in her inner breast pocket, as she did her best to ignore people on the television currently discussing Superman’s mission against Nightfall.

She hugged her briefcase to her chest as she left the Planet, anxiety condensing so thickly in her gut that she doubted she’d be able to keep anything down at all that evening.

Her thoughts shot to the envelope in her pocket.

She wasn’t sure what she was more afraid of: Nightfall or the contents of the letter.

Both could destroy her.

The trip home was a blur, and she could barely recall unlocking and relocking all of her door locks. Her stomach was so queasy she took a few antacid tablets before sitting on her bed. She stared at the sealed envelope in her hands.

After a long time, she finally put it in the drawer of her nightstand. She closed the drawer.

She couldn’t read it.

Chapter 5: Impact

Clark took a deep breath as he stood in full view of the public as Superman.

They were ready, and he desperately hoped he was ready too. The radio was in his ear, and the helmet was under his arm with the oxygen tank secured to his back. He knew what he had to do and when; he just wished he felt as able as he hoped he appeared.

He had submitted an article to Perry that morning: a brief interview with Superman. He did his best to come across confident, while also being conscious of the fact this might be his last message to the world. It had taken him several hours, with his parents’ help, to write it. It had almost been as difficult to complete as the letter.

After giving the article to Perry, he informed the very pleased Chief that he would need to go to Smallville. Fortunately, he hadn’t asked for any time off up to that point, and after getting the exclusive interview with Superman (no matter how short), Perry approved his time off.

He hoped this would provide him with enough cover to get back without anyone noticing his true absence — assuming he returned. If not, he had created a few options his parents could initiate if...

He refocused. He couldn’t allow himself to think about that. He had to be in the present.

The people around him were tense but hopeful, and many looked at him with gratitude and awe. He did his best to ignore their feelings toward him, as it only served to make him more anxious.

If he failed....

He suddenly felt compelled to scan the crowd. He wasn’t sure why, but then he saw her.

Lois was with the press, positioned in the back.

He wondered if she had read his letter.

Their eyes met, and the world disappeared for a long second.

She didn’t seem to have slept the night before. He could hear her heartbeat, fast and sharp, almost high on adrenaline, or maybe it was caffeine — likely both. Her eyes were wide, as if surprised he had noticed her, but then her surprise faded, as if she’d remembered something. And then she just looked sad. Regretful.

The moment ended as someone asked him a question. He turned away, looking at the head scientist.

“It’s time. Are you ready, Superman?” Professor Daitch asked.

“Yes,” he said, squaring his shoulders before securing the helmet on his head. He felt the seals press against his skin.

He allowed the scientists to do the final checks before they stepped away from him, indicating all was ready.

“I’ll do my best,” he promised, his voice distorted through the helmet.

“Good luck, Superman. And thank you,” Daitch said.

With a parting nod, Superman shot up, creating the loudest sonic boom anyone had ever heard.

Everyone at the Daily Planet was gathered in front of the television, watching the live footage from EPRAD.

Lois could feel her nerves fraying more than they ever had before. Every second that passed might be one second closer to never....

"I'm being told we have a transmission from Superman," the news anchor stated. "Let's take that live feed, direct from mission control."

On screen, a logo bearing the words: 'Superman for the Earth' was in the top corner. Underneath that was the chyron: *Voice of SUPERMAN*.

"I can see it now. In fact, it's hard to see anything else. It's immense," Superman said, his voice unmistakable despite the slight distortion from the mic. "I feel like an ant next to this."

On the tracking monitor, Superman was a little speck, arching about toward a much bigger dot. Along with that, a dashed line marked the path he had traveled and a faint line indicated his expected trajectory. The total path was a curve instead of a line. It had been explained that, after many simulations and a suggestion from the Man of Steel himself, the plan was to deflect and destroy the asteroid instead of solely breaking it apart from a direct impact. It was hoped the double strategy would ensure success.

"Roger, Superman. We copy you on the ground," Ground Control stated. "Do you have stress point acquisition in visual?"

"Yes," he answered a few seconds later.

"Stand by for the final briefing procedure," Ground Control said.

"I know what I have to do," Superman calmly assured.

"Superman, you're cleared for initiation on your cue," Ground Control conceded. "And there's a lot of people here who want you to know you're the best friend Earth's ever had. Godspeed."

"Thank you. Well, here I go," he said.

They heard an odd warble in the background as the small dot on the screen abruptly picked up speed.

"Impact in five —" Ground Control counted down, even as Superman's voice quietly overlapped their words: a prayer clearly not intended to be picked up by the helmet's mic. But the whole world heard.

"Please —"

The whispered plea was crisp, holding such emotion that was a stark contrast to Superman's normally confident, powerful voice.

The world stopped spinning. And waited.

"Four —"

"Let me —"

"Three —"

"Save my —"

"Two —"

"Home."

"Impact!"

Superman's transmission instantly cut to static.

It was as piercing as a gunshot.

"This is EPRAD control. We have lost communication with Superman."

Lois sensed a lot of people turn their eyes to her, but she felt completely inadequate to give them reassurance or any sort of verbal response.

She swallowed the lump in her throat, knowing if she attempted any speech she would cave to tears.

No one around her looked much better.

A thrum of pain pulsed through him as the pounding saturating his head ebbed to every inch of his frame.

He was floating, detached.

Where was he?

What happened?

Warmth in the form of light blanketed him from the right, but he barely noticed it.

He was more concerned with figuring out what to do, especially when he realized he was drifting what could only be miles above Earth.

Why couldn't he remember? How was he here?

Was this real?

He closed his eyes, fatigue thick in every cell as he forced his mind to think and not panic. To try to remember. Remember anything. But he couldn't even remember his name. What the heck was wrong with him?!

The caress of sunlight seemed to brush against his cheek as his mind's eye recalled ... something.

No. Someone.

Her hands were on his chest, her lips on his neck. Love filled him up and overflowed.

'Kal-El,' a voice murmured in his ear.

He turned his head as she pulled back, allowing him to see her face.

'Lois,' he breathed.

She was so beautiful. So glorious. This ... this was true contentment, he decided.

"I love you," he said before more sensations followed, and he gasped in wonder.

Lois smiled, beaming with an intensity that could only be compared to his level of joy.

He opened his eyes, another scene coming to mind.

He went to her, flying through the sky and coming to her window.

Despite his exhaustion, he willed himself down from the edge of space. Down and away from the sun.

It was dark as he cut through heavy clouds, trusting his memory and his instincts to guide him, never mind how he was moving across the sky.

He came to her window and pushed. It opened with no resistance, which was extremely fortunate as his flight utterly failed him a second after. He stumbled in and barely managed to catch himself on the window frame as his bare feet made contact with the floor.

He fumbled with the window, closing it behind him as his head swam wildly. Nausea clenched around his core, and hot black dots peppered his vision as he turned away from the wall. A rushing sound whirled in his ears (or was it his mind?) as he stepped further into the room, and he hit something with his knee.

He fell. Fortunately or unfortunately, he wasn't aware when he landed.

Chapter 6: Waking

Lois was raw. She wasn't sure how she had made it through work and wrote that evening's article. Her hands had trembled with every keystroke.

The shattered remains of Nightfall were drifting away from Earth. There was no longer any danger. However, there were no signs of Superman either. The scientists promised to keep looking.

She wished Clark had been there to help with the story, but at the same time ... she was glad he hadn't been.

She approached her apartment and closed her eyes as she turned the knob, ready to give in to all of the fear, despair, and dread she had been bottling up all day long.

Where was Superman? Kal-El? Was he okay? Would he come back? Was he ... was he gone?

