

Savior

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Rating: PG-13

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Summary: Lois helps rescue a man who's been imprisoned and tortured since he was a child. What will become of him as he reenters the world and how will Lois deal with her feelings for him as their relationship develops?

Story Size: 63,075 words (346Kb as text)

Author's Notes:

As night falls on an old abandoned warehouse just outside Metropolis, Lois finds more than just a front-page story when she helps rescue a man who's been imprisoned and subjected to unthinkable torture for nearly fifteen years. What will become of him as he's thrown into a world he hasn't seen since his too-short childhood? And how will Lois reconcile her complicated feelings for him as their friendship grows?

This story is something I've been working on for a while now, although the final five chapters or so came together in only about a week after a song I heard gave my muse a little push! It is a bit heavy, and I've been told I should add the warning that although I really, really broke Clark (as you'll see in the first few chapters), I do put him all back together by the end of the story. Really, I promise!

It seems like I'm a broken record, repeating this yet again, but I'd like to thank KSaraSara for all of the encouragement in the last couple months. And for the last-minute read through and help with a couple sections. And for commiserating with me over summary writing!

The rating is solidly PG-13 for some descriptions of violence and torture.

Thank you to everyone for all of your encouragement, and I hope you enjoy this one!

Prologue

A sharp pain like nothing he'd ever felt spread through the boy's body, radiating from a single point in his left shoulder. The hammer dropped from his hand, clattering loudly on the frozen ground, and the boy screwed his eyes shut as his legs gave out. His knees hit the solid earth, and he struggled for breath.

"Dad?" His voice sounded weak, but it could have just been that everything around him buzzed. Loudly. Or it

could have been the stabbing of a million tiny needles at his temples. He doubled over, clutching at his head, as the pain intensified.

"Clark? Son, what's wrong?" He recognized his father's voice, but it was muffled, like his own voice.

Then, through the haze, several things happened at once. Shouting erupted not far away, and his dad's voice boomed with anger in the young boy's ears.

"Who the hell are you, and what are you doing on my property?!"

If he hadn't been so engulfed in pain, the boy would have been quite taken aback at the mild curse word leaving his dad's lips. However, not a moment later, a scuffle broke out next to him, and four rough hands hoisted him up off the ground, sending spasms of sharp pains through his head, chest, arms, and abdomen. He forced his eyes open, but immediately regretted it as the afternoon light intensified the feeling. The million tiny needles were now knives. Razor-sharp knives, slicing him from every direction. Vaguely, he saw men in black army gear — a lot of men — and a bunch of black SUVs. And his dad, being hauled at gunpoint several feet in front of him. And his mom, down the hill, rushing out of the house and screaming his name.

"Mom!" he cried, and he attempted to struggle. He was usually strong. Stronger than most boys his age. But now, he could barely move, and the solid hands gripping him did not yield. "Let me go! Mom! Help!"

The boy felt tears streaming down his cheeks. Before he could cry out again, he was shoved into the back of one of the vehicles, and another sharp pain pierced him, this time in his right shoulder.

And the world went black.

Chapter 1

"Ms. Lane?"

Lois Lane looked up from her computer screen, and her inquisitive brown eyes met the bespectacled gaze of an older woman who stood nervously a few feet from her desk, clutching a purse tightly between her hands. *That's what the name placard says*, she thought sarcastically, but she held back the retort. The woman looked genuinely anxious, and something else that Lois couldn't explain flashed in the woman's eyes. Lois cleared her throat.

"Yes, I'm Lois Lane," she replied tersely, swiveling her chair to face the woman. "Can I help you?"

The woman's bright blue eyes darted around the room before settling back on Lois. A tear escaped from the corner of her eye and slid down her cheek, and the woman quickly reached up and wiped it away. Lois's curiosity was sufficiently peaked. She stood and grabbed a chair from

the desk next to hers, offering it to the older woman, who sat appreciatively.

“I-I don’t know if you can help me, Ms. Lane, but I’ve tried everything else, and —” The woman’s hands moved to cover her mouth, and she stifled a sob. She shook her head briefly, as if to shoo away her sadness, and then raised her eyes back to Lois. “My name is Martha Kent, Ms. Lane, and I came here to ask your help with finding my son, Clark, who was abducted from our home in Smallville, Kansas fifteen years ago.”

Lois blinked several times as she processed the woman’s words. Many thoughts raced through Lois’s mind, but she tried to keep her expression neutral.

“Mrs. Kent, I appreciate your candor, but why do you think I can help you? That sounds like a job for the police. I’m sorry that you’ve traveled such a long way,” Lois said quietly, reaching out to take the older woman’s hand in her own. The trembling, cold fingers in her hand gave her pause. Something about this woman... She shook her head. “I mean... Can you tell me about your son?”

Martha’s tired, sad eyes lowered to her hands, and she pulled away from Lois for a moment and reached into her purse. She handed Lois an aged photograph of a young boy, maybe ten years old, with a huge toothy grin. His dark hair fell loosely over his forehead, and his eyes... Lois stared at the picture, her fingers absently tracing around the edge of the image.

“Clark Jerome Kent,” Martha murmured, pulling a tissue out of her purse and blotting her eyes underneath her glasses. “He was a happy boy. He loved everything about life. He...he loved to go fishing with his dad and help me bake apple pies in the summer. And he was smart — always straight A’s in school. The teachers loved him. He was kind and funny and...”

Her voice trailed off, and Lois looked up from the photograph. The woman stared at her hands again, a faraway look in her eyes.

“Mrs. Kent?”

Martha flinched and squeezed her eyes shut.

“Sorry, Ms. Lane —”

“Please, call me Lois.”

“Lois. Sorry, I-I miss my boy so much. I saw the article you wrote in last Sunday’s paper. The one about the missing children. And I thought — well, I don’t really know what I was thinking. I suppose I’ve come an awfully long way to ask for your help. But the police won’t reopen his case, and I’ve gotten nowhere trying to get the FBI or DOJ to listen,” she rambled.

Lois handed her back the photograph, which the older woman carefully placed in a folder in her purse, and then lifted her coffee mug. The empty mug reminded her that

she’d been about to get up for a refill. She frowned and set the mug back down.

“Mrs. Kent, I —” She sighed. *This is going to be a long day.* “How about I get us some fresh coffee, and you can tell me more about your son?”

“Thank you, Lois. I would appreciate that very much.”

Lois stood and moved away from the desk, her coffee cup in hand. Across the bullpen, Perry White stepped out of his office. His eyes met hers, then darted to her desk and back. The Editor-in-Chief raised his eyebrows for a moment in a questioning gesture, but Lois just shrugged. She’d tell him about it later, or not, if it turned out to be nothing. A fifteen-year-old cold case of child abduction really didn’t seem like it could end well.

But something about the woman...

Yep, this is going to be a long day.

They moved into the conference room, where they could have a bit more privacy, and then the older woman began telling Lois a chilling story that started fifteen years ago. A story involving a government agency that apparently didn’t exist, a police force that couldn’t seem to do their job, and a family that had been broken apart.

Clark Jerome Kent. He would be twenty-five years old now. They’d adopted him as a child since they’d been unable to have children of their own — Martha Kent and her husband Jonathan, that is. They’d raised him at their farm in Smallville, Kansas, a tiny town about an hour outside Wichita. He’d been a perfect child — kind, smart, happy. She said he slept like an angel when he was an infant, never cried, always listened, always ate his vegetables, and loved to help with the chores.

One afternoon, shortly after his tenth birthday, Clark had been helping his father fix a broken fence rail when five large black SUVs had driven down their driveway. At least twenty men in black riot gear had jumped out of the vehicles, brandishing military-style weapons. Martha had run outside, only to be stopped by a man in a neat gray suit who called himself Jason Trask. The man had handed Martha official-looking documents which he said authorized him to take Clark. Jonathan and Martha had been held at gunpoint while Clark was forced into the back of one of the vehicles, fighting them weakly as he cried.

And that was the last time she’d seen him. They’d contacted the police immediately and then the FBI and DOJ when the police had been unable or unwilling to look into the supposed kidnapping. However, no one in either government agency knew anything about young Clark’s abduction, and there appeared to be no record of a Jason Trask working for the government in any capacity.

“I tried to do what I could, Lois,” Martha said quietly, blotting away more tears as she finished her story. “I

followed up several times a week with the police and the FBI. They finally told me to stop calling them and said they would call me if they found anything new.”

Lois was silent for a long time. She flipped through the folder Martha had given her. The well-organized file contained a collection of documents, phone call records, and other notes from the woman’s fifteen-year battle. She paused abruptly as a name on one of the documents jumped out at her. Clayborn. Adam Clayborn. She knew him from work she did on another story about a year ago. Lois lifted the paper slowly, reading the lines of Martha’s neat handwriting. Clayborn had called her on July 10, 1981, five years after Clark was taken. They had spoken briefly, and Clayborn had told her he had information for her and would follow up. Lois’s eyes darted down the rest of the page, which listed phone calls Martha or Jonathan had made or received related to Clark’s disappearance. Clayborn’s name was not mentioned again.

“This man — Adam Clayborn — he never called you back?” Lois asked, setting the paper down in front of Martha on the conference table and pointing to the name.

Martha scooted closer to the table and pushed her glasses higher up her nose as she looked down at the page. She closed her eyes for a moment and then shook her head.

“No, but that happened a lot,” Martha explained. A flicker of some emotion crossed her face, and the older woman lowered her eyes for a moment. She added quietly, “Occasionally, it seemed like they’d have a new person call us just to pacify us so that I’d stop hounding them, you know?”

Lois nodded and looked back down at the paper while gathering her courage. She wanted to help this woman, but... She placed the paper back in the folder.

“Martha, I —”

Underneath the next page, the colorful photograph Martha had given her earlier peeked out. Lois inhaled sharply as she pulled out the photo and stared at it again.

His smile. His eyes. There was just something about him...

“Martha, I don’t know if I can do anything to help you, or if I can find something new. It’s been a really long time, and —”

“Ms. Lane — err, Lois, I read your article from last week, and you just helped save thirty-two children who were abducted nearly seven years ago. Now, I know Clark’s case is different and happened much longer ago, and... But, well, I just had this feeling that you could help me. I can’t really explain it. Jonathan, he said I’m crazy to come all this way, but —”

“It’s just a feeling,” Lois finished for her, blinking back tears as she watched the older woman fumble with the strap of her purse. Martha nodded, and Lois closed the

folder on the desk. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes for a moment, picturing the young boy and wondering what he would look like today — that is, if he were still alive, which seemed unlikely. Lois reached forward and placed her hand over Martha’s. “I’ll see what I can do, Mrs. Kent.”

The man lay in a crumpled heap on the floor in the white room, blood seeping slowly out of a new cut on his cheek. He closed his eyes and tried to muster up the energy to move to his cot in the corner. But he felt too weak. They’d taken too much from him today.

Twisting away from the door, he curled up onto his side and clutched at his stomach. He could almost feel the bruises forming. Why had they hit him today? He must have looked at them wrong. Again. Not that they seemed to need a reason to hit him.

An unwelcoming tightness began to grow in his chest, and he immediately tensed as he felt his heart start to race.

In. Two. Three. Out. Two. Three. In. Two. Three. Out. Two. Three.

He repeated the chant in his head to help him stabilize his breathing, but it did nothing to stop the lightheadedness that always accompanied the rapid increase in his heart rate. Nevertheless, he persisted with the chant, knowing that the feeling would pass in several minutes. Then, he could hopefully force himself to crawl to his cot.

After what felt like an eternity, the dizziness faded, replaced by an intense throbbing at his temples. Moving slowly, he turned onto his stomach, placed his palms on the cold, hard ground of his cell, and grunted with effort as he pushed himself up onto his knees. His arms shook, and blood dripped from his face, the dark red blotches marring the otherwise clean, white floor.

They’d be mad about that too.

He held back tears. No crying allowed. And he hauled himself up into his cot and collapsed into an exhausted sleep.

Chapter 2

Cold. She was so cold. Freezing really. Pretty much every body part — her toes, her ears, her fingers, her nose. Freezing. To hell with winter. Why hadn’t she moved to California last summer when her sister had offered? She could be lying on a warm beach, the sun shining down on her, an alcoholic beverage in one hand and a good book in the other. Instead, here she was. Digging through the snow along the outside of whatever this god forsaken fortress was, chasing a lead that would probably be another dead end. The fence seemed to go on forever, and the knee-deep layer of freezing white snow slowed her progress as she marched on, looking for a hole to climb under or through.

Her source had seemed pretty solid, but this time, well, she was about to give up. She was just too damn cold. She'd dressed for it, but after a half hour, even the warmest winter socks could no longer keep the chill out.

Her hand grasped the fence, and she tugged herself along another step and then another. The building off to her right was a massive warehouse, seemingly abandoned, with no windows and only an occasional door every few hundred feet. The building stretched on and on into the darkness, and Lois squinted again at the wall, trying to find the number on the next door. Fourteen. She was looking for a door labeled '14.' And there should be a person-sized hole in the fence near the same spot. She grumbled to herself again as she trudged on.

Ten minutes and many curse words later, Lois's hand rattled the fence, and it shook loose, breaking inward slightly. Stunned, she glanced over at the building. Sure enough, through the moonlight, which glinted off the thick layer of fresh white snow, she saw a green door labeled with the number '14.' A sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach forced Lois to scan the area carefully before she pushed through the fence and lowered herself deeper into the snow, hoping it would provide her with some sort of cover. Progress was slow, but no alarms sounded, no lights switched on, and no dogs came barking to get her. Eventually, she covered the distance to the warehouse and sidled up against the wall, breathing heavily.

All right, Clayborn, you were right so far. She glanced at her watch. Five more minutes. She closed her eyes and waited. And waited. And waited. Her body grew colder.

Finally, a quiet click from the door next to her, the door labeled '14,' startled her out of her daze. She shifted against the wall, ready to attack if the person on the other side ended up being hostile. A head of gray hair peeked out the door, and a man's blue eyes met hers. The man was older, tall, and lanky, and he looked anxious. He glanced behind him and then opened the door a little wider.

"Ms. Lane?"

Lois nodded, still on edge. She moved slightly away from the wall to give herself a little space if she needed to run or fight. But the man didn't seem like a threat. If anything, he seemed more terrified than she was.

"Clayborn told me that you'd help me, Ms. Lane," the man whispered.

"Um, yeah, something like that. Danny, right?" Lois answered cautiously. Her fingers were numb with cold now, and she forced herself to stand tall against the aching in her joints.

The man nodded and stepped outside to join her. The door shut behind them, and Lois shifted back a step, her senses still on high alert. Danny shoved his hands into his pockets and shivered in the cold, then pulled out a

cigarette. He offered Lois one, and she shook her head quickly. He shrugged.

"I've worked here for fifteen years, Ms. Lane," the man said, his voice trembling. He lit up his cigarette and took a quick puff. "And I can't do it no more."

"And why's that?" Lois prodded, watching Danny carefully as he stared out into the snow-covered forest surrounding the warehouse. He pulled his coat tighter around himself and took another puff of his cigarette.

"I should've quit five years ago when they gave me the chance," he stated, ignoring Lois's question. She frowned, but let him continue. "You see, when they first brought him in, he was just a little boy."

"Clark?" Lois cut in, her heart beginning to beat harder in her chest. Maybe this lead wasn't a dead end after all — not like all the others.

Danny shrugged. "Is that his name? They call him AI-1. I've never known any different."

"AI-1?"

Danny gave her a look that Lois couldn't quite interpret. A warning, maybe? Then he shifted his gaze back out to the forest.

"Doesn't matter what his name is, Ms. Lane. All that matters is that they've got some real nasty stuff cooked up for him for next week, and I can't be a part of it no more," Danny explained. He kicked at the snow and then glanced over his shoulder at the door, as though expecting it to open. He tossed his half-smoked cigarette onto the ground and then turned to Lois. "They brought him here and said he was a threat to the world, Ms. Lane. But he was just a boy. They've done all sorts of bad things to him, studyin' him 'in the name of science,' they say. But now..."