His words echoed in her mind.

'Please, let me save my home.'

He had spoken with such a rare display of vulnerability before saving every single living being on the face of the planet.

Would those be his final words? The last statement she would ever hear from him?

His prayer had been answered. Would hers?

She entered her apartment with a sob and numbly relocked her door, mindlessly going from top to bottom as she ignored her tears.

At the click of the final lock, she pressed her forehead on the door to keep herself steady, and just let all of her anguish out.

She would never see Kal-El again! She would never be able to tell him....

Her regret once again slammed into her, and she wanted it all to just be over.

She wiped her eyes, ignoring the mascara now all over her fingers and no doubt on her cheeks and under her eyes.

She dropped her purse to the floor on her way to the kitchen and glanced at the clock that read 9:26 p.m.. It really had been a long, horrible day.

She suddenly wished she had some alcohol.

She didn't want chocolate fudge ice cream. It wasn't strong enough.

Frustrated, she settled with water and just chugged it before putting the cup in the sink and splashing her tear streaked face with water. Drying herself, she went to the side cabinet and took out the cracker box. After a few bites, she put it away, afraid she'd throw them up. Her stomach was all out of sorts from her nerves.

She needed a shower.

She trudged her way toward her room, her eyes panning her apartment with a bleak expression.

She frowned and blinked in confusion as her eyes settled on something just in sight around the corner.

Her pathetic potted plant that should have been on her side table by her balcony window was on the floor and broken. Dirt was all over the place. How had it fallen while she was out?

She slowed her approach.

Had her apartment been robbed? Ransacked? That would just be her luck. But how? Her door had been thoroughly locked, and she doubted a criminal would have relocked it. Maybe she had left her window unsecured? But how would they get to the window? And why leave the rest of her apartment unscathed?

Maybe the table leg had just failed?

She stepped around the corner and turned on the light.

She froze. For a long second, she couldn't comprehend what she was seeing.

A form covered in gray dust was sprawled out, chest down, on the floor beside the broken side table. The fabric tight against his back was in tatters and scorched. She thought maybe it had once been blue. The rest of the skin-tight clothing covering him was in even worse shape — if it was there at all. He had no shoes on, and his hair was disheveled.

And then it clicked.

"Superman?!" she gasped, rushing forward.

She fell on her knees beside him, horrified.

"Oh, gawd, please, please don't be dead!" she begged, grabbing his shoulder and turning him over.

Later she would be surprised by her own daring, but in that moment all she cared about was helping him.

She somehow managed to turn him onto his back toward her, allowing his head to rest, cradled, in the crook of her left arm as her free hand frantically searched for a pulse at his neck.

She nearly cried in relief when she felt the steady, albeit weak, beat under her fingertips.

"Superman, Kal-El!" She bent closer to him and closed her eyes in gratitude when she heard his breath and felt it

on her cheek. “Come on, wake up, please, you need to wake up! Can you hear me? Please wake up!”

She shook him gently, afraid to hurt him but at a loss as to what else she could do. Should she call 911? She felt inclined to do so, but why did he come to her?

After everything, why did he come to her?

She pushed aside her question and was about to ease his head and shoulders to the floor so she could call an ambulance, but then he stirred.

“Thank, G-d!” she cried as he opened his eyes.

“Superman, what do you need? Tell me what to do,” she said desperately.

He groaned and closed his eyes in pain.

“Sleep,” he mumbled.

“You can’t go back to sleep, not yet. We need to make sure you’re okay,” she said earnestly.

He turned his head, his ear now in clear view for her to see. There was a dried trail of blood leading from out his ear to the edge of his jawline.

She gasped loudly. “You’re bleeding! You need a doctor!”

He opened his eyes again, clearly out of it, but she could tell he was trying to focus on her.

“Doctor?” he asked, bewildered.

“You need a doctor. There’s blood coming out of your ear, probably from hitting the asteroid!”

“Asteroid?”

“Yes! Here, I’m calling 911. We need to get you to the hospital,” she decided.

“Wha — ? No,” he argued, though he was in no shape to fight.

Lois stilled. “No?” she questioned.

“I don’t want to go anywhere,” he said.

“You’re bleeding, though, bleeding from your ear! You need help!”

“Can’t,” he said.

“You can’t go? You can’t go to the hospital? Why not?” she asked.

What could be so important to make him so adamant about this?

“Not normal. I’m not normal,” he said, before closing his eyes. “So tired.”

She frowned.

Of course he wasn’t normal, he was Superman! But maybe he felt that because he wasn’t human, they wouldn’t be able to help him? Maybe he just needed a place to rest and recuperate.

But he was bleeding, and in such a way that she didn’t need to be a doctor to know not getting help could be very dangerous!

“Alright. I’ll get someone here instead,” she compromised, hoping he wouldn’t fight this, especially while he was lying limply, literally, in her arms.

He hummed in what she hoped was agreement.

Gently, she set him down all the way to the floor. She wondered if she should help get him into bed first, but he seemed too out of it anyway. Besides, she doubted she was strong enough to lift or even support him. It had taken a lot for her to even turn him over onto his back. She didn’t want to risk getting him up only for him to collapse on her or something else, hurting himself further.

She refocused. She had to get help.

But who should she call for help? Who could she call for help?

Clark was out of town, likely for the rest of the week, and though she was sure he would come to help, Superman needed help *now*.

She considered her father for a split second, but it was unlikely she would reach him and, even if she did, he probably wouldn’t be available to actually help anyway.

She frowned. For all of her contacts, she didn’t have many in the medical field at all. Or at least one she would trust.

After a moment of hesitation, she decided she only knew one person with enough contacts who would be able and willing to help.

Perry.

She quickly dialed his office number, figuring he was likely still at work, despite the late hour.

“Perry White, Daily Planet,” he answered.

“Thank goodness. Perry, it’s Lois. I need you to come to my apartment right now with the most trustworthy doctor you know,” she all but ordered.

“Lois? What’s going on? What’s this about?” he asked, picking up on her tone and instantly knowing this was serious.

“He made it back, but ... I don’t know. He doesn’t want to go to the hospital but I think he should be checked out. He’s not okay,” she said, not sure how much to say over the phone while trying to remain calm. Calmish, at any rate.

“He — ! You mean — ?” he began, immediately figuring out who she was talking about. “I don’t know if I can get anyone at this hour, but I’ll see what I can do. What’s wrong with him?”

“He was unconscious but he’s talking now, though he’s not really awake, and, Perry, there’s dry blood coming from his ear. He’s really out of it.”

“Okay. Try to keep him awake. It sounds like he might have a concussion. I’m going to try Dr. Ngo, then I’ll be there as soon as I can,” Perry promised before hanging up.

Lois sighed in relief before turning back to Superman. He hadn't moved at all.

"Superman, please, stay awake," she said, hurrying back to him and kneeling down again.

"Where am I?" he asked, squinting up at her. He was still lying on his back on the floor.

"You're in my apartment," she said, wondering what she could do for him if he did have a concussion, which was looking extremely likely.

"Why ... ?" he asked.

"Why? Why are you in my apartment?" she asked, confused as to what he could be asking about.

"No. Superman. Why are you calling me that?" he asked.

Lois blinked, completely and utterly baffled. Something was very wrong here.

"It's what people call you." She didn't know what else to say.

"They do?" he asked, looking just as baffled.

"Superman," she said slowly. He frowned at the name. She pressed on. "Do you know who I am?"

"Your name is Lois," he managed, but his uncertainty was blatant.

"You don't remember anything, do you?" she asked, even as she tried to not let her fear bleed into her voice.

"I'm sorry," he said, lost.

Even as she quelled a frantic bull of panic within her, she felt a surge of protection for him rise up within her.

"You have nothing to be sorry for. And your real name is Kal-El, but the world knows you as Superman," she explained, her voice a thread away from cracking from the emotion in her chest.

"Kal-El? Is that Middle Eastern?" he asked.

"It's Kryptonian."

"Is that a tribe?" he asked.

Lois frowned. "No, it's ... Sup — Kal-El, what **do** you remember?"

"Just ... Just you. Sort of. And a dream, I think. I was floating above Earth." He closed his eyes for several seconds before opening his eyes again.

She covered her mouth in shock.

He didn't remember *anything*.

He didn't remember being Superman. Didn't remember anything about himself. He didn't remember how many times he had saved her life or how important he was to the world.

And he didn't remember what she had done to him.

Would his memories return?

What would he do if they did?

What would happen if they didn't?

"Let's get you off the floor," she said, desperately hoping he couldn't tell she was barely keeping it together.

"Kay," he agreed.

He slowly sat up. After resting a minute, he got to his feet with her support. She counted it a victory when he only swayed for a few seconds before stabilizing.

"Okay. To the bed. You need to take it easy," she decided, squelching her memories from before as hard as she could.

"But ... I'm filthy," he said, looking down at himself.

Lois bit her lip. He was right. She supposed he could go get cleaned up. He did, miraculously, seem to be doing better than when she had called Perry. And maybe a shower would help him.

"I can find you something clean to wear," she proposed. "And you ... you can use my shower, if you think you're okay enough?"

"I think I am," he said.

"Okay. The towels above the cabinet are clean," she said. "I'll be right out here, so if you need anything, uh, let me know."

"Okay. Thanks."

She led him to her bathroom, past her bed, and watched him shuffle in and close the door behind him.

She quickly retrieved the biggest T-shirt and sweatpants she had and was, for the first time, grateful for one of her sister's practical jokes. Years ago, Lucy had gotten her a package of boxer briefs as a joke after learning Lois sometimes disguised herself as a man during investigations. As ridiculous as it was, Lois hadn't gotten rid of them. Hurray for this instance of hoarding.

She heard the water from the shower and tried her best not to pace or hover outside the bathroom door, even as she strained her ears to hear anything reminiscent of him falling or calling her name.

She sat down on the edge of her bed and forced herself to take a deep breath while ignoring the dirt and broken pot beyond her room.

She couldn't believe what was happening.

She was so grateful he had come back, that he had survived Nightfall against all odds, but now she was afraid.

Afraid she would mess up again.

No. This was a second chance. A chance to make up for her mistake, at least a little bit. She couldn't erase the past, but she could still help him.

She wondered when Perry, and hopefully that doctor, would arrive as she forced herself to not think about Kal-El's letter currently in the drawer of her nightstand. Still unread.

The water turned off.

"Uh, Lois?" he hesitantly called.

She quickly went to the door.

"I'm here," she assured.

He cracked open the door, and she held out the folded clothes for him. He took them gratefully, and she tried not to stare as she noticed the towel around his waist.

“Thanks,” he said, before closing the door again.

A few minutes later he stepped out, looking much better than before. Her oversized gray t-shirt was quite small on him and the sweatpants were borderline high waters, but the fatigue that had been dripping from him earlier was gone. His hair was slicked back but wasn't as orderly as his norm. It definitely wasn't gelled.

He looked at her uncertainly.

“How do you feel?” she asked, stepping away from the bed.

“Better, I think,” he said.

“Well, I think you should still rest. Perry should be here soon, and maybe a doctor,” she advised, indicating the bed.

“Perry?” he asked, before growing nervous. “A doctor?”

“Superman, I mean, Kal-El, you ... you stopped an asteroid. You hit it hard enough to deflect it and save Earth. The fact you're here is a miracle, but it obviously hurt you. It's no doubt why you can't remember anything,” she explained before biting her lip.

Maybe she should have waited.

He frowned. “I hit an asteroid? How?”

“Here. Maybe I should just show you. Come on,” she said, now leading him to her living room.

She turned on the television and indicated for him to sit.

“I, uh, am not sure how to tell you everything, but I don't think not trying would be helpful. You're ... you're very important to the world,” she managed as he sat.

She turned as LNN news came on.

‘EPRAD scientists confirm the threat from Nightfall is over, but they unfortunately haven't been able to determine the fate of Superman. It is hoped after deflecting Nightfall that his trajectory was back toward Earth, but due to the debris from Nightfall, they can't triangulate his likely path,’ the reporter said.

The screen displayed the last image of Superman's face, moments before he had secured the helmet on his head and departed for Nightfall.

“That's me?” he asked, surprised.

And then the image changed to replays of other instances of him in the news, primarily amazing rescues and him doing impossible feats.

Lois slowly eased herself in the chair beside the couch as he stared at the screen.

“Yeah,” she answered.

Superman silently watched himself lift cars, put out burning buildings, carry injured people through the air, and smile in front of huge crowds.

“How am I doing those things?” he asked, astonished.

“You're ... Kryptonian. I don't know **how** you do those things, you just do, but it's because you're Kryptonian. Scientists think you get your powers from the sun,” she tried to explain, now really second guessing her decision to show him this way.

Superman frowned in thought, but before either of them could say anything more, someone knocked on her door.

“Oh! That must be Perry!” She jumped up and hurried to the door.

Chapter 7: Memory

Superman, or Kal-El apparently, stayed on the couch, not quite sure what to do as Lois dashed to the door. He still felt out of it, and that was before considering his lack of memories.

“Perry, thanks for coming,” she said as two men entered her apartment.

“No problem, honey. This is Dr. Ngo. He and I go way back. He works at Metropolis General and is essentially their head trauma expert. I was lucky enough to catch him on his day off,” Perry said, going behind her as she closed the door.

“Even if it wasn't my day off, I would have come. The world owes a lot to Superman,” Dr. Ngo said.

Dr. Ngo was a middle-aged Asian gentleman. He was dressed in casual attire but his posture was rather regal. He carried a large briefcase, and Kal-El suspected medical equipment was within.

Perry and Ngo immediately spotted him sitting on the couch beyond the entry room and both straightened before Lois led the way.

“Superman, this is Perry White and Dr. Ngo,” Lois introduced.

He tried not to appear too self-conscious as he nodded in greeting. “Hi.”

He inwardly winced. He doubted ‘Superman’ would greet anyone like that.

“How are you feeling?” Perry asked as he looked at him in obvious concern.

“Tired, but better than earlier,” he answered honestly.

“I was told you were confused before and were bleeding from your ear. Would you mind if I took a look at you?” Dr. Ngo asked, slowly stepping forward.

Superman felt a sudden rise in apprehension, and he had no idea why. He suddenly felt hot and wanted space.

“What are you going to do?” he asked. His breathing quickened.

Lois moved past Ngo and stopped by the couch. He felt relieved by the buffer she unknowingly created just by her presence.

“Check your vitals and responses. I suspect you have a concussion, which, considering what happened, makes a great deal of sense. If you do have a concussion, I want to make sure the symptoms are not getting worse.”

Well, that didn't seem too difficult.

“Alright.” He took a deep breath, and he suspected they all took note of it.

“Would you prefer they leave the room?” Dr. Ngo asked.

“No! No. They can stay,” he said. He clasped his hands in front of himself and looked at them all apologetically.

“You can relax, son. We're all here to help,” Perry assured.

Kal-El focused on him, and he was struck by a sensation of familiarity. Just like Lois, he knew that he knew this person. He looked at Ngo and felt no familiarity at all. He turned back to Perry, who was looking at him with some growing concern.