He trailed off again. Lois forced herself to stay quiet; she didn't want to scare the man off. Her heart pounded, however, and her mind raced with questions.

"Anyways, Ms. Lane, I need help getting him outta here so they can let me quit. There ain't no reason to have security here if he's not here. Clayborn said you could help me. Clayborn was here with me at the very beginning, you know."

Lois didn't know that, but she nodded anyways. She needed him to keep talking so she had more time to think and process this information. Clark Kent was here. And alive.

"Yeah, but then he quit in '81. Said he didn't like the direction Trask was going," Danny continued. He shifted uncomfortably and scanned the area again. "I agreed with him, but —"

"Wait, Trask? As in Jason Trask?" Lois's head snapped up as the name registered in her head. She'd remembered Martha Kent mentioning Jason Trask as the man who'd been in charge the day Clark had been abducted. Although

it had been nearly three weeks since she'd spoken with Martha that first time, she'd also had another source warn her to "steer clear of Trask" during the course of her investigation, and she'd taken the warning to heart.

"Yeah, Jason Trask. He's the head of this whole operation. Been here since the beginning. But look, Ms. Lane, I really don't have much time left. I only get my five-minute cigarette break here, and Drack, well, he'll be all over me if I'm not back in on time. I'm surprised he hasn't broken down the door searching for me yet."

As though to illustrate his point, a loud bang on the door behind him startled both of them, and Lois jumped back, pressing her back against the wall to stay out of sight as the door opened slightly.

"Yo, Dan, get yo' ass back in here man. It's time for his dosing, and I'll be damned if I'm gonna let your damn cigarette break make us late. You know how much Trask hates that, man." Danny seemed to shrink into himself at the coarse voice, and he nodded.

"Almost done. Give me two more minutes. I need the fresh air. It's stuffy in there," Danny complained, shifting away from Lois to draw his coworker's attention in the other direction.

"And it's friggin' freezin' out there. Don't be late, man," Drack warned, and the door slammed shut, the sound echoing out into the otherwise quiet night.

Lois pushed herself away from the wall, letting out the breath she'd been holding.

"So, what do I do?" she asked hastily, keeping her voice low. "I have friends at the police precinct nearby. I can call them —"

"If you do that, he's dead," Danny interrupted. "They have a whole system set up here. The alarm goes off, and his room will be instantly incinerated. They don't want to take any chances of him escaping."

Lois didn't like the sound of that at all. She lowered her eyes to the ground as she wracked her brain trying to come up with a plan. But Danny started speaking again, his voice dropping lower still.

"Look, I got a plan," he said nervously. He pulled a folded-up paper from his pocket and handed it to her, his hands shaking. "It's all there. We do need the police, but only after he's safely out of the building. I wrote it all down. I have to go. Tomorrow night, 11 p.m. That's when Drack has his dinner break. That's our best shot. It's all there, Ms. Lane."

And then he disappeared quickly through door 14, leaving Lois shivering in the cold snow, holding a piece of paper with the plans for Clark Kent's rescue from... whatever this was. Lois stuffed the paper in the pocket of her coat and hurried back through the snow the way she'd come.

The feeling had finally returned to her fingers by the time she pulled her Jeep up to the curb outside her apartment building an hour and a half later. She reached into her pocket and pulled out the folded paper. Frowning, she shoved it back into her coat. *Patience, Lane*, she told herself. She scanned her surroundings, checking again that she hadn't been followed, and then hurried inside.

Several minutes later, a fresh, hot cup of coffee in her hands, she settled at her kitchen table, notes and file folders spread out all around her, and set the paper from Danny in front of her. Unfolded, it was no more than a regular notebook page with a bulleted list of instructions in barely legible handwriting. But as she read through, she found herself nodding and trembling at the same time. He'd thought through everything, she realized. But it was risky. And she still really had no idea what was going on inside the walls of that building.

Lois reached over to a folder sitting on her right — the folder Martha Kent had given her three weeks ago. She opened it up and pulled out the photograph of the young Clark Kent, and then, as she had several times in the last few weeks, she set the photograph in front of her and just stared at it.

Danny had said the boy was supposedly a threat to all of mankind. But to Lois, he looked just like a normal kid. A happy, kind, decidedly normal kid. So why had they taken him in the first place? And why had they kept him there so long?

She sipped her coffee and shifted her focus back to the list of instructions from Danny. A big asterisk marked one of the notes on the page, and Lois frowned. If she was interpreting his handwriting correctly, the note said, "Dosed at exactly 10 p.m. every night, so will be difficult to move. Bring help." Dosed? With what? And how difficult to move? Otherwise, the plan seemed solid. She needed to make some phone calls. Timing seemed to be most critical.

She picked up her cell phone, hesitated for only a second, and then dialed a number.

"Henderson, it's Lois. Sorry to call so late. I need your help."

The door clicked open behind him, and two sets of footsteps approached — one heavier, one lighter. Closing his eyes tightly, since they hated when he made eye contact, the man turned onto his back and lay quietly, passively on the cot, his right arm tight against his side. The cool air drifting in from the hallway through the open door passed over his naked body and almost made him shiver, but he held himself still.

Don't move.

Without uttering a word, the two men stopped next to his cot. As always, he felt a tiny flicker of fear in the back of his mind. Maybe tonight would be the night. Maybe they'd finished with him.

An evil man's words from long ago echoed in his head.

"One day, we will have learned all we can from you, and then, we will kill you. A long, slow, painful death fit for the disgusting abomination you are. You will wish you'd never come to Earth. Dirty alien."

Those were some of the last words that anyone had spoken to him, besides simple commands like, "Sit," and "Don't move." He heard that one a lot. And if he disobeyed...

The man screwed his eyes shut as a sharp pain speared his shoulder. But he didn't cry out or pull away. He knew better. The blonde heavysset man liked to hurt him, and the man who smelled of cigarettes never intervened. Pain spread through his body from the drug they'd injected. Just like every other night. For as long as he could remember.

He tried to focus on anything else, but he knew it was futile. The pain was all-consuming, overpowering any other thoughts. Soon, he heard the door click shut, and he knew he was alone again. He gave in and turned back onto his side, curling up and wrapping his arms around himself. The pain would fade after a while, but it never really left him anymore. They made sure of that.

Time passed, and, as he knew it would, the sharp pain dulled into a distant throbbing ache. He opened his eyes carefully and stared at the plain white wall less than a foot from his face. How many hours had he sat staring at this wall?

His mind started to wander, and his eyes closed again as he imagined a world filled with bright colors. Blue was his favorite. The sky was blue. Wasn't it? He thought so. And red, blood was red; that was his least favorite. Definitely. Although... He hesitated. Blood wasn't really red, red. It was a dark red. He liked bright red, he decided. Yes. Bright red, like... An image of a tree filled with bright red circular fruits popped into his mind. And a smell. Sweet and crisp. Apples. That's right. Apples. Apples were red. He liked that red. Not blood red.

There were other colors too. Green was a good one. Green like grass and trees. Yellow, too. Yellow was... a house. Yellow houses. A feeling of comfort and familiarity washed over him, though he wasn't sure why.

A sound from behind him interrupted his color game, and he felt his body tense as the smell of cigarettes wafted into the room. A single set of footsteps approached clumsily, and he felt the person lean over him.

"She's comin' for you tomorrow," the hoarse voice of the cigarette man told him. "Tomorrow night. Then I'm gonna be done with this. Don't say nuthin'. Not that you

talk anyways. But be good and keep quiet, and tomorrow you'll get outta here."

And then he was gone.

The man shifted onto his back, his color game forgotten as fear gripped him. Who was coming for him? She? A girl? He hadn't seen a girl since... his mom. No, he wouldn't think about his mom. He couldn't. He shouldn't. A tear threatened to fall.

No crying, or else.

With a weak, shaky hand, he reached up and wiped the tear from his cheek.

No crying, or else.

He pushed all thoughts of the cigarette man's words out of his mind. No one would be coming for him. Not after all this time. They'd forgotten about him and moved on; he was sure of it.

Orange. Oranges were orange. He laughed to himself. Orange oranges. Ha. And the sunrise. That was orange and pink. Purple also — there were purple flowers. They bloomed as the Sun rose in the morning. Purple and pink and yellow flowers in a brown wooden box sitting on the porch of a yellow and white house. The blue sky dotted with clouds, and green fields of grass sweeping out around in all directions.

Tears streamed down his face.

No, no crying. His hands covered his eyes, and he turned to face the wall again. The plain white wall. No more color game, he decided. And he shut his eyes, turning everything black, as he willed himself to go to sleep.

Chapter 3

The snow had all melted thanks to much higher temperatures during the daylight hours, and the full Moon lit up the sky, providing some light to help as they stumbled through the woods.

However, Lois's hands still shook as she snuck along the fence line, carefully keeping an eye on the time. Her earpiece buzzed, and a familiar voice said, "We're all in place, Lois. Ready to go when you give the word."

She tapped the transmitter on her wrist and then responded, "Thanks, Henderson. Five to ten minutes, about."

Behind her, a muted curse, followed by a loud crash made her flinch.

"Ouch! Lois, you didn't tell me there would be killer trees out here," a hushed voice complained. Branches and twigs snapped as her companion pulled himself back to his feet.

"Shh, Jimmy, keep quiet, please," Lois grumbled. "We're almost there, and we only have a couple minutes left. We can't be late. Come on!" Keeping low to the ground, Lois pushed back the fence at the same spot as the

previous night, just across from door 14. She motioned Jimmy Olsen through ahead of her and then followed. The two snuck across the open space, and Lois held her breath until they made it safely to the wall. She looked again at her watch. 10:58.

“Jimmy, be ready. I don’t know what shape he’s going to be in,” Lois whispered, turning briefly to her companion. He nodded and shouldered the backpack she’d given him.

“Got it, Lois,” he replied.

She bit her lower lip and turned back to the door. 10:59.

Not more than a minute later, the door clicked open. Next to her, Jimmy pressed himself back against the wall tighter, and Lois held her breath as the door inched outward slowly. Danny poked his head out, his gray hair covered with a black beanie and his blue eyes anxiously darting around. Lois stepped away from the wall a tiny bit as Danny looked nervously over his shoulder, blinking several times.

“She’s here, just like she said,” Danny commented in a low voice. He turned to Lois. “He’s really out of it tonight. They were tough on him today. Lots of blood draws. I hope you brought help, Ms. Lane.”

Lois’s stomach lurched. Lots of blood draws? What was this place? She shook herself mentally and nodded quickly to Danny, tugging Jimmy from his place against the wall.

“We’ll manage,” she insisted, crossing her arms over her chest to hide her shaking hands.

Danny frowned, but then nodded and moved back inside for a second. The door opened fully, and Danny pushed a wheelchair out into the cold, dark night. Its occupant was dressed in only a light blue hospital gown. No socks. No shoes. No coat. No pants. Nothing. He was pale, as though he hadn’t seen the Sun in years, which he maybe hadn’t, Lois realized, and his dark hair was cut short, military style. His bare arms were covered in bruises and needle marks, and a deep cut ran across his cheek, down to his jawline. He was gaunt and frail.

She knelt down next to the wheelchair.

“Jimmy, give him your coat, please,” Lois instructed quietly. “And the shoes and socks from the backpack.”

“Of course, yeah,” Jimmy agreed, immediately stripping his coat off and handing it to Lois.

In the doorway, Danny nervously glanced over his shoulder and shifted from foot to foot. He cleared his throat. Lois looked up at him briefly, but then back to the man sitting in the wheelchair as she struggled to get the coat wrapped around his broad shoulders.

“The police — when will they be here? And they’re gonna arrest me, right? So’s Trask don’t think I’m

involved. Like I wrote in the plan?” Danny’s voice was hushed but shaky. He slipped a foot back inside the door and peeked down the hallway.

“Yes. They’re just down the road, waiting for my signal to go. We just need to get him safely away from the building, into the woods. Five minutes, tops,” Lois responded. She tried to keep the anger out of her tone, but she couldn’t. “You couldn’t give him pants or a coat or anything? He’s going to freeze. Jimmy, hurry with those socks, please.”

Jimmy mumbled a quick “yes, ma’am” and pulled a pair of thick wool socks and tennis shoes from the backpack, then crouched down and tugged the socks onto the man’s feet. The man flinched at Jimmy’s touch, and his eyes opened about half way, revealing dark brown irises. He started to lift a hand off the wheelchair, but then seemed to think better of it.

Danny inched his way back in through the door, muttering something while continuing to glance behind him. Finally, Lois stood and tapped the transmitter on her wrist.

“Five minutes, Henderson. We have Clark, and we’re about to leave into the woods. He’s in bad shape. Have the ambulance meet us at the spot along Route 22, like we discussed. My Jeep is parked there.”

She waited for an affirmation that her message had been received, and then helped Jimmy finish tying the second shoe. Her eyes darted from Jimmy back to Danny, and the older man nodded before disappearing back into the building. The door clicked shut quietly behind him, and Lois exhaled shakily.

“Y-you c-called me Clark,” the man rasped. He opened his eyes again, a little wider this time, and raised his chin slightly to look up at her. Her breath caught in her throat as their eyes met. He was definitely the little boy from Martha’s photo. But his eyes were haunted, dark, and scared — nothing like they’d been before...

Despite their need to hurry, she knelt down beside him again and gently put her gloved hand over his. She smiled at him and said softly, “Your mother told me all about you, Clark. She loves you very much.”

He closed his eyes again, and a single tear fell down his cheek. From the other side of the wheelchair, Jimmy cleared his throat, and Lois looked up at him sharply. Jimmy raised his eyebrows and tipped his head toward the forest. Right. They needed to hurry. Of course.

“I know it will be hard, Clark, but we need your help to get you out of here. Okay?” Lois spoke gently, squeezing his hand in hers, and the man nodded in understanding.

Together, Lois and Jimmy managed to hoist Clark to his feet. He was easily taller than both of them, maybe around six feet; despite this, he was quite thin and weighed

relatively little, and they managed to make the trip from door 14 to the broken fence fairly quickly.

“Hold him up, Jimmy, and I’ll pull back the fence,” Lois instructed.

Hurriedly, she grabbed the edge of the chain link and pulled with all of her strength, creating a hole large enough for both men to squeeze through. Thankfully, Jimmy was stronger than he looked, and though Clark leaned on him heavily for support, they passed through with relative ease. Lois followed them a moment later, looped her arm back around Clark’s thin waist, and led the way into the dark woods.

“Lois, are we far enough away? Henderson?” Jimmy huffed as they trudged through the mud up a small hill, branches crunching beneath their feet.

“Yeah, I think so,” Lois replied. She slipped slightly on the wet earth, but caught herself as her arm tightened around Clark. She slowed to a stop and raised her left hand up, tapping the transmitter against her chin to activate it.

“H-Henderson?” Clark asked, his teeth chattering. He listed slightly toward Jimmy, who grunted with the effort of holding up the taller man. “S-sorry, I —”

“It’s okay, man, I got you,” Jimmy assured him, steadying both of them.

“Shh, both of you, I — Henderson, it’s a go... Yes. Thank you.” Lois tapped the transmitter again and then shifted her weight better to support Clark. “Just a little farther up this hill, and we’ll be there, Clark. You’re doing great.”

The three began moving again. Progress slowed as Clark became weaker, his breathing heavy and labored, but Lois gently encouraged him, and they pushed forward. Behind them, Lois heard sirens and an alarm, followed by shouting, but she didn’t allow them to stop. Finally, they reached the top of the crest, and flashing lights of an ambulance greeted them.

“Here! We’re here!” Jimmy called out, waving his free arm.

The loud noise and bright lights seemed to startle Clark, and he recoiled slightly, causing the group to stumble backwards. However, Lois and Jimmy steadied him and pushed forward. Three EMTs lifting a gurney met them after about another hundred feet or so.

“Ms. Lane?” the man in the lead asked, motioning to his companions to set down the gurney.