“I know you, don't I?” Kal-El asked.

As soon as he asked, he wished he hadn't. Perry looked like he had been punched in the gut.

“Of course, Superman. Do you ...?” Perry looked uncertainly at Lois who sighed softly.

“He doesn't remember anything, Perry,” Lois supplied. “Nothing about himself, either.”

“Do you know who the president is, Superman?” Dr. Ngo asked.

“President Daniel Smith,” he said.

“What did you do this morning?” he asked.

“I have no idea,” Superman said. “Lois said I went into space and hit an asteroid.”

“Dissociative amnesia. It's where you forget things about your life, and it can be all encompassing or only in certain areas,” Dr. Ngo explained. “It typically occurs after an experience of overwhelming stress, such as a traumatic event like war, abuse, an accident, or disaster. Considering recent events, I think it's fair to say you're suffering from a generalized case of dissociative amnesia because of your impact with Nightfall,” he said, turning to Superman at the end.

“What can we do?” Lois asked before Kal-El could ask for information about 'Nightfall.'

“Keep him around people and surroundings he should know, discuss his life with him, and be patient. Basic 'talk therapy' typically helps,” Ngo said.

“So his memories can return?” Perry asked.

“Most cases of dissociative amnesia are relatively short. Often, memories return suddenly and completely, although it can come in bursts over time. Memory recovery can be triggered by something in the person's surroundings or in therapy,” Ngo explained. “So the

outlook there is very good, and the fact he felt he knew you, Perry, that's certainly a positive sign.”

Lois and Perry sighed in relief as Ngo took a moment to get his stethoscope, otoscope, blood pressure cuff, and penlight out.

Kal-El took off the gray shirt Lois had given him, figuring it would help Dr. Ngo examine him faster.

“Alright, take a deep breath for me please,” Ngo said, beginning the physical examination.

Superman did as instructed.

“How's your eyesight? Blurry or double vision? Spots?” Ngo asked as he moved on and used his penlight.

“It was hard to focus earlier, but that's gone away,” Superman said, now following Ngo's finger with his eyes.

“Your responses are all good, now for your ears,” Ngo said, quickly moving along.

After checking his blood pressure, he was done. Kal-El put the shirt back on, relieved.

“Well, I did see some blood in the ear canal, but couldn't see any damage or swelling indicative of head trauma. I suspect your abilities lend you some superior healing on top of your strength and such,” Ngo said thoughtfully. “How does your head feel?”

“Better. The floor doesn't feel like it's tilting anymore, and it doesn't hurt as much or feel as ... heavy?”

“Pressure anywhere?”

“It was here, but it's just here now,” he said, pointing near the top back of his head before sliding it over a bit.

Ngo hummed in thought. “If you were anyone else, I'd take you in for an MRI or a CT scan, but I'm not sure we'd get any useful images,” Ngo said with a frown. “However, the rate of your improvement assures me we don't need to see anything and that helping you recover your memories will be more productive than having you travel to the hospital and undergo a scan that might take several hours.”

Scans sounded horrible. He was really glad he managed to avoid them.

“Oh, and you can sleep. I know the common belief is that you can't let someone with a concussion sleep, but I'm confident you're on the mend and that sleep is safe for you. And actually, it's probably the best thing you can do for yourself at the moment,” Ngo continued.

“Alright. Thank you, doctor,” he said, grateful.

“It's my pleasure, Superman.”

“Well, I think all things considered, you're better off staying with Lois, Superman,” Perry said. “Other than Clark Kent, she knows you the best, as far as I know. Unfortunately, Clark is out of town, but I can try calling him if you wish.”

“Okay,” he said. Maybe Clark could tell him more about his powers.

“Alright, we have a plan. Do either of you need anything?” Perry asked, looking at both him and Lois.

Superman shook his head.

“No, Chief, we’re set, I think, but what are you going to do? I mean, with the fact he’s back....” She looked uneasily between them, and Kal-El was confused.

“I think we can say that Superman made it back and sent the Daily Planet a message, asking us to inform the world of his return while he focuses on recovering. We can leave it vague, saying that’s all he really told us,” Perry said, looking questioningly at Superman. “And actually, we should call the Superman Foundation first.”

Confused but confident Perry knew best, Kal-El nodded, giving permission for that plan.

Lois sagged in relief before looking at Dr. Ngo.

He lifted his hands up in surrender. “Doctor-patient confidentiality. I was never here, but I can come back if you need me,” he said.

Lois smiled, and Kal-El was again struck by how beautiful she looked.

“Thanks,” Lois said.

“Of course.”

“Okay. We’ll head out now, but don’t hesitate to call me if you need anything or if you need to talk to Dr. Ngo,” Perry said.

“Yes. And try not to force yourself to remember. Everything is still in there. It’ll come,” Ngo advised.

“Thanks again,” Superman said.

“No, thank **you**, Superman. You’ll understand when you remember, but it’s a great honor to be able to help you. Let me know if you ever need me again,” Ngo said before stepping back with Perry.

Lois escorted Perry and Dr. Ngo out and closed the door behind them. Kal-El tried not to look too relieved when Lois turned back around and faced him. Just her and him. He felt so exhausted, and not just physically. He was ready to sleep.

“You take my bed — it’s much more comfortable, and it’ll take me time to bring out the inflatable mattress,” Lois said, taking charge, which was alright with him.

If he hadn’t been so tired, he might have pushed back on taking her bed, but he really just wanted to rest.

“Okay. Thanks. Sleep sounds really good,” he admitted.

She led him back to her room, and he slid into bed soon after.

“Are you thirsty or anything?” she asked.

“No thanks, I’m fine,” he assured.

“Okay,” she said, pulling back and turning off the immediate light.

“I’m going to clean up and then I’ll just be out there if you need me,” she said.

He was so tired that he barely managed to hum his understanding when he began slipping into dreamland.

Lois quietly fixed coffee the next morning, not wanting to disturb Superman. Kal-El. He was still sleeping, which didn’t surprise her.

She called Perry and gave him a quick update. He immediately reassured her that she didn’t need to bother coming in for work. She was both relieved by and uneasy with the impromptu day off.

She was grateful to be able to continue helping Kal-El, but what if he remembered?

Of course, she wanted him to remember who he was, but she was afraid of what he would do if his memories all came back in her presence. Or worse, if only the worst memories returned.

Hopefully her help since she found him would help ease whatever anger might still be there.

She looked at the muted television currently on LNN as she quietly stirred her coffee.

The Daily Planet had already published the article with news of Superman’s return. The world was now rejoicing.

Perry hadn’t been able to reach Clark or the Kents. He would try again later in the day and get back with her. She wouldn’t be surprised if they were out celebrating with the rest of the world.

Kal-El had done it. He had saved them all. He had saved his home.

She smiled softly as she brought the mug up to her lips. “Urgh.” She grimaced and quickly put it down, nearly gagging at the smell.

She looked down at the light brown fluid. Had the milk gone bad? It should have still had a few more good days.

Before she could think on it further, she heard Superman coming down the hallway.

“Uh, Lois?” he asked, uncertain.

“Morning,” she said with a smile.

He had combed his hair back and was looking much more like himself, sans suit.

“Morning,” he returned before looking at the clock behind her. “But it’s 12:20.”

“Close enough,” she said, for a moment allowing herself to briefly forget what she had done months before as he smiled at her. “Are you hungry? I did fix coffee, but I’m afraid the milk went bad.”

“I’m okay. I don’t think I’m hungry,” he said with a shrug.