“Yes,” Lois replied quickly. She felt Clark trembling, though she wasn’t sure if it was from the cold or from fear, and when she glanced at him, he was even paler than he’d been earlier. His eyes were screwed tightly shut, and his breathing was ragged and irregular. “Please, please help him.”

The EMTs took over, helping Clark onto the small bed and quickly covering him with a blanket. Lois reached out and took his hand as the EMTs began carrying him the rest of the way up the hill to the road, where the ambulance waited, and Clark opened his eyes weakly to look up at her.

“Th-thank you,” he stuttered feebly, and his eyes closed again.

Jimmy hurried up beside Lois as they finished the trek, his hands tucked under his arms for warmth. Lois glanced at her companion, and when their eyes met, she smiled at him, mouthing “Thank you.” Jimmy just nodded, clenched his jaw, and continued trudging up the hill.

As they reached the road, Lois’s earpiece beeped to life, and Henderson’s voice came in loud and clear.

“It’s done, Lois. Two men arrested, and my officers are confiscating everything. And your source was right. One room, which looked like where they kept him, it was completely destroyed before my men even got all the way into the building. How is he?”

Lois smiled as she tapped the transmitter on her wrist. “He’s with us here at the ambulance. Going to the hospital now. Thank you, Bill. I appreciate this more than you know. I’ll see you at the hospital later.”

Lois let go of Clark’s hand as the EMTs loaded him into the ambulance. The man’s eyes flew open, and a look of panic spread across his thin features. Quickly, Lois jumped up into the ambulance after him and took his hand again.

“I’m right here, Clark. I’m right here with you,” she assured him, her voice low and soft. She looked out the back of the vehicle, where Jimmy stood, his arms still wrapped tightly around himself to try to keep warm. With her free hand, Lois reached into her pocket and pulled out her keys. “Jimmy, will you drive my car to the hospital?”

“Yeah, of course,” he replied without hesitation. She tossed him the keys, and he caught them easily. He nodded to her and then hurried around the ambulance toward Lois’s Jeep.

Within less than a minute, they were speeding down the icy road, heading toward the city. The two EMTs in the back with Lois and Clark worked efficiently. They took his vitals and hooked him up to an IV saline drip. He stayed passive, but Lois felt his hand trembling in hers, and she knew he was terrified. She squeezed his hand gently and occasionally whispered that everything was going to be okay. Both EMTs eventually settled back into their seats as Clark’s vital signs appeared to be stable, and Lois saw the lights of the city greet them up ahead.

“Almost there. You’re doing great,” she told him again.

Still holding his hand, she reached up with her other hand and brushed a smudge of dirt off his forehead. His

eyes fluttered open momentarily, and he seemed to try to smile at her, but the effort was too much. He closed his eyes again.

“How much longer?” she asked the nearest EMT, her voice quiet.

“About five minutes, Ms. Lane,” he answered. “Just up around that bend there.”

Lois nodded and settled back into her seat a bit. She allowed her eyes to close as the ambulance bumped along down the road. The hard part was done. This man, who had been held captive for fifteen years, was now safe. He could see his parents again, sleep in his own bed, eat home-cooked meals, make friends...

Oh God, she thought. Her stomach lurched, and she sat up and stared at him. Maybe the hard part was not done, she realized. Maybe the hard part was just beginning.

She took a deep breath and rubbed the back of his hand with her thumb.

Yes. The hard part was just beginning.

Her hand was his only lifeline. Everything else was bright and loud and unfamiliar and scary. And so he held her hand and tried to ignore the rest of the world. Her skin was soft and warm, and his fingers tightened ever so slightly around hers.

He was shaking; he could feel it. Trembling uncontrollably. He knew she could feel it, too, but somehow he knew she'd understand. He could tell from her voice. Her soothing, calm, in-control voice.

She'd called him Clark.

He'd almost forgotten that was his name.

But now, thanks to her, he remembered. He was Clark. Clark Kent. His parents were Martha and Jonathan Kent. From Smallville, Kansas. However, that was about as much as he remembered.

He screwed his eyes shut tighter as gloved fingers carefully cleaned the wound on his cheek and began applying a bandage. And a tiny prick in his arm was followed by a cold sensation spreading up into his chest. He opened his eyes just enough to see a needle taped onto his forearm. Fear seized him. What were they drugging him with now?

But then the woman — Lois, they had called her — she squeezed his hand again and told him, “Almost there. You're doing great,” and he relaxed slightly. She wouldn't let them hurt him. He knew it. Somehow, he just knew it.

Brown. Deep brown. That was the color of her eyes. Maybe his new favorite color. Yes, definitely.

He felt a gentle touch on his forehead, and startled, he opened his eyes. She smiled at him. A smile. How long had it been? Could he still smile? He tried, but he suddenly felt exhausted, and he closed his eyes again.

“How much longer?”

“About five minutes, Ms. Lane. Just up around that bend there.”

Words. Talking. The voices around him sounded so foreign. There was no anger in them. No disgust. No hatred.

And he'd spoken himself for the first time in...years, maybe? He wasn't sure. His voice had worked, just like it should. Sort of. He'd fumbled a bit. Stuttered? Yeah, he thought that was the right word. But he'd spoken. And people around him talked to him and to each other. And the woman — Lois — she'd mentioned his mom. She'd said...

He suppressed a groan as pain and heat coursed through his abdomen.

Don't move.

Freak. Alien. Abomination.

He forced himself to lie still on the gurney, his fingers still wrapped in Lois's warm hand, as the vehicle bumped down the road. A monitor beeped to his right, and then another gloved hand touched his neck, pressing against him for a moment.

“What was that?” Lois asked quietly.

“His heart rate spiked up over 200 for a bit,” a man's voice answered. “Probably nothing, but we'll keep an eye on it.”

“Okay.”

After a moment, Clark felt her hand tighten in his again, and he turned his head slightly toward her. Her beautiful brown eyes gazed back at him with concern. She was worried about him. Not angry or disgusted. Not furious that he was looking at her. Not mistrusting or spiteful.

She smiled at him again. And he closed his eyes and thought that he'd maybe never seen anything so beautiful in his life as her smile.

“We're pulling up to the hospital right now, Clark,” her sweet voice told him, and indeed, he felt the ambulance slow as it rattled and bumped along. “Your parents are on their way from Kansas, but it will take them a few hours to get here.”

“O-okay,” he croaked. His throat felt dry, and he tried to swallow, but a sharp pain caught him in the chest, and he froze again.

Don't move.

Freak. Alien. Abomination.

Lois didn't think that, did she? He felt her fingers start to slip out of his, and he tightened his hand in hers. He couldn't let her go. He didn't want to be alone with these unfamiliar men with their needles and beeping monitors and gloved hands.

“P-please d-don’t leave me. P-please st-stay. Please,” he stammered.

“I’ll stay here with you, Clark. Don’t worry. I’m not going anywhere.” Her voice drifted to him as though through a dense fog, and he latched onto it and held her hand as tightly as he could.

“Th-thank you.”

He wanted to look up at her, to see her beautiful eyes and kind smile again, but the gurney started to move, and he forced his eyes to stay shut. Voices echoed around him. Explanations that he didn’t understand. A gloved hand touched his shoulder, and a cold instrument pressed into his chest. He wanted to shrink away from it. He didn’t want them to touch him. But fear held him still.

Don’t move.

And then someone pressed a hand into his side — his bruised side where they’d hit him several days ago. Pain flared up again, white hot shards stabbing through his belly. And, once again, the world went dark.

Chapter 4

Lois tapped her pen against her notepad, her fingers gripping the black plastic firmly. With a frustrated sigh, she looked across the room again to the man sleeping calmly in the hospital bed, several warm blankets still draped over him. Monitors beeped, providing evidence of his steady breathing and heart rate, and Lois found herself staring at the numbers on the screen, not for the first time. 123/78. 84 bpm. 97.3°F. 98% O₂ saturation. Steady, stable, and within normal range.

She stood and stretched her arms up over her head as she tried to suppress a yawn. Henderson had come and gone, as had several other law enforcement officers, including two FBI agents, who had informed Lois that Jason Trask and several of his associates had been killed during an altercation with local authorities as they’d tried to board a plane to Russia. Danny and Drack had been arrested, questioned, and released, and Henderson’s team was still working with the FBI to confiscate all of the documents, samples, and other evidence left at the warehouse. Jimmy had stayed for several hours, supporting Lois and answering any questions the law enforcement officers had thrown at him, but he’d finally gone home to take a shower and get some sleep. Lois, however, couldn’t leave. She’d promised Clark she’d stay with him until his parents arrived, and although they’d managed to get seats on the first available flight from Kansas, they weren’t due in for at least another couple hours.

Which meant Lois should have plenty of time to get her story written for the afternoon edition of the *Daily Planet*.

She glanced at the clock on the wall. 5 a.m. No wonder she couldn’t think straight. She reached into her purse and pulled out a half-full bottle of water and a granola bar, then sat back down. The granola bar tasted stale, but she ate it anyways, and she downed the rest of the water in one long gulp. Then she stared again at her blank notepad.

Words. Words. Words.

None would come.

She didn’t usually have writer’s block. Actually — she paused and tilted her head sideways, scrunching her eyebrows together as she considered — she didn’t think she’d ever had writer’s block before today. But the problem, she knew, was not about finding the words to write the story. It was about deciding how much of this story to tell.

Her eyes drifted again to the man sleeping not more than three feet away. He snored softly in his sleep, and occasionally, his eyes twitched as though he dreamed. How would he see the world now, as a grown man who’d had his childhood taken away from him? How would he react to seeing his parents again? How could he ever have any sort of normal life after this?

Henderson had questioned Danny for over two hours, he’d told Lois. The man had given them details on everything — from the first days Clark had been held captive just about fifteen years ago, to the most recent experiments they’d been running on him. AI-1, they’d called him. “Alien Invader #1.” They’d thought this man, who’d only been a young boy at the time of his abduction, was an alien, sent to Earth to establish a base of operations in preparation for a much larger invasion. They’d pumped him full of a green chemical, which they called GK-1, prepared from an odd glowing green meteorite; the treatment had rendered him weak and sick. And they’d experimented on him in every way imaginable. For fifteen years. Never let outside. Never allowed to have books to read, toys to play with, music to listen to. Never given a hug. Never treated with any sort of kindness. And she’d also seen his scars and bruises as the nurses had changed him into a fresh hospital gown and cleaned him up. Surgical scars covered his abdomen, chest, and back, and scars from injuries marred his arms, face, and legs.

A tear slipped down Lois’s cheek, and she hastily wiped it away and lowered her gaze to her notepad again. She couldn’t write all of that. No, she needed to keep the article short. Bare bones. No crazy details about Trask’s delusions or the torture this man had been subjected to.

Resolved, she uncapped her pen and started writing.

A soft knock at the door startled her awake, and Lois sat up abruptly, her pen falling out of her hand and to the floor. She rubbed the sleep from her eyes and looked up at

the nurse who had entered the room. The woman smiled at Lois.

“Sorry to disturb you, Ms. Lane, but I need to check on Mr. Kent here,” she explained, her voice a low whisper. She shuffled over to the monitors and picked up Clark’s medical chart, which sat in a holder next to the bed.

“No problem, Nurse Anne,” Lois answered, her voice also low. “Guess I finally drifted off. It’s been a long night. Or morning. Or —” Lois glanced over at the clock again. 6:45 a.m. “Yeah, it’s been long.”

Nurse Anne smiled again and took down a few notes on the chart before checking the IV glucose and saline, which were still sufficiently full. She then spent a couple minutes listening to Clark’s breathing, which thankfully didn’t wake him, and turned to leave the room. She paused in the doorway.

“You’re kind to stay here with him, Ms. Lane. From what I understand, he’s been through hell.”

“I promised him I’d stay,” Lois replied quietly. She leaned over to pick up her pen and then glanced at the woman standing in the doorway. “And his mother. I promised her too.”

The nurse just nodded, then said, with a small smile, “I’ll bring you a cup of coffee and a sandwich. You look like you could use something. And Susan brought donuts today. She always gets the best. Let me guess — chocolate-covered old fashioned?”

Lois smiled and scooted back into the chair more. “You’re good. Anything with chocolate is a win for me. Thank you, Anne.”

From the hospital bed, Clark shifted in his sleep, mumbling incoherently. Lois glanced almost nervously at the monitors again. 119/75. 86 bpm. 97.4°F. 98.5% O₂ saturation. Steady and stable still.

She set her notepad and pen down on the side table next to her chair, stood, and closed the distance between her and Clark with a single step. He was still pale, still gaunt, still bruised. But now he was safe. Her hand, almost of its own volition, moved to his forehead, and she gently caressed him, her fingers running over a small scar at his hairline. He mumbled in his sleep again and leaned into her touch slightly. With a quick intake of breath, she pulled her hand away. What was she doing? She had no right to touch him without his permission. Holding his hand, maybe. But touching his forehead? She watched as the muscles in his jaw twitched, and then she backed up and sat in her chair again, picking up her notepad to finish her story.

Twenty minutes later, now fed, caffeinated, and somewhat energized, she took photographs of her notepad pages with the completed story and texted them to Perry White, her editor. They could have the handwriting

transcribed, and the story should be published in the afternoon edition. “*Not page 1,*” she requested in a subsequent text. “*Please, Perry. He doesn’t need publicity.*”

A few minutes later, her phone buzzed with a notification. The short message from Perry simply said. “*You got it. Good job, Lois. Get some sleep now.*” Lois chuckled to herself and then stood again and moved to the window.

The Sun shone brightly in the early morning sky, and outside, the world moved. Traffic drove freely on the highway, which was visible from Clark’s third-story room, and people walked along the sidewalks below, crowding around the busy bus stop as a city bus pulled up to the curb.

A groan from behind her startled Lois, and she turned around hastily, nearly bumping into the side table and spilling her coffee. Clark’s eyes were screwed tightly shut, and he raised a shaky hand to cover his face.

“Clark, hey, what’s wrong?” Lois asked gently, stepping toward him cautiously to avoid alarming him.

He opened his eyes slowly, but inhaled sharply and closed them again.

“It-it’s r-really...bright,” he fumbled. He turned his head away from the sunlight and frowned. “My head — my head hurts. Can you t-turn off the — the...the lights, p-please?”

His stuttering speech was punctuated by pauses, and Lois wondered whether he’d carried on any sort of conversation in the last fifteen years. She immediately moved back to the window and closed the curtains and then dimmed the regular lights in the room as well.

“There we go,” she said. “There, is that better?” She moved around the side of the bed, pulled her chair up next to him, and sat. Cautiously, he opened his eyes. He blinked several times.

“Y-yes, th-thank you,” he replied.

He took several deep breaths as he slowly scanned the room. His eyes finally landed on Lois, and a concerned look briefly crossed his face. However, he quickly closed his eyes again and settled back down into the bed. Tentatively, she reached out and took his hand. He didn’t resist, but she felt him trembling.

“Your parents should be here any minute, Clark,” she told him, squeezing his hand gently. His eyes opened, and he shifted slightly in the bed, grimacing. His eyes were a rich chocolate color, she noted, but the dark circles underneath them betrayed his condition.

“I miss them. Mom and Dad.”

“Yeah, they really missed you, too,” Lois agreed. She smiled at him, and he narrowed his eyes for a moment

before lowering his gaze to their hands, clasped together on the side of the bed.

"I'm...older now," he said slowly. He shook his head and kept his eyes lowered. "They — they m-maybe won't — won't w-want m-me t-to...to..." He pulled his hand away from Lois's almost fearfully and again covered his eyes, this time with both hands. She shook her head slowly, though he didn't see.

"Clark, they're going to be so happy to see you. Your mom..." Lois paused as Clark uncovered his eyes and turned his head to look at her. He looked so vulnerable, so unsure of himself that Lois had a hard time not reaching out to give him a hug. But she reminded herself that any gesture like that would probably not be welcome. She blinked back tears as she continued. "Your mom has been looking for you every day since you were taken, Clark. She never gave up hope that you were still out there. And your dad — he told me that he knew I'd find you because you are brave and strong, and you'd always keep fighting to find your way back to them."