“Well, you did once tell me that you don’t need to eat, but you like to,” she said thoughtfully.

“I don’t need to eat?” he asked, baffled.

“That’s what you told me,” she said. “I think you must get everything you need from the sun.”

Superman frowned, obviously troubled.

"I know you must have a lot of questions," she said. "Why don't you sit and I'll try to answer what I can."

He joined her at the table in the chair right beside her.

"What would you like to know?" she asked once he had settled and turned to her.

He looked down at his hands and gave a shaky breath before glancing up at her.

"Am I human?" he finally asked.

That had not been the first question she had expected, but she supposed she should have.

"Well, no. You're Kryptonian. You're from the planet Krypton," she explained, not sure what else to add. She wished she knew more.

"I'm ... an alien?" he asked, his expression too blank for Lois to discern just yet.

"Technically, I suppose, but I don't know of anyone who views you like that, at least in a negative way," she said.

"Mr. White mentioned someone named Clark who knows me the best, so does that mean there's no other Kryptonians we could talk to?" he asked.

Lois couldn't help but bite her bottom lip before reaching out and placing her hand over his.

"You're the only one on Earth, as far as I know," she answered softly.

"Oh."

The only word Lois could think of to describe Kal-El right then was 'forlorn.'

"But you did tell me your parents ... um, Lara and Jor-El, left you something. A globe. Clark will know more about that because he kept it for a time," she said, hoping he wouldn't inquire too much about that fiasco.

"Lara and Jor-El," he said slowly. "And my name is Kal-El. I wonder if El is like a last name?"

"I could see that being the case. I also know your crest, the 'S' shield, is sort of like a family symbol. I saw a picture of your father once, and he wore the same thing," she said, latching onto that fragment of a memory after seeing how much Superman was seeking any bit of information about his past.

"Really?" he asked, a glimmer of excitement suddenly in his voice.

"Yeah. I'm sorry I don't know more," she said, wishing more than ever before that she had inquired more about his family when she had had the chance.

She squeezed his hand.

Kal-El looked up from her hand on his.

"That's okay, I'm glad to be told this much. And ... thanks," he said, meeting her eyes.

The second that passed seemed to span a full minute instead of a blink. He could hear her heartbeat, and it was a balm to his soul as he breathed in the smell of vanilla and honey that seemed to be all over her.

In his mind's eye, he could feel her hands on his back before sliding up onto his shoulders. He felt her warmth against his bare skin, her lips on his flesh, and her fingers in his hair.

What he had remembered before, that had been real — he knew that now. They were together.

Was she afraid of telling him too soon? Afraid it would ruin their relationship?

He leaned forward, compelled to get closer as he looked deeper into her eyes.

Their lips barely met and bliss instantly surged, but before it could become more, it was abruptly cut short with a gasp.

He opened his eyes to find Lois suddenly on the other side of the table away from him, breathing heavily and flushed. There were tears in her eyes.

He straightened and stood up, backing away from the table to give her more space.

"I — I'm sorry! I remembered something. I — I thought we were — I'm so sorry," he stammered.

He had felt so high for a split second that this low was violently stifling.

He didn't know what to do as she began to cry, covering her face with her hands.

"Please, I — I didn't mean to hurt you," he said, feeling shredded.

"It's — you didn't do anything, I just can't," she said between shuddering breaths. "I care too much about you to repeat a horrible mistake."

"What?" he asked, feeling struck.

She saw his face and hurried back toward him, tears on her cheeks. She stopped an arm's reach in front of him.

"I ... a few months ago, I ... you..." She closed her eyes and forced herself to calm down, if only a little. "I took advantage of you. There was a compound, a pheromone that, well, took away your self-control, your inhibitions ... and you came to me. I didn't stop us. I didn't make any serious attempt to stop things," she said, not meeting his eyes.

She was so ashamed.

She then told him what had happened from the beginning. Told him everything.

She remained standing in the middle of her kitchen as he stepped back and silently sat down in his chair.

Confusion was only a fraction of what he was feeling.

He knew everything she had just confessed was the truth, but even now, he knew he still loved her.

However, he could also now feel a distant twinge of deep hurt.

What she had done had hurt him. He could recall the sensation in that moment, even though he couldn't remember the circumstances around it with any real clarity.

But he also knew there was more. More that had come after. It was the only thing that explained why his feelings felt so layered.

And why he loved her more.

"Did you ... did you talk to me after that day?" Kal-El asked in the silence that was threatening to drown them.

"No. I didn't have any right to try. I was certain it wouldn't help anything," she whispered. "But ... but you did send me a letter through Clark, just before Nightfall."

"What did I write?" he asked.

She gave a muffled snuffle. "I haven't read it. I'm too afraid to. You should hate me."

He took a deep breath.

"Lois," he whispered. "Look at me."

Lois slowly lifted her face, her eyes red-rimmed. She forced herself to meet his eyes.

"Read it," he said. "I don't remember what I wrote, but I know I would never intentionally do anything to hurt you. I really don't think you have anything to fear."

"It's ... it's in my nightstand," she managed.

"Go read it," he encouraged. "Go read it now. I'll be here."

She looked back down, giving a grateful sob. "Okay."

She walked out of the kitchen, leaving him alone.

Alone with his thoughts and the cold coffee.

Chapter 8: Regain

Lois wiped her eyes as she entered her room and opened the top drawer of her nightstand. She retrieved the envelope and took it back to her bed, where she shakily removed the single folded sheet of paper.

It was handwritten, and the scrawl was flawless.

With tears in her eyes, she read.

Dear Lois,

I suspect receiving a letter from me is the last thing you expected, but I decided I couldn't leave things the way we had left them. I just wish I had figured out a way to talk to you directly before the threat of Nightfall came. I hope this letter will suffice.

I hear things. I know how you have been. I know how your work has suffered and how much you have. Even now, I am certain you still are, and I can't allow that to continue.

You made a mistake, and, yes, you hurt me, but life is too short, too fragile to allow a single decision — yours or anyone else's — to rule your life. Especially when you've learned from it. I want you to be able to live the rest of

your life without that mistake weighing you down, so please believe me when you read this. I have forgiven you. And I never hated you.

Whatever happens with Nightfall, know that I left hoping you will eventually forgive yourself and live a good, long life.

And if I should return, one day I will keep my promise and show and tell you everything. Everything I keep secret from the world.

Eternally yours,

Kal-El

Lois had never cried so hard in her life, even when her guilt had been so potent and debilitating. But this cry was different. It was full of relief and gratitude, tinged with a deep sense of poignance.

Kal-El was back, but he didn't remember. However, even without his memories, he was still the same kind, selfless man he had been before.

And he was still waiting for her in her kitchen.

She stood up and left her room, feeling better than she had in a long time.

"Kal-El?" she asked tentatively.

She stepped into the kitchen and found him by the counter with a fresh cup of coffee.

"Was it okay?" he asked nervously, turning toward her and putting his coffee down. "The letter?"

Pushing aside her wayward hope that he hadn't used the bad milk, she hurried forward.

"You were right," she said, clutching the sheet of forgiveness close to herself as she continued toward him. "Thank you. Thank you so much."

She wasn't sure who initiated the hug, but his arms were soon around her as she pressed herself against him.

They pulled back a moment later, both clearly flustered, but happy.

"Here, you should read it," she said, holding it out for him.

He smiled. "Okay."

He took the page, and she watched him read.

His eyebrows rose higher the further he went, and as he no doubt came to the end, he closed his eyes.

She didn't move, holding her breath.

"I remember," he said finally as he smiled softly. "I remember writing this."

"You do?" she asked, daring to hope.