"He-he said that?" Clark asked in a small voice.

Lois nodded. "Yes, he did," she confirmed. "He said he was very proud of you."

Clark dropped his eyes again, blinking several times, and he then reached up and rubbed the bridge of his nose with a trembling hand. He shook his head as though trying to rid his mind of some terrible thought and then hastily wiped a tear off his cheek. Lois frowned with concern as the man in front of her began to shake badly. Without thinking, she reached out and touched his shoulder gently. He stilled, but his breathing remained labored and fast.

"Hey, it's okay now. You're safe here," she murmured quietly. She scooted her chair a little closer to his bed, but he flinched at the sound of the wooden legs scraping the ground. He lowered his head into his hands and clenched his jaw, holding himself as motionless as possible. "Clark? What's going on there? You're okay now," Lois repeated, rubbing his upper arm softly.

He shook his head. "C-can't c-cry. Th-they s-said no crying is allowed," he mumbled, and he almost frantically wiped the tears from his cheeks again, sniffing loudly. "No crying or else... No crying or..."

Her heart ached for him. Why was life so unfair? She shifted in her chair again and gently took his hand in hers.

"You can cry here, Clark," she told him. His eyes were shut tightly, but she felt him respond to her words. He let out a long breath, and his jaw quivered. "It's safe to cry here. I promise."

A tear slid down his cheek. Then another. And then he pulled his hand away from hers and covered his eyes with both hands as he began to sob, his body shaking. Hesitantly, she put an arm around his shoulders, and he

almost immediately leaned into her. Tears threatened to fall from her eyes as well, but she managed to blink them away again.

"That's right. You're safe here, Clark," she echoed, rubbing his back soothingly. "You're safe here."

Hugs. If he thought Lois's smile was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen in his life, then hugs from his parents were the most wonderful thing he'd ever felt in his life.

They'd arrived just as he'd finished crying into Lois's shoulder. And so, he'd cried more as his mother had hurried over to the side of the bed and enveloped him in a tight, warm embrace.

He almost hadn't recognized her. And now, as she pulled back from him, tears wetting her cheeks, he still almost couldn't remember her from...before. Her straw-colored hair was out of place, pulled back into a messy bun, and her glasses sat askew on her face. The eyes peering out at him from behind the thick lenses were bright blue and filled with love and concern. He blinked back more tears and dropped his gaze to his hands.

How could he barely remember her? It felt like betrayal. And his dad, who stood back several feet, his eyes moist, looked like a stranger. He was hefty, with gray hair and kind eyes, like his mom. But Clark couldn't remember the man at all.

His dad stepped up next to the bed, and a wide grin broke out on his face.

"Clark, son, I — well, I just..."

The large man's voice seemed to fail him, just as his mom's had moments ago. His mom moved aside, and the man, his dad, leaned over to hug Clark.

And memories came flooding back to him. This same hug, over and over, in different places and at different times during his too-short childhood. A hug in the barn when he'd confessed to being upset about a bully at school. A hug on the porch of a yellow and white farmhouse when he'd been worried about his mother, who was sick with pneumonia. A hug on his tenth birthday, when one of his friends had been in a car accident and hadn't been able to make the party. A hug in his bedroom when Clark was six and one of his pet goldfish had died. His dad's big bear hugs.

It felt different now, of course. For starters, he was apparently twenty-five years old. Lois had told him that earlier. And so, now, his dad's arms didn't quite reach all the way around him, at least not like they used to. Also, there was a greater gentleness from both of them; not hesitation, but caution, Clark thought. And as the pain pulsed in his abdomen again, he realized maybe they were just trying to be careful not to hurt him.

He reached up and wiped a tear from his cheek. His eyes briefly met Lois's, and she smiled at him warmly before stepping out of the room to allow him time with his parents alone.

Next to his bed, his parents held each other as they gazed down at him, and Clark closed his eyes to fight off the uncomfortable feeling settling in his chest. What if he wasn't what they wanted anymore? What if they found out what happened to him and didn't love him? He'd have nowhere to go. He wasn't a child any longer. He was a grown adult. And he couldn't even speak clearly in full sentences.

A gentle hand rested on his shoulder. He tilted his head slightly, allowing his cheek to touch his mother's fingers.

"Clark, I never gave up hope, honey," she said quietly, as though she knew his thoughts. "I never stopped looking for you. I never stopped loving you."

"M-mom, I c-can't... I mean, I-I j-just..."

He shook his head in frustration. He wanted to tell her that he was sorry for causing them so much pain and that he loved both of them and that he hoped they would allow him to come home. But his words wouldn't work. His brain couldn't seem to process his thoughts and turn them into words.

"Son, we both love you more than you know," his dad told him, grasping Clark's shoulder firmly.

And Clark started to cry again. That voice telling him, "*No crying or else,*" faded into the background, and Lois's sweet voice reminded him, "*It's safe to cry here. You're safe here, Clark.*"

He focused all his mental energy and deliberately said the four most important words in his currently quite limited vocabulary.

"I love you, too."

Chapter 5

The airplane banked smoothly, beginning its final descent toward Wichita Dwight D. Eisenhower National Airport, and Lois closed her laptop, stuffed it back into its case, and pushed the case under the seat in front of her. Outside, the high clouds stretched out across the sky, and a light rain began to fall as the ground approached rapidly. Lois frowned as she stared out the window at the rain, her fingers tapping absently on her arm rest. She'd been to Kansas once before, when she was a senior in college, but she didn't remember it being quite so flat. Fields extended to the south as far as she could see, no hills in sight.

She was here on business, of course. Because for some boneheaded reason, the American Society of Journalists and Authors Annual Conference had been moved from its long-standing location in New York City to out in the middle of nowhere — AKA Wichita, Kansas. And Perry

had insisted she attend. Although she normally would have jumped at the chance to represent the Daily Planet at the ASJA Annual Conference in previous years, three days of talks on journalistic integrity, moving journalism into the digital age, and emerging media trends just wasn't terribly appealing to her right now. However, she hadn't really argued about it for more than a few minutes because, well, she had other reasons for wanting to come to Kansas.

One other reason, really. And that reason was the simple fact that Smallville was only about an hour southwest of Wichita.

The plane's wheels hit the ground, and the aircraft bounced a couple times before smoothing out and decelerating rapidly. Lois pulled her phone out of her pocket and switched it out of airplane mode. Almost immediately, it buzzed with multiple text message notifications: Jimmy asking where she'd left her notes on the congressional hearing from the previous day; Perry asking if she could send her revisions for a short article that she'd written on the reopening of the Metropolis Zoo; and several from her sister asking when she'd be back from Kansas so they could meet up.

More importantly, she also saw she'd missed a call from Martha Kent.

Lois smiled to herself and quickly dialed the Kents' number. After two rings, an older male voice answered the phone.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Jonathan, this is Lois," she started, unintentionally lowering her voice as the other passengers around her also fumbled with their phones and luggage, getting ready to disembark. "I just landed in Wichita. Are we still on for this evening?"

"Lois, yes, hi. Martha is right here, cooking enough food to feed an army," Jonathan answered jovially, a hint of laughter in his voice. "We're looking forward to seeing you."

"Perfect. I just need to get my rental car and then I'll be heading your direction," Lois explained quickly, shifting in her seat as the man next to her stood to remove his luggage from the overhead bin. "So maybe two hours or less?"

"Sounds good, Lois. We'll see you then... What's that Martha?" Jonathan paused, and Lois heard some rustling on the other end of the line. She smiled as Jonathan mumbled and cleared his throat. "Of course, yes. Lois, Martha reminded me to tell you to be careful on highway 42. It looks clear, but with the rain, it can get icy very quickly if the temperature drops."

"Right, thank you, Jonathan," Lois acknowledged, glancing again outside at the rain, which had started to fall steadier and heavier. "I'll be careful. See you soon."

The phone went silent as Jonathan Kent hung up on the other end, and Lois quickly shoved the phone into her pocket and pulled her laptop bag out from under the seat. It had been nearly a month since she'd helped to rescue Clark from that warehouse outside of Metropolis and just over three weeks since the Kents and made the long drive home from Metropolis to Kansas, finally reunited as a family again. She'd kept in touch with Martha and had been delighted when Martha had invited her to dinner during her trip to Wichita.

She followed the line of passengers off the plane and angled toward the baggage claim area, a smile growing on her face. And about thirty minutes later, she was on the road in a mid-sized white sedan, traveling south toward Smallville.

Lois Lane didn't get nervous. Ah, who was she trying to fool. Yes, she did get nervous. And right now, she was quite nervous.

She shook her head to steady herself, shouldered her purse, and raised her hand to knock on the door. The old farmhouse had been easy to find, down a well-maintained dirt road just outside of 'downtown' Smallville, which was not much more than a short stretch of road lined on either side with a few shops, a diner, a bank, and a small movie theater. The yellow paint and white trim looked relatively fresh, and several potted plants, wilted from the cold February weather, sat on the porch. A single hand-painted wind chime sung in the breeze, its soft clangs echoing out across the open corn fields.

Lois smiled at the simple knickknack, steeled her nerves, and knocked lightly on the door. Quiet rustling came from inside the house, followed by footsteps, and then the door opened to reveal a tall, broad-shouldered man about her age with deep brown eyes, short dark hair, and a guarded smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. Clark Kent. She almost stepped backwards in surprise; he looked quite different than he had three weeks ago. The cut on his cheek had healed, and although still pale, he was no longer gaunt or frail-looking. He stood tall and straight, and the dark circles under his eyes had faded. He wore a long-sleeved black shirt and khakis.

"Lois, hi," he greeted quietly. "Please, come in." He pushed the door open all the way, and warm air wafted out to welcome her as he motioned her inside.

"Thank you," she replied, following him.

The farmhouse could be best described as 'cozy,' she decided. To her right, there was a small living room with a couch, a coffee table, two recliners, and a television, and to her left, her hosts congregated in a small but functional kitchen. Martha Kent pulled a casserole dish out of the oven, smiling brightly as she saw Lois, and Jonathan Kent

stood at the counter carving a small turkey. He too looked up at her and smiled briefly, before shifting his focus back to his task.

"Lois, oh, I'm so glad you could make it," Martha exclaimed as she set down the casserole dish and hurried around the small kitchen table to greet her guest. The two women hugged as though they were old friends, and as Martha pulled out of the embrace, she glanced quickly over Lois's shoulder and frowned. "Clark, honey, can you finish setting the table so we can eat? I bet Lois is starving. Aren't you, dear?" The older woman stepped away from Lois and back into the kitchen to put the final touches on dinner.

"Oh, well, you know... I can always eat..." Lois blushed as she turned to look toward Clark. His eyes were lowered to the floor, and he rubbed the back of his neck uncomfortably.

"Sorry, Mom, I-I forgot. I'll just..."

His voice trailed off as he moved awkwardly around Lois to the table and finished setting out the appropriate dishes and utensils. A sort of uncomfortable silence filled the room as Lois stood and watched the Kents work.

After another moment, Lois cleared her throat. "You have a lovely home," she said, moving a bit closer to the table.

"Thank you, dear." Martha smiled as she looked up from the kitchen and started moving dishes from the kitchen counter to the table. Mashed potatoes, gravy, corn casserole, green beans, rolls, and of course the turkey. Jonathan hadn't been kidding when he'd said Martha was cooking to feed an army.

"Can I help with anything else, Mom?" Clark asked tentatively. He blinked several times and settled his hands on the back of one of the chairs as he watched his mother. Lois noticed that he seemed stiff or tense, maybe, and his smile was a bit forced; she hoped she wasn't making him anxious just being there.

"No, thank you, honey, I've got it." Martha shook her head as she set down another dish on the table, and she gently patted his shoulder. His smile seemed to shift briefly at his mother's touch, relaxing a bit, but then tightened again as his eyes drifted to Lois. He quickly looked away, and Lois frowned. Yep, she made him nervous for some reason.

But then his demeanor shifted yet again as he moved toward her and pulled out the chair nearest to her.

"W-would you l-like to sit, Lois?" he invited, motioning to the seat. His eyes lifted to hers briefly and then lowered to his hands.

Maybe he was just shy, she wondered. She stepped toward him.

"Yes, thank you, Clark."

To her surprise, he raised his eyes again and smiled at her, a broad, true smile that seemed to brighten the whole room. It was momentary, flickering across his lips and then hiding behind his more guarded expression, which she'd seen when she first arrived, but it was there.

She sat carefully as he pushed the chair in under her, and she then watched as he moved to take the seat next to her. Martha and Jonathan joined them a moment later, and as they all began digging into the wonderful feast Martha had prepared, Lois found herself sneaking quiet glances at the man sitting next to her. He was handsome, she realized with a start, her eyes darting back to her own plate for a moment. She took an extra scoop of green beans and a small slice of turkey, then passed the gravy to Martha, who sat on her right. She smiled at a joke Jonathan told and took a sip of coffee as she studied Clark again. His eyes. Something about his eyes... Just as they had in the photograph Martha had shown her that first time they'd met at the Planet, his eyes drew her in. She saw deep within them benevolence, wisdom, kindness, and empathy. Her throat suddenly felt dry, and she looked away sharply.

God, she was attracted to him.

No, that didn't sound like a good idea. And how? Sure, he was nice to look at. But...no, it was much more than that. Much more.

"Lois, are you okay, dear?" Martha's kind voice broke through her introspection, and Lois quickly nodded as she wiped her mouth with her napkin.

"Yes, sorry, I just — this is so nice. I haven't had a home-cooked meal like this in a long time," Lois explained, mentally kicking herself for lying. She lifted her eyes to Martha's and smiled. "I really appreciate all of this. It seems like so much trouble, though..."

"Oh, don't you worry about that, dear. We'll have leftovers for days, and, well, Clark's got quite an appetite, so I'm sure none of it will go to waste," Martha laughed, her gaze shifting momentarily to her son sitting across the table.

Clark blushed. "Mom..."

"Well, it's true, honey," Martha insisted. She leaned over toward Lois and whispered, almost conspiratorially, "He's making up for all the lost meals, I think." And she winked and tilted her chin briefly toward Clark, who was sheepishly shoving a much-too-large piece of turkey into his mouth. His face turned an even darker red, and he looked down at his plate again. Lois smiled as her eyes darted from Clark to his mother and then to Jonathan, who also had a crooked grin on his face.

"Don't embarrass the boy, Martha," Jonathan chided, setting his fork down alongside his knife. But he smiled along with both of them and then expertly redirected the

conversation to Lois. "So, Lois, this journalism conference you're attending, is this something you do every year?"

Lois shook her head and swallowed the bite of green beans in her mouth before responding.

"No, this will actually be my first time attending this particular conference. The Daily Planet typically sends one representative — a senior reporter, usually, and since I was just recently promoted, I wasn't even expecting to go this year. But my editor thought it would be a good experience for me, so here I am." She smiled at Jonathan, who nodded thoughtfully and then picked his knife up again to cut another piece of turkey.

"You...you're an investigative journalist, is that right?" Clark inquired tentatively. He looked almost embarrassed to be asking her the question, but as she shifted toward him and their eyes met, she saw a deep curiosity in him, and she grinned and nodded.

"Yes, that's right. There's many different paths a journalist can take. For example, at the Daily Planet, we have reporters like me, who are investigative journalists, but then we also have reporters who focus on politics, or travel, or business, or sports," Lois explained. Martha and Jonathan also seemed interested, and Lois found her audience staring at her expectantly, waiting for more explanation. Clark leaned forward and rested his elbows on the table, then seemed to remember his manners as his mother shot him a look. He grimaced and sat up again.

"Um, so, how did — how did you decide when — I mean, how did you decide that you wanted to be an investigative reporter?" He fumbled slightly with his words, but seemed to gain a little bit of confidence when he managed to finish his question.

He stared intensely at Lois, eagerly awaiting her answer, and Lois found herself lost in his eyes again. They were a deep brown, full of curiosity, intelligence, and enthusiasm. Finally, she nodded to acknowledge the question and broke eye contact, blinking to focus her thoughts.