He frowned, his eyes looking back and forth but not really focusing on anything. "I remember other things...."

He startled, giving her the letter back.

"My parents! I need to go. They don't know I'm really okay," he said.

A dozen questions passed through her mind, but she ignored her desire to quench her curiosity and instead put her hand on his arm.

“Then go to them,” she said. “I’ll be here.”

“Thank you, Lois. I don’t remember everything yet, but thank you. No matter what, I’ll always be grateful for your help,” he said, cupping the side of her face with his warm hand.

He pulled his hand away after a moment and glanced down at his empty mug sitting on the counter.

“Did you drink the bad milk?!” she asked suddenly, aghast.

“Oh, I, uh, I guess I must have. Sorry for finishing it,” he said.

“‘Sorry for finishing’ the sour milk that I was going to dump out anyway?” Lois asked, now amused. “Well, I suppose it can’t hurt you.”

He shrugged, smiling sheepishly. “It didn’t taste bad, but then I don’t remember the last time I had coffee,” he said honestly. “Or how it’s supposed to taste,” he added, chuckling slightly at the tongue-in-cheek joke about his lack of memories.

She laughed, shaking her head. “Well, when you get back I’ll make sure to have fresh milk so you can compare,” she said before being struck with a thought. “Wait, do you remember how to fly?”

He grinned. “Yeah. I remember how to control my powers again.”

She gave a relieved smile.

“Well, I better go,” he said.

“Okay.”

She walked him to the window and gently opened it.

“Please send my regards to Perry. Oh! And before I forget, if he has any good ideas on what to do with the remnants of my uniform, feel free to give it to him. I ... I’d rather not throw it away, but it’s definitely ruined.”

“We’ll take care of it. It is a piece of history, after all,” she said, inwardly wondering if he was drawing out his departure intentionally or not.

He blinked, taken aback by the historical importance of his suit.

“Oh, I hadn’t thought of that,” he said. “Okay, well, I’ll leave it to you.” He stepped up onto the ledge of the window. “Good evening, Lois.”

“Bye,” she returned.

And then he was gone, a sonic boom echoing behind him.

Kal-El landed behind his parents’ home. He didn’t remember as much as he would have liked — he didn’t even know his name yet — but he knew this was home.

However, he suddenly felt silly and uncertain as he knocked on the back patio door. What if what he had remembered was an old memory and they no longer lived here? Maybe he should have looked into this property before just showing up? Well, it was a bit too late now as he heard movement within the house.

And then they were there.

“Clark!” his mom cried.

She enveloped him, and he instantly knew her arms were his sanctuary and his dad’s hand on his shoulder was his anchor.

“Mom, Dad,” he breathed as his mind was rocked by all that was Clark Kent.

“Clark, we didn’t know where you were but knew you would come when you could after the Planet made that statement,” she explained. “Are you okay?”

She and his father pulled back, waiting for him expectantly.

“Yeah. Yeah, I, uh, had amnesia, but it came back, and I remembered the rest just now,” he said, collecting himself.

“Amnesia?” his dad asked, concerned.

“It’s okay. Perry was able to get a good doctor, and he told us it sometimes happens when someone goes through high-stress situations and that the memories typically come back completely, eventually,” he said.

His dad’s eyes widened in concern.

“Let’s get inside and you can tell us everything that happened,” he said.

Sitting down at the table, Clark did exactly that, rehashing all that had happened to him since waking up on Lois’ apartment floor. He only remembered snippets of his flight back, but he didn’t feel like covering that, and his parents didn’t seem to mind that omission.

“So Dr. Ngo was sure you’d be fine?” his mom asked.

“Yeah,” Clark said, though he knew his dad wasn’t too thrilled about the fact a doctor had been able to examine him.

“And you said Perry trusted him?” Jonathan asked.

“Yeah, Dad. I really don’t think I have anything to worry about with him.”

“Okay, as long as you’re sure, son,” Jonathan relented.

“So Lois read your letter?” Martha asked, speaking after a silence had lapsed between them.

“Yeah, she did.”

“What are you going to do now?” she asked.

“I’m going to tell her,” he said with a deep breath. “Not telling her now would feel wrong.”

Martha slowly nodded, agreeing with the decision overall.

“I just don’t know how, and I’m ... afraid,” he admitted.

“You’re afraid that she’ll only see you as Superman after you tell her?” Jonathan asked.

“No, I think she’s demonstrated that she actually sees Clark, and I’m not concerned about whether or not she’d keep my secret. No, I’m afraid of what the truth will do to her. I don’t know what she’ll do when she realizes that what she did to Superman she also did to Clark,” he said, being mindful of his strength as he tightened his hands around his glass of fresh buttermilk.

His parents nodded understandingly, though Martha’s eyes narrowed at how he referred to himself in the third-person.

“It’ll also reveal the fact I kept the secret from her for nearly half a year before that night, though the reason why I kept it a secret will instantly be clear, which will only add to her guilt.

“And then, on top of all of that, there’s also the realization that I’ve been working alongside her for months after it! It’s ... a lot to take in,” he said.

“Yes, it is, but I think clearing the air, so to speak, is better done before too much more time passes,” Martha advised.

Clark nodded in agreement. “I’ll tell her soon, maybe Friday, that way she at least has the weekend to hopefully come to terms with it before work Monday,” he said.

“I think that’s a reasonable plan,” Jonathan said.

Clark put his head down on his forearm.

“In the meantime, I think you could use a bit more sleep,” his mom said.

“Yeah,” Clark agreed, getting up to head to bed.

Lois stepped into work that morning, not surprised to see Clark’s desk empty.

He had called her briefly that morning, letting her know he’d be back the next day, he just wanted to finish a few things in Smallville. She was relieved and told him as much. Though surprised by her own honesty, she decided not to feel too self-conscious about it, especially when Clark responded so happily to it.

She sighed. She still wondered how much Clark knew and decided she might one day ask Kal-El. One day.

She glanced at the coffee maker beyond the bullpen and couldn’t help but grimace. She still couldn’t believe Superman had drunk a whole cup of contaminated coffee. The thought alone made her want to gag, and she actually suddenly felt a little queasy.

“Lois!” Perry called.

“Yeah, Chief?!” she called, grateful for the distraction.

“My office!” he called.

Lois hurried over, carrying a small box under her arm. He shut the door behind her.

“I’ve already contacted EPRAD and the National Museum about what they’d like to do with the remains of Superman’s uniform, and, let me tell you, they’re ecstatic. You’re sure Superman is fine with whatever’s decided?” Perry asked.

“As long as it’s not used disrespectfully or something, I don’t think he really has a strong opinion. He just didn’t want it thrown away. If I remember right, his mother made the uniform for him,” she said.

Perry’s eyes widened. “Is that so? Well, I’ll definitely make sure the-powers-that-be know that.”

She nodded, putting the box down on his desk. She then slowly lifted the lid, revealing the filthy suit, neatly folded, within. The crest was in full view, though the top right edge was frayed and all of the colors were muted and coated in a thin layer of dust. There were also holes and tears throughout the formerly sapphire blue fabric. It was astonishing to know this thin material had survived an impact that would have decimated the world.

It was just as astonishing that the man who had worn it had returned, and returned in one piece, super powers or not. He just as easily could have been lost.

“Lois, are you okay?” Perry asked.

“Uh, yeah, yeah, I’m fine, Perry,” she assured, but that didn’t seem to mollify him.

“Here, sit down, you look really pale all of a sudden,” he said, pulling out a chair for her.

She sat down just in time as the world suddenly swooned.

“Lois?” he asked.

She opened her eyes, not remembering when she had closed them.

“Yeah?” she asked, blinking at him.

“I want you to go home and schedule a doctor appointment ASAP. You zoned out on me for almost a minute. I was about to call for help.”

“Perry, I don’t need to go —” she started.

“You’ve been running on near empty for a while, honey. And you haven’t been yourself for several weeks — months really. Don’t think I haven’t noticed. You had started to do a little better but, with this past week, you’ve ended up draining yourself dry. Get yourself checked out. It likely is just stress, but I’ve seen too many instances of people waiting to get checked out only to discover something too late. Just humor an old man,” he said seriously.

She frowned. “Okay, Perry, but only for you.”

“I’ll keep you posted on the suit and if I hear from Superman, assuming you don’t before me,” he said as she stood up.

“Okay,” she said, grudgingly admitting to herself that maybe she should see a doctor.

Four hours later, she sat waiting in her primary doctor's office. She had been very lucky that someone canceled at the last minute, and they had been able to slide her in that same afternoon.

She had just finished taking a general battery of tests that would hopefully determine whether or not there was anything she should worry about. She felt confident it was just stress and that she would begin to improve now that the source of the stress (her guilt!) had been greatly reduced the day before.

A knock on the door broke her from her musings, and the doctor entered.

"Well, Lois, good news, you're extremely healthy other than being slightly dehydrated," Dr. Marsh began as she sat down in the stool across from her.

There was a folded sheet of paper in her hand.

"Oh, that's good. Is that why I almost passed out this morning?" she asked, relieved to hear confirmation of her belief that all was well.

Dr. Marsh smiled. "Partly. One test did come back positive, which is likely the real cause."

She opened the sheet and handed it to her. Lois scanned the page, only to freeze on a block of text.

"I'm ... I'm pregnant?" she breathed.

All sensation fled her. She felt utterly numb.

How was this possible?

As in, she knew *how*, but how could **she** be after all this time?! It had been nearly three months, and ... she supposed it was possible. Unlikely, but possible.

She had blamed everything on stress and had never imagined becoming pregnant was on the table. She had even been on the pill. She couldn't believe she had fallen into the 'it'll never happen to me' mentality trap.

But, how could she be pregnant?!

And why wasn't she showing? She should be starting or almost starting the second trimester, right? People began to show then, right? Or at least that's what she thought her mother had pointed out once. Admittedly, she didn't know much about pregnancy.

Her numb, confused surprise then morphed into astonishment and fear.

But this wasn't a normal pregnancy.

She was pregnant with Superman's baby.

What little she did know about pregnancy might be moot.

What would this pregnancy entail? Was there anything she should or shouldn't do? Was her body even capable of providing what this child needed to develop properly?

"Lois?"

"I ... I can't believe it," she managed.

What was she going to do?

What would Kal-El think?

"Are you okay?" Dr. Marsh asked.

Lois put her face in her hands.

"Well, you are still very early in the pregnancy, if you wished ... it would be fairly simple to —"

A cold spike sheared through her center.

"No! No ... I'll ... I'll figure it out," she managed.

This ... this life was from him. Them. Sure, the circumstances were ... less than ideal, but....

She swallowed.

But how was she going to tell him this? After everything....

But she had to tell him.

In a daze, she scheduled an appointment with an OBGYN Dr. Marsh recommended and left, praying things would be okay.

Chapter 9: Reconcile

Clark entered his apartment for the first time in what felt like forever.

He took a deep breath and relaxed. It was good to be home. Well, second home.

He went further in and spotted that his answering machine had a flashing light. A message.

Moseying over, he pressed play.

"Clark? It's Lois. I, uh, if you see Superman, could you let him know I need to see him right away? It's important. Thanks." Her voice cracked, and he immediately could tell she was on the verge of crying.

At that, she hung up.

He had been gone for two days. When had she called?

He quickly checked and was relieved it was just earlier that same day.

He frowned. She sounded really upset.

Should he go to her as Clark or Superman?

Maybe he could go to her as Clark and assess the situation and then go from there?

He really needed to tell her the truth, and he didn't want to do it as Superman.

With his mind made up, he hurried out and appeared in the alleyway behind her apartment. He then ran at human speed up to her door.

Lois took a deep breath. She didn't think she had any more tears. After leaving the doctor's office, she had thought long and hard — between many bouts of weeping sessions — and called Clark the next morning.

Fortunately or unfortunately, he hadn't been home, so she had left what she hoped was a coherent message.

She glanced at the clock, grateful Perry had given her Friday off when she had called and assured him she was healthy — she just needed to take it easy for a few days.

He had heartily agreed and told her to stay home before she even had to ask.

Hopefully Clark would get the message to Superman before she headed back to work Monday.

She got up and made herself a cup of hot cocoa. She knew caffeine was supposedly not good for the baby, so figured hot cocoa would be a good (or at least decent) replacement for coffee. Not that she found coffee all that appetizing at the moment.

Her aversion to the coffee suddenly made so much sense, not to mention all her snacking.

She sat down with her mug and took a sip before she heard a knock on her door.

Not sure who it might be, she got up and glanced at her reflection in the nearby window. Relieved she looked halfway decent, she went to the door.

"Coming!" she said, before looking through the peephole.

It was Clark.

Quickly opening the door, she stepped back and tried to remain calm.

Had he gotten her message? Had he spoken with Superman?

"Hi," she said at the same time as Clark.

They smiled uncertainly at each other.

She let him in.

"I, uh, wanted to make sure you were okay and, uh, tell you something. Um, are you okay?" he asked.

She closed the door behind him.

She bit her lip and tried not to think about whether or not she was okay. Because she didn't know. Instead, she focused on wondering what Clark wanted to tell her and if he had gotten her message.

"What is it?" she asked, avoiding the question. "Did you see Superman? Is he okay?"

"Yes, he's fine, but, if you're okay, I really need to talk to you about something ... please," he said, pressing forward and not commenting on her not answering his question. She was grateful.

"Did he send you?" she asked softly, leading them into her living room and sitting down on the couch. He sat beside her.

"I'm here for my own reasons as much as his. Please, Lois, this is important."

"Okay, Clark," she said, confused and now worried.

"I think it'd be best if you just listen and wait to talk until I'm done. It shouldn't take me long to say what I need to say, but I don't know if I'll be able to finish if you interrupt me, okay?"

Lois slowly nodded, now afraid of what he was going to say. It was rare to see Clark this serious.

He took a deep breath, appearing just as fearful as she felt.

"I know I've been different since the ... Miranda mess, but it's not for the reasons you likely think. And before I go on, I want to make clear that I'm not angry or upset anymore. I've accepted what happened, and I've forgiven you," he said.

She began to open her mouth, unnerved and bewildered by his words, but his pointed look silenced her.

"I've thought long and hard about how to tell you this, and I realized drawing it out is pointless. Just remember, I'm still me," he said, taking off his glasses.

She was too concerned about what he was about to say to process him removing his glasses as he made eye contact with her. The world stilled as he took hold of her nearest hand. She didn't pull away.

"Lois, I made you a promise a long time ago and then again a few days ago. I promised you I would show and tell you everything. Everything I keep secret from the world," he said, giving her hand a gentle squeeze. "Please let me know when you're ready to hear it all."

"Kal-El ... ?" she asked in a strained whisper, her eyes wide.

He nodded, even as her head swam with the implications.

It was too much to sort, so she didn't try as realization upon realization surged like the tide, again and again.

Clark's abrupt distance after that horrible day. She had been too buried by her own feelings to really wonder about it. And then later she had just assumed his awkwardness was due to him likely knowing what had happened between her and Superman.