"Oh, well, that's a good question. I think it was probably when I was a freshman in high school," Lois mused. She set down her fork and took a quick sip of her coffee before continuing. "I started working for the school newspaper, mostly just to get my dad off my back about not having any extracurriculars, you see." She gave Clark a bit of a crooked smile. "Anyways, another student and I ended up exposing a math teacher who was selling good grades to the football team. I kinda got hooked after that, I think. And then the summer between freshman and sophomore year, I managed to land an internship at the Daily Planet. I was mostly in charge of making sure the Editor-in-Chief got his coffee and copying papers for the

senior reporters, but I just loved the atmosphere. And I decided that's what I wanted to do."

Lois lowered her eyes, a bit embarrassed about the admission. Next to her, Clark mumbled something too quiet for her to hear, and she tilted her head toward him. He looked lost in thought, staring at his dinner plate as he chewed pensively, but after a moment, he met her gaze, his eyes still holding that same intensity as earlier. He opened his mouth as though to speak, but then frowned, raised his eyes to his mother, and shook his head. Lois was confused by the interaction, but Martha jumped in.

"Clark has been looking into what he needs to do to get his GED so he can maybe take some classes at a local community college. There's one in the next town over, not too far away," the older woman supplied, smiling across the table at her son. He nodded and smiled back at his mom, then quickly took a large bite of a roll as he lowered his eyes to his plate.

"That's a great idea, Clark," Lois said encouragingly. "Are you interested in journalism?"

"Um, maybe? I really d-don't know y-yet," he stuttered. "I-I like to write. Or, at least, I used to." He pushed his green beans around on his plate absently with his fork, and Lois noticed his hand trembling slightly. She glanced across the table to Martha, but the older woman didn't seem to be concerned.

"That's wonderful. I'd be happy to answer any questions you have, of course."

"Th-thank you, Lois, I appreciate that." Clark grinned at her, but his eyes were guarded and unsure again. He lifted his coffee cup and hesitantly sniffed the liquid before taking a cautious sip. Grimacing, he set the mug back down. "I don't know how you all drink this. I just can't get used to the taste. It's so... What's the word? ...Bitter, I think."

Lois quickly set down her own coffee cup and covered her mouth as she laughed, maybe a little too loudly.

"It's an acquired taste, for sure," she agreed. "Jimmy — my friend Jimmy Olsen, who works with me at the Planet — do you remember him, Clark?" He shook his head in response, and Lois continued. "He drinks his coffee with so much milk and sugar that it's barely recognizable as coffee."

Clark laughed — a full, deep laugh. It was a beautiful sound, Lois thought, and she had a sense of almost feeling honored to be hearing it from him after everything he'd been through. Across from her at the table, Martha reached over and placed her hand on top of Jonathan's, and the couple shared a knowing look, reflecting Lois's thoughts.

"Maybe I'll have to try milk and sugar then," Clark said, still smiling as though he'd just heard the funniest joke in the world. He scanned the table quickly and then

picked up his plate, pushed back his chair, and stood up. "If you're finished, can I — can I take y-your p-plate, Lois?"

He blinked a few times, and Lois detected a hint of agitation replacing the happiness in his expression, although he tried to hide it. She smiled softly at him and handed him her mostly empty dinner plate.

"Thank you, Clark."

With a tight smile of his own, he nodded, took her plate, and then moved to the other side of the table, offering the same to his parents.

"Yes, thank you, honey. Oh, I'm stuffed," Martha announced, setting her plate on top of Lois's in Clark's now-full hands. "Lois, dear, would you like some more coffee? Or dessert? I made an apple pie and a chocolate cake."

Lois opened her mouth to decline, but hesitated. She wasn't ready to leave yet.

"Oh, well, I guess I can never resist chocolate, Martha."

The older woman smiled knowingly, winked at Lois, and then stood and followed her son into the kitchen.

Clark took his time washing the dishes as his mother began slicing the chocolate cake and apple pie. Normally, he'd be the first one lining up for dessert. He'd have one big slice of each. And probably some ice cream, too. The apple pie was his favorite, but her chocolate cake was also incredible. And she'd told him many times in the last three weeks that he could have both of whatever she'd made. He didn't have to choose one or the other. But tonight, he politely declined dessert; he'd eaten enough at dinner, and he was quite full.

Plus, he needed some space.

The woman sitting at their table, talking easily with his dad about what types of crops they grew on the farm and in the region, she made him confused. He wasn't even sure why. When their eyes met, he forgot what he was doing, as if he didn't struggle enough with memory issues already, and when she spoke... Her fluid, smooth voice disarmed him, and if he didn't pay very close attention, he'd miss what she said.

And so, being around her, while it felt amazing, was also exhausting.

He remembered her from almost a month ago. She'd rescued him from that prison he'd been held at for fifteen years. He owed her so much. Just like his parents, who had held on all that time and never given up looking for him. He owed them too. But with Lois, there was something more. She'd been the first person he'd seen outside of the warehouse. The first person to call him by his name in fifteen years. She'd held his hand in the ambulance, when

he'd been terrified of the emergency workers touching him and prodding him and monitoring him. And then she'd stayed with him at the hospital until his parents had arrived, just as she'd promised she would.

And now, as he methodically dried the dishes and put them away in the cupboard, he stole glances at her. He loved the way her shoulder-length dark hair framed her face and the way her smile seemed to light up the whole room. Her laugh made him want to smile and laugh too, which was something he still struggled with. And for some reason he couldn't explain, he longed to touch her. He wanted to feel her hand in his. Maybe even a hug.

He mentally shook himself as he put away the final plate and turned back toward the kitchen table. His mother set down a generous slice of chocolate cake in front of Lois, and the younger woman's eyes widened as she smiled enthusiastically.

"Oh, my goodness, Martha, this looks just incredible," she commented, picking up her fork and digging in.

Clark felt the corners of his mouth twitch upward in the beginning of a smile.

"I hope you like it, dear. Clark helped to make it, you know," his mom explained, her gaze shifting briefly to Clark. He shook his head.

"No, Mom, I-I just stirred the — the b-batter and took it out of the — of the oven," he replied. He turned away so he didn't have to see Lois's reaction, folded the dish towel up neatly, and set it on the counter.

"You'll be a master chef in no time, Clark," Lois declared. "And you're probably already better than me in the kitchen. I'd have forgotten to take it out of the oven, even if that was my only job. And it probably would have caught fire, somehow. That tends to happen when I'm in the kitchen."

She did it again. Made him smile. He turned back around and rested against the counter, watching his parents and Lois eat, and he crossed his arms over his chest. The conversation slipped back to agriculture, and his dad started into a long lecture about the importance of field crop rotation. Lois listened intently, nodding at regular intervals and asking insightful questions, but he saw her occasionally glance his direction as well.

A familiar pain started to pulse between his eyes, and he dropped his gaze to the floor. He needed to rest for a bit, or at least get out of the light and close his eyes. Ten, fifteen minutes tops should be enough.

He felt his mother watching him, and he looked up at her, his face taut with pain. She nodded to him, and he knew that she'd explain his absence to Lois. Then he again lowered his eyes and turned toward the hallway. A moment later, he collapsed onto his bed as the room began to sway around him. The thick comforter was still warm from his

nap several hours prior, and he buried his head into his pillow and pulled the blanket up to his chin. The silent darkness of the room calmed him, as it always did, and he felt the pain receding again, fading to a dull ache. He closed his eyes. A few minutes of rest, and then he could join them again.

A gentle knock at his door woke him up a bit later, and he quickly sat up and rubbed his eyes.

"Clark, honey, are you okay?" his mother asked, raising her voice slightly so he could hear her.

He jumped out of bed and flipped the light switch on, bathing the room in yellowish unnatural light. He then cleared his throat and pulled open the door, pasting a smile on his face.

"Yeah, Mom, s-sorry. I, uh, guess I — I guess I fell asleep," he fumbled, running a nervous hand through his hair. He glanced back over his shoulder at the clock on the wall in his room. 7:15 p.m. He'd been asleep for about thirty minutes. Yikes. "Lois isn't — she isn't g-gone yet, is she? I wanted to say goodbye."

Martha shook her head with a knowing smile.

"No, dear, she hasn't left. And I don't think she's going to tonight. It's been snowing pretty hard for a while now actually. So you just relax a bit. Sorry to wake you, honey."

His mom turned and left, and he shut the door again and stumbled back over to the bed. He still felt exhausted, and that dull headache still pulsed behind his eyes.

But he'd slept long enough. He pushed himself up into a sitting position on his bed, his back resting against the dark oak headboard, and picked up the book on his nightstand. He'd spent a lot of time reading in the last three weeks, anything he could get his hands on, really. He'd read the newspaper, his mom's *National Geographic* magazines, and his old paperback copies of the *Chronicles of Narnia*. Then he had moved on to read some more classic literature, including his current read, *To Kill a Mockingbird*. He flipped to page 79, marked by a plain blue bookmark, found his place, and began reading.

He'd give himself a chapter, maybe, before he'd head back out into the living room and see what Lois was up to. He knew right now his dad would be out at the barn, and his mom would probably be talking with Lois. A wave of guilt washed over him, and he frowned as he sat up straighter. Lois had come here all the way from Metropolis, and here he was, hiding out in his bedroom. He shook his head and closed his book.

He owed her more than that.

If not for her, he'd still be...

His chest tightened as he forced himself to his feet. *Don't think about it. You're safe now.*

Safe. Right. He'd felt safe when he was ten. He'd felt loved and safe and protected. And look what had happened.

No, it won't happen again. You're safe now.

His heart began racing, like it always did when he couldn't keep the bad thoughts out of his mind. He grabbed onto his dresser for support and screwed his eyes shut as images and memories flashed in front of him. White walls of a small room, locked from the outside. White walls of a slightly larger room with a plain, cold steel platform in the center. The straps tightening around his legs, chest, and arms to hold him down. A surgical knife moving toward his abdomen. Pain as they cut into him. But he couldn't scream, or else. Be quiet, or else. No crying, or else.

"Clark?"

He exhaled sharply as his mother's voice from the other room pulled him out of the memory. Wiping the thin layer of sweat from his forehead, he willed his feet to move him forward, and his hands shook as he reached out to open the door. He quickly fixed an unperturbed expression on his face, stuffed his hands into his pockets, and moved toward the light at the end of the hallway.

The light that would lead him toward her. Lois. "*You're safe here, Clark.*"

Safe. He was. Really.

Chapter 6

Snow. Clean white snow. And lots of it.

Lois stood on the porch and stared out across the darkening fields in disbelief. Just two hours ago, it had been a light rain. But now, heavy snow fell, and a thick layer, almost a foot deep already, covered the driveway, her rental car, and everything as far as she could see. And as the darkness grew into the evening, there was no end in sight.

She sighed and crossed her arms over her chest. Yep, she should have moved to California with her sister Lucy. Next to her, Martha Kent shook her head and then put an arm around Lois's shoulders.

"Well, dear, I don't think you'll be going anywhere until morning, at least," Martha lamented, following Lois's gaze out over the open fields. "This storm sure moved in fast. We weren't expecting any snow until late tonight."

"Oh, Martha, I can't impose on you like that," Lois argued. However, she knew Martha was right. The roads were not safe, and her small rental car would not handle well in the deep snow. She was stuck.

"It's not an imposition, dear. We're happy to have you. Now come on back inside, and I'll send Clark out to your car to get your bags," Martha instructed, guiding the younger woman back inside. Lois followed Martha, who

led her over to the couch. "You just sit here, and I'll get you a fresh cup of coffee. Clark?"

Lois slipped off her coat and laid it across the back of the couch, then sat back into the cushions as she contemplated her situation. Perry was going to be furious. And the hotel — she needed to call the hotel so they didn't just cancel her reservation. After all, she should be able to make it back to Wichita tomorrow. At least, that's what she hoped.

Clark emerged from the hallway, his hands shoved deep in his pockets. He glanced briefly to Lois and smiled, then turned to his mother.

"What is it, Mom?"

"Lois will be staying with us tonight, honey. Can you head out to her car and bring in her luggage?" Martha poured a cup of coffee and started over toward Lois, careful not to spill the hot liquid.

"Sure, of course," Clark answered, his gaze drifting again to Lois.

She watched as he turned toward the front door, grabbed his coat from the rack, and then smiled at her shyly before disappearing outside. Martha set Lois's mug down on the coffee table.

"I'll get the guest bedroom ready for you, dear. It's just down the hallway here across from Clark's room."

Martha tilted her head toward the hallway and started to turn away, but then stopped and spun back around. Her eyes darted to the front door, from which Clark had exited just a moment before, and then back to Lois. Sighing deeply, the older woman took a seat next to Lois and then reached out and took Lois's hands, her eyes turning stormy.

"I haven't said this enough, Lois, but thank you. From the bottom of my heart, thank you." Lois felt Martha's hands trembling, and a tear slid quietly down Martha's cheek. "I honestly never thought I'd have my son back again. Although the last month has been hard, Clark, well, he's — he's already healed so much, Lois. But you saw him at dinner, I'm sure. He...he sometimes has lapses where he can't remember what he was about to say or do, and he still has trouble speaking. He's still got a long ways to go. You've been so kind to him. I just...I just needed to thank you again, Lois. If not for you, he'd still be in that horrible place, with them doing God knows what to him."

The sincerity of Martha's words gave Lois goosebumps, and Lois nodded and closed her eyes tightly to hold back her tears. Martha leaned into her, and the two women embraced.

"It makes me so happy to see him. And to see you all together," Lois whispered into Martha's ear.

She pulled back out of the hug, and their eyes met again. Martha reached up and brushed the tears off her

cheeks just as the front door opened. Lois quickly turned around in her seat and grimaced as she saw Clark struggling to carry in Lois's two large luggage bags and computer bag. She jumped up to her feet.

"Oh, goodness, Clark, I'm sorry. Here, let me help."

"No, I got it, Lois, really, I —"

"I should have asked you to just get the one bag. I don't really need both, I just —"

And then, in her hurry to get to Clark, her amazing grace and balance and poise flew right out the window. She tripped over something — what, she wasn't sure — and stumbled directly into Clark's arms. He dropped her luggage and somehow managed to stop her fall, his arms wrapping around her tightly. In the awkward position she landed in, her face and hands ended up pressed against his chest. His strong, solid chest. *Oh, wow*, she thought, momentarily distracted by the feeling under her fingers, and then she immediately scolded herself and pushed away from him.

"Sorry! Sorry, I —"

His hands moved to grip her shoulders, steadying her on her feet. *Oh, God, his hands are strong too*. She shook her head. *Get a hold of yourself, Lois*.

"No, I'm — I'm sorry. Are — are you okay?" he faltered, biting his lip nervously. His hands released her when he realized she was stable, and he moved back a step, putting a few feet of distance between them. His eyes darted over her shoulder, to where his mother now stood, and then back to her.

"Yes, thank you, Clark. I'm fine, I-I just tripped. I must be tired, or I dunno, something," she mumbled, her face turning bright red. She smoothed out her T-shirt with shaky hands and then grimaced as she watched him bend over and pick up her luggage bags again. "Please, let me help, Clark. Here..." Her voice trailed off as she reached out and took her computer bag from him. He swallowed tightly and then nodded to her.

"I'll just put your bags in the —" He squinted as though trying to remember something, but shook his head again and restarted. "I'll just put them in the e-extra b-bedroom."

"Sure, okay. Thank you again, Clark," Lois said, and she sidestepped to give him room. He smiled weakly and moved past her and down the hallway. Lois's eyes followed him and then shifted to Martha. The older woman stood with her arms crossed over her chest and worry in her eyes. Lois grimaced again. "Sorry."

"Oh, dear, it's okay. I'm glad he caught you though!" Martha smiled with a hint of a twinkle in her eye. "I'd better go get your room ready, dear, and then I've got a few chores to do before bed. Jonathan and I usually get to sleep pretty early around here, but Clark keeps odd hours,

I'm afraid. He hasn't really adjusted yet in that regard. So he may..." She paused and glanced over her shoulder toward the hallway before continuing. "...he may be up late. You're welcome to anything we've got in the fridge, or cupboards — there's tea and coffee and more cake." Martha smiled again and winked at Lois, then turned and started off down the hallway. "Oh, and the wi-fi works best out here in the living room. The password is Buttercup... Don't ask."