But she had been wrong. He had been hurting.

Hurting and hiding his pain as best he could.

She had hurt the two most important men in her life. And they were the same man.

And she already knew why he hadn't told her the truth before now.

Lord, she had screwed up so much.

But he had somehow forgiven her.

She didn't bother to even try to contain her tears as she launched herself at him and held onto him as if her life depended on it. Maybe it did.

"Oh, gawd, I'm so sorry, Clark, I'm so sorry!" she gasped, pulling back just enough to look at him as she placed her hands on either side of his face before hugging him again.

He hugged her back, holding her tenderly and close.

"I've forgiven you. It's behind us," he said.

This man. He had just saved the entire world, and here he was, extending so much mercy and grace.... He might

not be human, but he had more humanity in his pinky than most people had in their whole bodies.

And she was the mother of his child.

Her.

She tightly closed her eyes as she recognized another reality.

She was carrying Clark's baby, not just Superman's.

She had to tell him now.

What would he do?

She didn't think he would just abandon her, but how much could one person take?

She clung to him, too emotionally spent to care that she was trembling.

"Are you okay?" he asked as her tears slowed and she was merely weepy.

She shook her head, trying to gather herself enough to talk. He held her in silence, patiently waiting for her hiccups to pass.

"What did you need to see me about?" he asked after another moment. "Your message. It seemed ... important."

"It is," she said. "But I don't know how to tell you.

After everything, you've even forgiven me for what I did. I don't know how to tell you this."

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"The milk. It wasn't bad," she said, looking down, her brain for some reason latching onto that detail.

"What?" he asked, so baffled, he couldn't help but chuckle at the memory of her reaction to him drinking her sour milk in his coffee and the absurdity of her bringing it up now.

"It was me. I mean, I can't stand coffee anymore," she said, forcing down the knot in her throat.

"Lois, I'm confused. You're not making any sense. You mean the coffee was bad?" he asked, utterly bewildered about what she was trying to say.

"No, I'm sorry. I'm trying to tell you ... I'm" She floundered, before she recalled something he had told her all those months ago. "Can you focus your hearing? Do you hear anything ... different?"

"Where?" he asked, even more confused by the random request.

"In me," she said, before holding her breath.

He frowned but tilted his head, and she was struck by the image. How many times had he tilted his head like that, only to disappear? How many times had he heard something in her presence that required his attention as Superman?

It was mind-boggling.

She stared at him, waiting for what she was sure would come.

His eyes widened, and her heart clenched in hope and tentative relief at his expression.

It was one of astonished wonder and joy.

"Are you ... are you pregnant?" he asked so quietly she barely heard him.

She nodded. "Are you ... happy?"

His eyes filled with tears as he positively beamed.

"I'm a dad...." He reverently touched her stomach.

"I'm a dad."

"Yeah." Her voice cracked.

He looked at her, so overwhelmed he couldn't speak.

"I know ... I know the circumstances are ... not great, but —" she said nervously.

"The circumstances don't matter," he stated confidently. "Because this is a new life. Lois, you're growing a new person inside of you!" he exclaimed, bursting with excitement. "Our child."

Lois laughed and was suddenly crying tears of joy.

"I love you," she said earnestly.

He kissed her forehead, his hands on her side and hip, pulling her closer. However, before things got too heated he pulled back and just held her.

"I've loved you since the first time I saw you and have never stopped," he said, his forehead on hers.

"Will you marry me, Clark?" she asked.

She knew she would never find anyone like him and that no one would ever love her as much as he did. She also knew she could never love anyone as much as she loved him. But love wasn't the only reason.

She wanted to give this child what she hadn't had growing up: a loving, devoted family. And while she wasn't sure if she was mother material, she knew Clark would be a great dad, and his folks would be amazing grandparents. From them, she'd figure it out.

He almost gaped at her in surprise, before he smiled softly at her.

"Yes," he said simply, before cupping her cheek with his hand and slowly bringing his lips to hers.

She nervously returned his advance, in disbelief of his quick acceptance of her impromptu marriage proposal, but so *so* happy.

Her hesitancy soon evaporated as the kiss progressed, his love undeniably present in every caress as she was intensely reminded of how good he was at kissing. Memories of that night flashed in her mind's eye, and she blushed as his hand slid up into her hair just as it had all those months ago.

He eased back, looking content.

They exchanged shy smiles before she shifted on the couch and allowed herself to rest against him.

"I, uh, have an appointment next week," she said after a moment. "Could you go with me?" She felt silly for asking, but she needed to hear his answer.

"Of course!" he said, giving her a slight squeeze.

“Do you, I mean, do you know what we should expect? I mean, with the pregnancy?” she asked hesitantly.

Clark went still.

“Actually, no. I, uh, don’t know much about Kryptonians, or anything really. I came here as a baby, and only discovered where I came from when I found that globe,” he admitted.

“You didn’t know until then?!” she asked, astonished. “Oh. ‘It’s the not knowing that kills you,’” she recalled, quoting him from a conversation they had had at work so long ago that it felt like a lifetime away.

“Yeah. Would you, would you like me to share what I do know? Or would that be too much, too soon?” he asked.

Tentatively, she smiled at him. “I think we’re passed that being a valid reason to hold back,” she said, hand on her stomach. “Please, I want to know everything.”

“Then let’s go to Smallville. The globe is there.”

She perked up and got up from the couch, allowing him to stand up.

“I’ve always wanted to do this in front of you,” he said, stepping away from her.

She gasped as he spun in place, blurring in color, before stopping in front of her in his suit — his cape swooshing behind him.

“Wow!”

He grinned. He approached her, and she gazed up at him.

Knowing and seeing were two different things.

“I’m still me,” he said self-consciously.

“I know,” she said softly, touching his shield.

This was real. She wasn’t dreaming.

“Your mother really made this?” she asked, though it was hardly a question.

“She makes all of my suits,” he said, his voice soft.

She inwardly blanched as a thought came to mind.

“Do they ... do they know?” She looked up at him, resigned.

“Yes. They know enough, as well as how much you helped me when I returned,” he said gently.

She rested her cheek against his emblem, trying not to tear up. She didn’t deserve him.

He suddenly hugged her. “They’re going to be thrilled about being grandparents!” he declared, absolutely giddy.

She pulled back in disbelief.

Had the circumstances been different, she would have found the image before her hilarious.

Superman, as hyper as a sugar-high child.

Instead, all she could think about was how his parents should be furious with her, even disgusted that her selfish, short-sighted, impulsive choice had hurt their son so deeply and resulted in an unplanned pregnancy.

She knew if her parents found out wha —

She cringed. Lord, she would have to tell her parents at some point.

Okay, maybe she could avoid telling them about the circumstances, but even then, the pregnancy couldn’t be hidden. They would know she had gotten pregnant out of wedlock — not that they were particularly religious, but it was the image they cared about.

“Lois?” Clark, Superman, Kal-El, asked.

“My parents are going to be appalled,” she whispered. “Mother will —”

“Lois, we can’t control what other people think or feel. Try not to dwell too much on any negative reactions people might have, no matter who they are. How they feel is their problem; don’t let it be yours too,” he stated. “This is our life, our child. We’re ... we’re a family now.”

Her eyes filled up and overflowed.

He was right.

“Okay,” she said.

They then went to the window.

“Ready?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

“I’m going to move fast until we’re out of Metropolis. We’re going to need to be more careful from now on,” he said, suddenly serious.

She nodded in understanding.

Things were different now.

And she knew a lot of other things would soon change. At that, they shot out the window, and it shut in their wake.

Thus closing the first chapter of their lives and starting the next.

THE END