Lois chuckled as a small smile grew on her face. "Thank you, Martha."

Martha's kind, wise eyes shone again, almost with a trace of mischief, and then she disappeared down the hallway. Lois shouldered her computer bag and moved over to the couch. She did actually need to get some work done; the revisions to her article on the Metropolis Zoo reopening were due in a few hours to make it to the afternoon edition the next day, and that was just the thing she needed to help her wind down after the long day. She settled back on the couch, took a long sip of her coffee, and pulled out her laptop.

Her fingers paused on the keyboard, and she bit her lip in concentration as she reread the final paragraph of her article. It was okay. Not great, but...something was missing. She frowned.

"Hmmm, I just don't..."

A rustling from across the room reminded her that she was not alone, and she looked up at the dark eyes staring back at her from over the top of a novel. Clark raised his eyebrows and lowered his book.

"Sorry, I'm having trouble with the final paragraph. Sometimes I talk to myself," Lois explained, her cheeks turning slightly red as she smiled at him. Curiosity flickered in his eyes, and he opened his mouth to respond, but then hesitated.

"Uh... Can — can I, um, w-watch you work?" he stuttered, setting the book down on the side table next to him and then rubbing the back of his neck nervously. He scooted to the edge of his chair.

"Sure, Clark. Here, come sit next to me," she offered, patting the cushion next to her on the couch. He smiled, a wide goofy grin that made Lois's heart flutter, and then stood and moved across the room toward her. She mentally shook herself. She was not allowed to be attracted to him. No, it wouldn't be right.

He settled into the spot next to her, leaving a good amount of space between them, and she shifted her laptop so he could read the screen. After a second, he blinked a few times and frowned. He then hopped up from the couch, moved into the kitchen, and returned a moment later with a pair of black-framed reading glasses. He sat

next to her again, smiling tightly, and then adjusted the glasses and began reading silently to himself, his lips moving ever so slightly and his brow furrowed in concentration.

Adorable. No, Lois. Focus.

She forced her eyes closed and then opened them again as she shifted her gaze back to the computer screen. The final paragraph stared back at her, her cursor blinking tauntingly, and she almost growled at it in frustration. This was an easy article; she didn't understand why she was having so much trouble. She inhaled sharply.

Oh, wow, his aftershave. It smells so good... No, Lane, knock it off!

Next to her, Clark continued reading, oblivious to her mental gymnastics. After another moment, he reached a hand up toward the screen and tentatively pointed to the second paragraph.

"W-what do — what do you mean here by this, uh... 'Regulators had rev — revoked the zoo's accredit — accreditation due to gross neg — neg —'" He paused and swallowed hard with frustration. But Lois gave him a kind smile.

"Negligence," she read, her voice soft.

Clark lowered his eyes for a moment, but then raised them again with a sort of quiet determination. He took a deep breath and started the sentence over, his voice much steadier. "'Regulators had revoked the zoo's accreditation due to gross negligence and multiple accounts of animals suffering from severe malnutrition.'" He looked to Lois, who grinned and nodded emphatically.

"Yes, good job," she praised. He gave a weak smile and continued to listen intently as she clarified the meaning of the sentence. "So, in this paragraph here, I'm trying to explain to the readers what happened three years ago when the zoo was shut down. All zoos in the country have to be accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, and that means that the zoo has been evaluated to ensure it meets appropriate standards for animal welfare and management. The Metropolis Zoo was assessed three years ago when the AZA received reports of animal neglect and malnutrition —"

"Malnutrition?" he interjected. He lowered his eyes for a moment. "Does that mean they were not being fed enough?"

"Basically, yes," Lois answered. "The reports also alleged that the animals' pens were not being cleaned and that they were not receiving proper medical treatment."

Clark nodded in understanding, and his eyes seemed to darken momentarily as he adjusted his glasses. He shifted his gaze back to the computer screen.

"So, um, the zoo was shut down because...because they weren't taking proper care of the animals and the —

the AZA...uh, took away the zoo's accred-accreditation," Clark summarized. He looked back to Lois, who nodded, and then he frowned and started reading again.

Lois watched as he worked his way down the page, occasionally stopping and blinking as though trying to interpret the meaning of the text. When he reached near the end of the article, he cleared his throat and looked at her almost nervously. He again raised his hand to the page and tentatively pointed at a phrase on the screen.

"I-I think this sh-should be 'affected' w-with an 'a', not an 'e'..."

His voice trailed off, and Lois frowned as she reread the sentence he'd pointed to. She almost laughed; he'd indeed caught one of her many typos — and it was one that even her copy editor had overlooked since the article had already been through one round of editing.

"You're right, Clark. Nice catch. Thank you." He sat up a little straighter, another broad grin on his face, and Lois couldn't help but smile back. "Now if only you could help me fix up this final paragraph here."

He squinted at the screen again, reading, and then looked up at her in confusion.

"I don't see anything wrong with it," he admitted.

And he was right. There really was nothing wrong with it. But she felt like it wasn't quite how she wanted to end the article, and she sighed and nodded.

"I know. It's just...not as impactful as I want," she said. When he gave her a confused look, she added, "I guess it's this — I've explained what happened when the zoo was shut down and announced that the zoo is reopening on a certain date, with specific changes being implemented. But what assurance does the public have that the new zoo commission will keep animal welfare at the forefront of their agenda? The AZA hasn't insisted on more frequent inspections, and several members of the old management team for the zoo are still heading the new management team. So, is anything really going to change?"

"Oh, right, I see," Clark agreed pensively. He blinked several times and then reread the final paragraph for a third time. "Um..." Hesitantly, he scooted a little closer to Lois and pointed to a sentence in the next to last paragraph. "W-what if you m-move this sentence, this, uh, quote from the — the AZA inspector to the last sentence?" Nervously, he glanced at Lois and then back to the screen. "Uh, I-I think the quote is...the quote says..." He closed his eyes and shook his head, struggling to find the words he wanted. But Lois understood his suggestion, and a huge, bright smile grew on her lips.

"Clark, you're a genius. That's perfect!" she exclaimed. She quickly shifted the computer back onto her lap, and her fingers flew over the keyboard as she copied, pasted,

deleted, and retyped the final two paragraphs, moving the sentence Clark had suggested to the final paragraph and reorganizing the previous paragraph slightly. “There. What do you think now?”

He smiled and nodded.

“Better. Right?”

“Definitely,” Lois agreed. “Thank you, Clark.”

She suddenly had a strong urge to kiss him. He was so close to her — only a few inches away now — and he smelled so good. But it wouldn’t be right. No, definitely not right. So she just smiled at him again and then shifted slightly to surreptitiously put a tiny bit more space between them. She quickly finalized the article and emailed it to Perry, then closed her laptop. Clark still sat next to her, a silly grin on his face, and he watched her as she put her laptop away in its case. However, as she straightened up and raised her eyes to his, his smile faded, and he blinked again and removed his reading glasses, rubbing the bridge of his nose.

“Are you okay?” she asked quietly. Without thinking, she reached out and placed her hand gently on his back. He flinched slightly, but nodded and cleared his throat.

“I-I just get headaches s-sometimes still,” he explained. “It’s worse when I’m r-reading, although the glasses help. I — ” He shook his head again and closed his eyes. “Everything can get... blurry, especially when I’m reading on a computer. The d-doctor says — the doctor says the headaches and — and blurry vision and everything are — are probably b-because of that...that...” He paused again and frowned, his frustration evident. Lois rubbed a slow circle on his back, waiting patiently as he gathered his thoughts. “...probably because of that drug they were g-giving me.”

She found herself blinking back tears as she listened. She really knew nothing of his medical condition or prognosis, except for the brief conversation she’d had with Martha earlier when Martha had mentioned his memory and speech issues. But she supposed that being dosed with a strange mineral-derived drug for fifteen years would be expected to cause long-lasting effects. Her hand stilled on his back, and he turned his head toward her and gave her a weak smile.

“Most of the time, I feel fine,” he assured her, as though he sensed that she was concerned. “And it’s all much b-better than...than when I was...” He didn’t finish his thought this time, but they both understood. Lois nodded emphatically and wiped a tear off her cheek.

“Of course,” she said quietly. She leaned into him as he scooted closer to her, and her arm moved to wrap around him, his head coming to rest on her shoulder. His large body shuddered against her, and she realized that he too was struggling to hold back tears. Her arm tightened

around him involuntarily as she felt a sudden surge of protectiveness toward him.

And that strange connection she’d felt the first time she’d seen a picture of him as a young boy, when Martha had shown up at the Daily Planet begging her to help find him — that strange pulse of knowing him, as though they’d been friends in another lifetime or another world somewhere — she felt that again. Only much stronger this time. And growing.

And she absently wondered, as she closed her eyes and felt his tears wet her shirt, whether the snow could just continue through the night and into the next day so she wouldn’t have to leave for Wichita in the morning.

Clark stood shivering at the end of the long driveway, his coat pulled tightly around him, as his father plowed the two feet of snow to clear a path to the main road. Unfortunately, the roads were drivable; the snow had stopped around midnight, and road crews had done a fantastic job of plowing. Which meant Lois would be leaving for Wichita soon.

He shoved his hands deeper into the pockets of his jeans, wishing he’d remembered a pair of gloves, and he recalled his conversation with Lois late last night. His mild embarrassment at crying when she held him had been all but forgotten when she’d suggested they go over the requirements for his college application together. She’d opened her laptop back up, searched the Internet for Granville Community College, and shown him how to find admissions information. He was still hopeless with technology, but she’d explained everything clearly and logically, and he’d been able to follow along as she’d navigated the website. They’d found out he did in fact need a GED to apply and that the small college actually had a fairly rigorous journalism program, with ties to the *Wichita Post* and *Kansas Star*.

He still wasn’t sure if he was interested in journalism, but after helping Lois with her article, he did feel as though he would definitely be suited to a career in writing.

His dad slowed the tractor to a stop in front of him and motioned for Clark to climb up. They then rode back toward the barn in an amicable silence. The early morning sunlight peeked through the clouds to the east, and Clark found himself having to shield his eyes from the bright white snow covering the fields in every direction.

He shuddered and closed his eyes for a moment. Bright white everywhere. Nope. He shifted his gaze to the barn, a large structure painted red. Bright red. Not blood red. And then he looked to his dad, whose head was covered with a blue and black wool hat. His dad smiled at him, stopped the tractor, and shut it off, the engine’s loud rumble

quieting abruptly. The older man then patted Clark gently on the back.

“Your mom probably has breakfast ready by now,” he said, motioning toward the house. “Why don’t you head on inside, and I’ll check on Ginny one more time.”

Clark nodded and hopped down from the tractor, allowing his gaze to jump to the pile of wood logs covered by a blue tarp, then to the yellow siding of the farmhouse. His own black boots and dark-wash jeans. The multicolored wind chimes his mom hung on the porch. Anything but plain, bright white.

Plain white was dangerous. It made him slip back in time and forget where he was.

Nope, he needed color. Lots of color. Even black, even darkness, was much better than bright white.

He opened the door to the farmhouse and was greeted by warm air smelling of bacon, eggs, and cinnamon rolls. Ah, his mom’s homemade cinnamon rolls. Lois was in for a treat.

Motion and voices from the kitchen distracted him as he kicked off his boots and removed his hat and coat. He looked up sharply. The two women worked side by side, his mom directing Lois as they joked and laughed together.

“See, a little bit of nutmeg is just what you need,” his mom said, pulling a large tray of rolls out of the oven. “Can you smell it?”

Lois leaned over the tray, inhaled deeply, and groaned.

“Yes, wow. Martha, I can’t wait to taste it.”

“Don’t forget to take the eggs off the heat now, dear, or they’ll burn.”

“Right!”

Lois scooted over to the stovetop and quickly removed the scrambled eggs from the heat as she stirred them, and Clark smiled. His mom had given him the same lesson — Breakfast Foods 101, she’d called it. How to make scrambled eggs. Low heat, stir often, don’t overcook.

“Oh, Clark, honey — how are the roads? Your dad was able to clear the driveway?” his mom asked as she began removing the cinnamon rolls from the baking tray and placing them on a serving dish.

Upbeat. Positive. Don’t show them that you’re anything less than excited, he rebuffed, forcing a neutral expression.

“Yeah,” he replied. “Yeah, the roads look clear n-now. Lois shouldn’t have any trouble g-getting to — getting to Wichita.” Seeing a stack of plates and utensils sitting at one corner of the counter, Clark moved to the kitchen and then started setting the table. “Dad is just checking on Ginny. He’ll be —”

And his brain shut off. It did that sometimes, and it frustrated him to no end. He lost whatever he was going to say, and he knew there was no way to recover it.

Mercifully, it hadn’t happened to him last night when he’d been alone with Lois. But it was still embarrassing enough to have it happen at all. He closed his eyes and felt his shoulders tense as he set down another plate and tried to remember what he’d been talking about. His mom beat him to it, however.

“Lois, Ginny is our milk cow. She banged up her leg last week, and Jonathan has been babying her like I’ve never seen before!”

Martha laughed and started moving serving dishes to the table. Clark thanked her silently and then pulled out a chair for Lois.

“Thank you, Clark,” Lois murmured. She sat, and the three of them were joined by Jonathan just a few minutes later.

Over breakfast, Clark listened quietly as Lois explained to Martha what they’d found about the community college the night before. She also mentioned how Clark had helped with her article, and he found himself blushing at her praise. The two women then continued talking about the recipe for the cinnamon rolls, and Martha promised to write it out for Lois and send it to her via email. Lois claimed, with a self-deprecating laugh, that if she could manage to make the cinnamon rolls at home on her own, it would be the first dish she could make that didn’t involve chocolate. Clark chuckled at the thought as he ate his third cinnamon roll and piled an extra helping of eggs on his plate. And the four continued their easy chatter.

Soon, however, much too soon, breakfast was finished.

An odd sort of fluttering in his stomach gripped him as he stood, collected everyone’s plates, and began washing the dishes. His dad excused himself back out to the barn to finish up chores, and his mother cleared the leftovers from the table. After arranging the extra food in appropriate containers in the fridge, she came up behind him and placed a gentle hand on his back. She could feel his tension; she always could. She was almost too intuitive.

“Honey, why don’t you help Lois take her luggage out to the car, and I’ll finish up the dishes.”

He set down the plate he’d been scrubbing and nodded. After quickly drying his hands, he hurried down the hall toward the guest bedroom. The door was cracked open a few inches, and he heard Lois’s voice and some rustling from inside.

“No, Perry, I’m leaving in just a few minutes, so I can still catch the keynote speech... Yes, I’m fine. I can handle driving in the snow, Perry... I know, I know, Chief...”

Clark knocked quietly on the door, not wanting to disturb her, but also not wanting to eavesdrop. The door creaked open a few more inches, and Lois leaned back from her spot near the bed, her expression breaking into a huge bright smile as their eyes met.

And that sensation of his stomach fluttering hit him again. Awkwardly, to hide his reaction, he gave a little wave. She nodded and held up a finger, which he thought might mean, “Just a minute,” or something to that effect, and turned away from him.

“Perry, I have to go... Yes, I’ll call you later... Sure, yes, the mayor’s speech notes are on my laptop, so I’ll do the write up tonight... Yes, Chief. Goodbye.”

With a huff, she hung up her phone and stood.

“Sorry about that, Clark. My boss — he’s the best, but he can be a bit long-winded sometimes,” she explained with a crooked smile. “What’s up? I was just finishing up packing.”

“I, uh, that is, my mom, she — she suggested I — ” He stopped and shook his head. Why did he have so much trouble speaking still, even after almost a month? As always, Lois stood patiently and waited for him to gather his thoughts again, her beautiful dark eyes smiling at him. He restarted, speaking slowly and carefully to avoid stuttering again. “Can I help you take your luggage to the car?”

“Of course,” she replied easily. “But this time, you take one bag, and I take one bag. Okay?”

He felt his face heat up as he recalled Lois tripping and falling into him the evening before when she’d thought he was overburdened by her two luggage bags and computer bag. Her hands pressing into his chest had caused that odd fluttering sensation in his stomach. He quickly nodded in response.

“Deal.”

She smiled up at him and motioned to the heavier of her two bags, and together, they lugged the bags out through the hallway, into the living room, and to the car. The brisk winter air hit him, and although he had long sleeves on, the chilly breeze had him shivering almost instantly. Thankfully, their trip to the car was short, and they hurried back inside.

As he shut the door behind them, he heard Lois moving toward the kitchen, where his mother was still finishing the dishes. He turned to watch as the two women hugged and said their goodbyes. Lois wiped a tear from her eye, and then his mom let out a sigh and hugged the younger woman again.

“Thank you so much, Lois,” his mother murmured. He smiled but lowered his eyes as Lois whispered something back that he couldn’t quite hear. Maybe something about chocolate cake.

“Clark, I’m going to grab my computer bag and then say goodbye to your dad out at the barn,” Lois explained.

He looked up and nodded at her as she hurried off back toward the guest bedroom. His mother set down the dish towel and was almost immediately by his side, her arms

wrapping around his waist lovingly. Although they often shared hugs for no real reason except that they could, this embrace felt different somehow. He returned the hug, pulling her closer to him, and he felt her shaking slightly.

“Everything okay, Mom?” he said quietly, holding her tighter.

“Everything is perfect, dear.”

She backed away as Lois came out down the hallway, a black computer bag slung over one shoulder. His stomach lurched, a feeling that was much different from the fluttering, he noted, as she headed toward the front door. And he realized that the slight nausea he felt was because he just really wasn’t ready to let her leave. With a quick glance at his mom, who gave him a knowing wink, he hurried after Lois and reached the door just before her. Holding it open, he smiled nervously at her and motioned her through.

“Why thank you, Mr. Kent,” she joked, returning his smile.

Clark grabbed his coat and followed her outside. Several minutes later, after Lois had said goodbye to his dad, he found himself staring into her deep brown eyes, smiling as she told him a joke that he hadn’t really understood. But he laughed and nodded anyways. Anything to see her smile and hear her laugh. Then her smile faded, and he frowned right along with her.

“It was really great to see you, Clark,” she said quietly, her eyes not leaving his. “I can’t tell you how happy I am that you are doing so well.”

“It’s all because of you,” he replied automatically, his eyes lowering to the ground. His shoes stuck slightly in the muddy snow, and he scuffed the ground a bit, watching distractedly as the snow turned brownish. “I can’t — I can’t even thank you enough.”

He was glad his voice hadn’t failed him at that moment, although there was so much more he felt he needed to say to her. Maybe he could write to her; writing might be easier than talking. Then again, he knew he was going to miss hearing her voice.

“Maybe, um, you don’t have a cell phone, do you?” she asked, biting her lip and shifting her computer bag up her shoulder higher.

He smiled weakly as he realized that her train of thought had been the same as his. But then he shook his head.

“No, not yet. But I-I, uh —”

And then it happened again, and his mom wasn’t around to save him. His brain clicked off, shutting down whatever he’d been about to say. He nearly growled in frustration, but managed to control himself, and as always, Lois seemed to understand him.

“Well, your mom has my number. So, um, I hope that you’ll maybe call me?”

He raised his eyes to hers, and the stomach flutter happened again. He couldn’t speak still, so he simply nodded. She smiled — that huge, bright smile that just warmed him — and then swallowed as she opened the door to her rental car. She hesitated and turned back toward him again.

Before he knew what was happening, her arms wrapped snugly around his waist, and she pressed herself up against him in a hug — the hug he’d thought about last night, the one he’d wanted to initiate but had held back. And it felt as good as he’d imagined. He closed his eyes and encircled her with his arms around her shoulders. A deep sigh escaped her lips as she settled her head on his chest, and for a moment, Clark forgot again where he was and what he was doing. All he felt was her. And a comforting, stabilizing warmth spreading from his chest and through his body.

And then, it was over. And she pulled away from him, smiled almost sadly, and climbed into her car.

“Goodbye, Clark.”

“Goodbye, Lois.”

At least he’d found his voice again. But a single tear slid down his cheek, and as he watched her drive away, he stuffed his hands into his pockets and wondered how he was going to earn enough money to buy himself a cell phone.

Chapter 7

Lois searched the crowd of passengers exiting through the large set of double doors at Metropolis International Airport. Her eyes landed on a tall, dark-haired man whose deep brown eyes were hidden behind a pair of black-rimmed glasses. He weaved in and out of the crowd, his eyes jumping nervously around until they met hers. And when she smiled and waved at him, a look of relief crossed his face, followed quickly by a wide, bright grin. He raised his hand to wave back and then carefully maneuvered through the other passengers toward her, shouldering his duffle bag.

“Clark, you made it!” Lois greeted, reaching up to hug him enthusiastically. He returned the embrace with a sigh, and she felt a slight trembling in his body.

“Finally,” he breathed. “That may have been the longest four hours of my life. I’m not sure I ever want to fly again.”

She pulled back out of the embrace, chuckling slightly, and looked up at him, still smiling.

“Was there a lot of turbulence? I know the weather has been a bit unpredictable lately,” she said. She looped her

arm through his and started leading the way toward the baggage claim area.

“Um, I don’t really know. It just felt...claustrophobic, I guess. The space was too small, and there were too many people, and... Well, since I’ve never flown before, I have no frame of reference. But it was not fun,” he explained.

She nodded and twisted her head to smile up at him again. His eyes were trained ahead, shifting around to take in the sights of the airport, and his jaw twitched slightly as he frowned.

“There’s so many people. Is it — is it a-always this crowded?” he asked, grimacing and shaking his head. He seemed to lean into her a little bit, his body tensing, and she steered him over toward a quieter corner of the baggage claim area where they could still see the baggage carousel.

“On a Sunday afternoon in early summer, yes, this is normal,” she confirmed. She stepped in front of him and then wrapped her arms up and around his neck, pulling him in for another hug. “It’s so good to see you, Clark.”

He dropped his duffle bag next to them and looped his arms around her waist, drawing her closer to him, and they both breathed in deeply. Lois didn’t know whether Clark felt it too, but something about this hug, this embrace just filled her. Made her feel whole and complete and...loved. Which was crazy, she reflected, pulling away from him slowly. His dark eyes studied hers briefly, and her smile grew as he shyly looked away toward the baggage carousel. God, he was even more handsome than when she’d last seen him four months ago, when she’d stayed at his parents’ home in Smallville during that unexpected snow storm. His hair had grown out a little and was neatly styled, and he’d filled out more, his solid physique accentuated by his well-fitted dark-wash jeans and long-sleeved heather gray t-shirt. Her heart seemed to skip a beat, and she swallowed tightly as his closeness made her feel...warmer.

Stop, Lois. You don’t have that kind of relationship. He’s just a friend. He’s just a friend and...and he’s still got his arm around me... She stiffened slightly at the realization as his arm lingered on her waist.

“So, uh, how long does it usually take for...” His voice trailed off as he too seemed to remember that his arm casually rested around her. His face turned bright red, and he dropped his arm and stepped away, running a nervous hand through his hair. “Uh, yeah, s-sorry, I — how long until the luggage comes out?”

He forced a smile on his face, and their eyes met again. Lois couldn’t help but grin at him; he looked adorably sheepish, like a kid who’d been caught with his hand in the cookie jar. She momentarily considered teasing him, but

decided against it. Instead, she shifted her gaze to the baggage carousel, which hadn't yet started to move.

"Not long, usually just a few minutes," she answered, keeping her tone light.

From her pocket, her phone buzzed, a welcome distraction as her mind tried to remind her how nice it had felt to have his arm wrapped around her waist. And how solid and warm he was. She gulped and quickly pulled the phone out, her eyes landing on the notification of a text message from Martha Kent.

"Oh, Clark, did you call your mom when you landed?" She tapped on the notification and then read the message silently to herself. "I'm guessing not," she added with a laugh.

Lois held the phone up for him to see. The short message was a strongly worded request to have Clark call her ASAP so she knew he was alive and had made the trip to Metropolis safely.

He blanched and shook his head. "N-no, I completely forgot. Ah, my poor mom," he mumbled, and he stuffed his hand into his pocket and pulled out an older black Samsung cell phone, similar to a phone Lois had replaced about a year prior. He fumbled slightly with the phone as his hands began to tremble, but he managed to dial the Kents' number. Lois smiled at him knowingly and gently patted his shoulder as he bit his lip nervously.

"You know, I'm thinking traveling may not be my thing, Lois. I — Hi, Mom... Yeah, I'm sorry, I — " He turned away from Lois slightly and raked a hand through his hair, nodding into the phone. Half-listening to his conversation, she glanced again to the baggage carousel, which had finally creaked to life. "Y-yeah, I know, I... It was fine, Mom, and Lois is here with me and — and we're w-waiting — we're waiting for the b-b — the luggage — " He stopped talking abruptly, and Lois shifted her gaze back to him. He nodded again into the phone, but his eyes had screwed shut, and his free hand pinched the bridge of his nose under his glasses. He took a deep breath and seemed to try to steady himself. "Okay, Mom... Yeah, I will... Yeah, Mom, I love you too... Bye."

He hung up the phone with shaking hands and shoved it back into the pocket of his jeans with a heavy sigh.

"She asked one thing of me — to call her when I landed — and I forgot. After everything that they've done for me... I still forgot," he said quietly, keeping his eyes glued to the floor. He shuffled his feet.

"Hey, now, it's okay," Lois assured him. She hesitated a moment, but then reached out and took his hand. "Let's get your luggage and get out of here, huh? I can't wait to show you the city. You're going to love it."

Lois looped her arm through his and patted his chest playfully, eliciting a tight smile from him. She'd take it for

now. He stooped down and picked up his duffel bag, and together they pushed through the crowd toward the baggage carousel to find Clark's luggage.

One thing Lois learned over the next hour was that Martha Kent did indeed have a bit of an overprotective streak. She received no fewer than five more text messages from Martha in the time between when Clark hung up with her and when they found Lois's silver Jeep Grand Cherokee, which was parked neatly near the back of the short-term parking lot. Martha wanted to make sure Clark's luggage didn't get lost, and that he had remembered to grab his carry-on luggage before he'd exited the airplane, and that he had his medication with him — which he needed to take promptly at 5:00 p.m. every day — and that Lois was sure he wasn't going to be an imposition, staying with her for the summer while he explored whether he was interested in pursuing a career in journalism.

Not that Lois blamed Martha. No, she was sure that if she were in Martha's shoes, she probably wouldn't have even let Clark out of her sight.

As Clark hefted his two large luggage bags and duffel bag into the back of the Jeep, Lois sent Martha a quick message to let her know Clark was doing well and that he had all of his luggage. She also assured Martha again that she was more than happy to have Clark stay with her; after all, she had an extra bedroom that otherwise sat empty.

"Everything okay?" he asked as he climbed into the passenger's seat next to her.

She nodded and switched her phone off.

"Just returning a text from your mom," Lois explained with a sideways smile. She started the car and glanced at the clock as it blinked to life. 4:58 p.m. "She asked me to remind you —"

"Oh, right, yeah," Clark interjected. "One sec."

He unfastened his seatbelt, hopped out of the vehicle, rifled through his duffel bag for a minute, and then joined her in the front seat again, an orange pill bottle in his hand. He refastened his seatbelt and quickly swallowed a small blue pill while Lois backed out of the parking spot and followed the signs for downtown Metropolis.

She glanced sideways at him as he shoved the small pill bottle into his pocket and then shifted in his seat and leaned over slightly to gaze out at the tall buildings of the Metropolis skyline in the distance. She was curious about the pills, but it would be rude of her to ask, she knew. She refocused her attention on the road in front of her.

"Oh, wow, that's..." Clark's voice trailed off as he stared out the windshield.

"It's pretty incredible, huh? Do you see the Daily Planet? The globe is there," Lois said, pointing ahead and

slightly to her right at the landmark globe glinting in the afternoon sunlight. Clark adjusted his glasses and nodded.

“It’s — it’s just... Wow.”

She smiled and glanced at him again as she merged onto the highway. His expression showed pure awe, and he blinked and then grinned at her. *God, that smile.*

“And I get to work there with you for the next three months? I can’t believe it,” he beamed. He shifted again in his seat for a better view.

She expertly navigated the Jeep into downtown Metropolis, and they spent the next half hour just driving around, taking in the sights of the city and the people living there. It was busy; traffic was heavy, and crowds congregated on the street corners and bus stops. But that gave her more time to explain the buildings they drove by. Clark seemed particularly interested in the architecture of the old theater in the historical district and in the expansive grounds of Metropolis University. He made Lois promise to bring him back to visit the campus when they had free time later in the week. Finally, Lois turned down a quiet, tree-lined street and pulled the Jeep up to her apartment building — a multi-story brick structure nestled among other similar apartment buildings.

“Here we are,” she announced. She removed the keys from the ignition and watched Clark as he again stared almost in awe at the apartment building. She laughed and patted his shoulder. “It’s really nothing special, you know.”

“All of this is so different from Smallville. I-I think it’s all incredible.” He quickly unfastened his seatbelt and jumped out of the car onto the sidewalk, glancing back at Lois as she copied him. She let him gawk at the building while she moved to the back of the Jeep and opened the hatch, revealing his two large luggage bags and smaller duffle bag. She shouldered the duffle and pulled the two luggage bags out, struggling with their weight as she set them on the sidewalk. Clark still stood, smiling up at the building, oblivious to her effort, and she laughed to herself as she shut the hatch.

“If you think the outside of the building is neat, wait until you see the inside,” she joked, adding, “Here, come help me with this, and we’ll head up.”

Clark twisted around to look at her, that adorable grin on his face, and Lois motioned to him with a wave of her hand.

“Oh, right, of course. Sorry.”

He trotted over to her and grabbed both luggage bags as she began leading the way inside.

“You have both of those? They seem pretty heavy,” Lois commented, holding the door to the building open for him. He grinned at her again and nodded.

“They’re not that heavy,” he replied. To demonstrate his point, or maybe to show off, Lois wondered, he lifted both of the luggage bags higher and smiled again. “See?”

“Maybe you’ve just been working out, Mr. Kent,” Lois teased. He blushed a deep red as she patted him on the arm, and she then turned toward the elevator, Clark following closely. As they entered the elevator, her stomach growled loudly, and she grimaced. “I don’t know if you remember, but I don’t really cook. Well, it’s not that I don’t cook, actually, it’s more like anytime I try to cook, well, things just tend to, you know, blow up or catch fire... So, uh, well, do you like pepperoni or sausage on your pizza?”

Clark blinked at her several times, his eyes narrowed as he tried to interpret her rambling. Then, he laughed, and Lois couldn’t help but join him. She leaned up against him to steady herself as the elevator lurched to a stop on the fifth floor.

“Whatever you want is fine with me, Lois.”

“Good. Right answer. I think we’re going to get along just fine,” she quipped, flashing him a brilliant, wide smile and then leading the way down the hall to her apartment.

Clark stared at the ceiling, his eyes focusing on a single point straight above him. The clock on the wall next to him blinked as the time changed to 9:55 p.m. Tension began building behind his eyes, just like every night about this time. He was glad Lois had suggested they get to bed early; she wouldn’t have to witness his nightly migraine or experience the panic that he always felt before and after the onset of the debilitating headache.

He curled up onto his side, facing the wall, and pulled the comforter up to his chin. The dark, unfamiliar room was warm, but he felt exposed without the blanket covering him. And it helped to keep his mind from thinking he was back there in that awful place, where he’d not been given any clothing or blankets. He shook his head as he remembered the constant chill of the room. Never warm. Never comfortable. Always exposed.

No, he was safe and warm and comfortable here. Except the growing pain behind his eyes. Nausea hit him then, and he curled up more, clutching at his stomach as he suppressed a groan.

Quiet. Stay quiet. Don’t cry. Don’t move.

He shook his head again, ridding his mind of the intrusive thoughts, and then he allowed himself to cry. Silently, tears fell from his eyes, staining the pillow. And he allowed himself to move, turning over again onto his back and staring up at the plain white ceiling. No, no, no, not plain white. He closed his eyes and imagined it being painted blue. A bright blue, like the sky.

Too late. He couldn't stop it. The panic. His heart started racing, and the lightheadedness that always accompanied it made him shiver, despite his warmth.

In his mind, the comfortable, quiet, dark room disappeared, replaced by harsh white walls and a hard steel platform beneath him. He heard his own screams, cut short by a rough hand slapping him across the face with such force that he nearly blacked out. "*Shut the hell up, or I'll give you something to cry about. Freak.*" He felt the needle piercing his skin, plunging deep into the muscle of his right shoulder. And the stabbing pains as the drug spread. And then he was on the ground, blood dripping from his nose. A steel-toed boot kicked him in the side, a sickening crunch echoing in his ears as his ribs cracked.

He couldn't cry.

No crying, or else.

Or else they'd make it hurt even more.

He shook himself and forced his breathing to stabilize. Lois. He was here, with her, in her apartment, safe from them. His hands gripped the comforter tightly, causing the muscles in his arms to tremble, but he didn't let go. The blanket was soft, warm, enveloping him. He felt a crease in the fabric and ran his fingers along it.

One, two, three. Four, five, six. One, two, three. Four, five, six. His new chant, breathing in and out. Sometimes it helped. A little.

He opened his eyes again, but turned his head toward the door. The door wasn't locked. He could leave if he wanted. He was in control.

Quickly, he pushed back the comforter and stood, ignoring the wave of dizziness that washed over him and the sharp stabbing pains pulsing behind his eyes. He stepped over to the door, grabbed the handle, and eased the door open several inches. Light from the living room filtered in; Lois was still up. He didn't want to see her right now, not like this. But his breathing eased considerably as he closed the door again.

The simple reminder of the unlocked door usually allowed him to go to sleep; he'd discovered that early on, within the first week he'd been back at his parents' house. Here, now, in this unfamiliar room, with its unfamiliar colors and warmth and smells, he needed the reminder again.

Blindly, he felt his way back to the bed, collapsed onto the soft mattress, and pulled the comforter back up over himself, all the way up to his chin.

And he willed himself to go to sleep, his teeth chattering and his hands trembling.

Chapter 8

Lois pushed the button for the main newsroom floor, the elevator doors closed, and the elevator lurched upward.

She could feel Clark's nervous energy next to her, and he shuffled his feet while staring at the number blinking above the elevator doors. It beeped loudly each time they rose a level, and he flinched every time. She adjusted her purse on her shoulder as she wondered whether she should have brought him in the day before, when it would have been quiet and not crowded.

The doors opened loudly, and Lois stepped out confidently. Clark followed a step behind, his wide dark eyes scanning the room. He adjusted his glasses and then shoved his hands deep into his pockets as his eyes landed on her. She frowned as he forced a tight smile, quite different from the look of awe he'd had the day before when she'd given him a tour of the city from the safety of her car. She slowed to walk next to him instead of in front of him and then rested a hand gently on his arm. He trembled slightly under her touch.

"Just follow me," she instructed quietly. Several of her colleagues greeted them as they walked down the ramp and through the maze of desks toward the small conference room in the back corner, and she smiled and nodded cordially, though her attention remained focused on the man next to her.

He'd told her that morning that he was a bit nervous about the day, and although she'd assured him that he'd be with her all day, she'd noticed a steady decline in his speech patterns as they got closer to the Planet on the drive in. His stuttering definitely worsened when he was stressed or nervous, and she didn't want that for him. She wanted him to be relaxed and comfortable and to have a good experience. And so, she needed to get him into the conference room and settled, where he could get used to the hustle and bustle without having to mitigate the loud noises and curious stares of her colleagues.

"Here we go," she said. She opened the door to the small conference room and ushered him inside. As she closed the door behind them, she heard him exhale sharply, and she turned back around toward him. "You okay?"

He nodded, his tight forced smile replaced with something a bit more organic, and he raised his eyes to look out the glass windows of the conference room. She followed his gaze for a moment.

It was 8 a.m. Monday morning in the Daily Planet newsroom. Like every Monday morning, the room was filled with a sense of anticipation — reporters moved around the room, congregated at the coffee machine, and threw ideas at each other for stories that had been brewing over the weekend. TVs with various news stations playing hung along the walls, and a photographer, holding up a large camera, jogged down the ramp while shouting to another of their colleagues. Perry White, Editor-in-Chief, stepped out of his office, bellowed something that

momentarily brought the newsroom to a standstill, and then yelled again for everyone to get back to work.

Lois smiled; it was her favorite time of day. The energy, the anticipation, the eagerness — she thrived on this. However, a quick glance at her new “apprentice” revealed that he was not quite as enthused. His shoulders hunched slightly, and his lips tightened into a grimace as Perry slammed the door to his office. She reminded herself again that less than five months had passed since he’d been rescued from that facility north of Metropolis, where he’d been held since he was a young boy. So...his life experience as an adult consisted of all of five months, most of which was living quietly with his parents at their small farm in Nowheresville, Kansas.

And they were definitely not in Kansas anymore.

“It’s loud and busy out there, so we can work in here today. How does that sound?” she asked as casually as she could, not wanting to attract attention to his discomfort. She patted him on the shoulder and turned away from the window. “Actually, how about you settle in here — you can ‘people watch’ for a few minutes — and I’ll get a few things from my desk and grab us some coffee?”

Clark shifted his eyes to her, blinking several times, and then nodded.

“Um, yeah, that’s — that s-sounds g-good. Uh, lots of milk and sugar though, please,” he mumbled. And he grinned at her — still forced, but he seemed to be trying to control his anxiety.

She chuckled, remembering their conversation about coffee from four months ago, and she glanced quickly out into the newsroom.

“See that man over there in the gray T-shirt and blue jeans?” she asked, pointing to her right out the window, where a young man in his early twenties stood talking to an older blonde woman.

“Yeah.”

“That’s Jimmy Olsen. He was there when we...rescued you. And he drinks his coffee like that — mostly milk and sugar, with a little coffee.” Lois winked at him, and Clark’s smile grew just a little more. “I’ll have him make your coffee for you. Sound good?”

He nodded.

“Yeah, yes. Uh, th-thank you — thank you, Lois,” he added. With a shaking hand, he reached up and removed his glasses, squinted for a moment, and rubbed the bridge of his nose. He then replaced his glasses and blinked before shifting his eyes to meet hers.

The many unspoken words in his mannerisms told her a lot. Not just that he was uncertain, nervous, and insecure. No, not just that. Something else too. She paused as she studied him briefly. No, it wasn’t just his anxiety. She realized that he needed something from this experience,

but he was terrified that he wouldn’t find it. Somehow, from the simple act of him removing and replacing his glasses, she saw that he needed validation, assurance, and a purpose. He needed to know that he could be something. That he wasn’t a ten-year-old boy in an adult’s body — someone with no past to build a future on.

God, she wanted to hug him right now. She wanted to tell him that he would find his way and his purpose given time, to tell him that she believed in him and would help him as much as she could. But she just smiled at him and then hurriedly left the conference room, the door closing behind her.

They could talk more about it later.

For now, coffee first, then the stuff she needed from her desk. She angled toward Jimmy, who was now walking briskly toward Perry’s office, and she waved as she called his name.

“Jimmy! I need your help!”

“Impressive, Kent. I like it.”

Perry White looked up at Lois and Clark over the top of his glasses as he set down the single-page printout of Clark’s write up, and Lois felt a huge smile growing on her face. She’d given him a simple task — compiling and familiarizing himself with all of her research on a story she was working on related to a huge asteroid that was supposed to be passing within several hundred thousand miles of Earth in about a month. She’d planned to write up the article herself for tomorrow morning’s edition, but she’d gotten stuck in traffic on her way back from meeting a source — one who would talk to her and only her, leaving Clark to stay back at the Planet. When she’d returned with only an hour to go before deadline, he’d nervously presented her with his draft of an article, which, to her surprise, had been not only well written and impactful but also an accurate representation of her research. She’d done a quick once-over, changing only a few words here and there, and had then shot the article off to Perry, with Clark’s name following hers on the byline. Clark had argued that his name shouldn’t be on the article, since he was technically not a writer and he’d only written up the research she’d already done, but Lois had been so amazed by his work that she’d insisted. And it seemed that Perry agreed.

“Thank you, sir,” Clark replied stiffly. He glanced at her before adding, “It’s all Lois’s research. I just wrote it up, to — to help her out of course.”

“Ah, well, regardless, Kent, if this article is any indication, I’d say you have a bright future ahead of you, son. Good job,” Perry drawled, and he stood up and offered his hand. Clark stepped forward to shake hands with the older man, his movement still unsure and rigid.

“Thank you, sir,” Clark repeated.

Lois patted him on the shoulder and winked at Perry.

“I told you he was gonna be good, didn’t I, Chief?” She didn’t wait for an answer as she turned to Clark. “Come on, Mr. Kent. I think a celebration is in order. I know this burger joint on the other side of town. They have the best double fudge chocolate milkshakes in Metropolis.”

“Uh, right, sure, okay.”

Lois heard Perry chuckle and mumble something about how nice it would be to be young again as she and Clark exited his office, her arm looped in his. The newsroom was still in full swing, with deadline approaching rapidly; however, their work for the day was all done, and she was starving. They’d been so busy that she’d forgotten to suggest they break for lunch. Clark had never complained. About anything. All day, in fact. He’d worked hard, done everything she’d asked of him right away, and had been focused and on task. She imagined he should be quite hungry too.

She’d never been one to want to work with a partner, but she had to admit to herself that she really could enjoy working with him. They just seemed to be on the same wavelength. Together, they quickly cleaned up the work they’d left in the conference room and then started up the ramp toward the elevators, Clark hanging back one step behind Lois as she led the way.

When they reached the elevator, Clark’s cell phone buzzed in his pocket, and Lois glanced at him as she pushed the ‘down’ button to take them to the parking garage. He pulled out his cell phone and swiped at a notification.

“Ah, shoot, it’s 5. I f-forgot to b-bring my medication...” His voice trailed off as the elevator doors opened, and he followed Lois inside.

“We can stop at home first,” she offered. “It’s actually not far out of the way.” A quick glance sideways told her that he was genuinely upset, and she frowned as the elevator lurched into motion. “Five minutes extra is all. Really.”

“Thank you. And sorry,” he mumbled, stuffing his cell phone back into his pocket.

The elevator doors opened on level 2 of the parking garage, and Lois looped her arm in his again as she led the way out. He was so hard on himself, she mused, her eyes drifting sideways to study him. Like his posture, his face looked stiff and unhappy, his jaw set in a tight frown. His glasses had fallen slightly down his nose, and he reached up with his free hand to straighten them. Lois looked back ahead of them, her silver Jeep coming into view just around the back of a large white truck, and she released his arm to pull her keys out of her purse.

A moment later, they both settled into the front seat, and Lois started the engine. She didn’t immediately back out of the parking spot, however. Instead, she shifted in her seat to face him. His hands were clasped tensely in his lap, and he stared silently out the window as though avoiding her gaze.

“Clark...”

Her voice seemed to startle him, and he flinched slightly, then turned to face her, blinking anxiously.

“Hmm?” Again, he reached up and adjusted his glasses.

“Do you...do you think I’m upset because we have to stop at home first? Because I’m not. It’s really not a big deal. And I don’t want you to be worried or think that I’m angry or anything.” She reached out and placed her hand over his while she spoke, and she felt him trembling. “In fact, right now, I’m pretty much the opposite of upset. I’m so impressed by what you were able to get done today, Clark. And it’s just day one. You’re an amazing writer, and you seem to have this innate ability to consolidate information easily and quickly. I’m excited for this summer, Clark. I think we’re going to get a lot done together.”

He just lowered his eyes and stared at their hands in his lap. He didn’t respond right away. Finally, just as she was about to pull away and get started on the way home, he let out a long breath.

“Thank you, Lois. I’m sorry if I seem upset. I just — I just want — I just want —” He closed his eyes for a moment and shook his head, and she waited patiently while he gathered his thoughts. When he started talking again, his voice was calmer and deeper, as though he was working extra hard to control his words. “I just want to do my best, and I get frustrated when I forget things, like my medication.” He paused for another moment, letting his eyes drift up to meet hers. “My mom was really worried about letting me come here by myself, and I wanted to prove to her and to myself that I could do this — you know, that I could be a responsible adult. And it’s only day one, and I’m already forgetting something very important. I-I know you’re not upset with me, but I’m upset with myself.”

She squeezed his hands lightly and gave him a half smile.

“Clark, even those of us who have been at this as adults for much, much longer than you forget things,” Lois told him softly. He blinked and lowered his eyes again. “We even sometimes forget really important things. Like just last week, I forgot to pay my rent on the first of the month. I’ve never been late with my rent before, but I’d been working on a big story the day before, and it just completely slipped my mind.” Clark removed his glasses

for a minute and rubbed his eyes, and Lois saw for the first time that day how tired he looked. She continued. "It's completely normal, especially when you've had such an eventful day like today."

Despite the truth in her words, she could see he was unconvinced. He still frowned, and he shook his head slowly as he replaced his glasses. Before he could object, she cleared her throat and started again.

"And you're actually light-years ahead of most people still, even though you've only been at this adult thing for not even five months," she declared. He raised his eyebrows at her. "Oh, you don't believe me, huh? Well, tell me this. You already have a plan so this doesn't happen again, don't you?"

He actually looked embarrassed; his cheeks turned red, and he nodded self-consciously.

"I was going to ask you if I can put my extra bottle of pills in your purse tonight so I won't forget tomorrow. And then I'll leave them in a drawer in my desk. I mean, uh, you said I'm getting the desk next to yours tomorrow, right?"

She nodded, grinning at him.

"See, you're doing just fine, Clark. You made a little mistake earlier, and now you're already taking steps to be sure it doesn't happen again," Lois explained, shifting her Jeep into reverse and starting to back out of the small parking space. "Everyone makes mistakes, but it's how you respond to those mistakes that defines you. And you're acting much more mature than many other adults I know, trust me."

"You mean that?"

"Definitely. Now let's go get some food. I'm starving."

"No, Mom... J-just t-twenty minutes late, Mom. It's fine and —"

Clark moved down the hallway toward his bedroom, mumbling into his phone, and Lois finished pouring herself a glass of wine and Clark a cup of tea. She moved both drinks to the coffee table and settled herself on the couch to wait for him. A few minutes later, he reappeared, shaking his head as he stuffed his phone into his pocket.

"I had to convince her that she doesn't need to visit next week to check on me," he grumbled, taking his seat next to her on the couch.

Lois chuckled and set her wine glass down.

"She just loves you a lot and misses you," she observed, and she patted him on the back gently and then reached under the coffee table and pulled out a colorful box. "Okay, after last night, I need a rematch. You're not going to beat me at Scrabble twice in a row, Mr. Kent."

She glanced sideways at him and grinned as he laughed, some of his tension from earlier fading.

"And if I do?"

He cocked an eyebrow at her, a silly grin spreading across his face, and Lois momentarily lost herself staring at him, unable to think of a witty comeback. All she wanted to do in that moment was kiss him. He looked adorable and goofy and handsome and kind and completely kissable...

No, stop it, Lane.

"If you do — which you won't — then I guess I'll have to..."

Kiss you. Or maybe that should be if I win, you kiss me. God, Lois, get a hold of yourself.

She felt her cheeks turn red, and she looked away, pretending to think harder. "Oh, I got it! Loser does the dishes for a week."

She nodded and twisted back toward him as he grimaced in response.

"Okay, you're on," he accepted, offering her his hand to shake.

She giggled and dramatically shook his hand, then opened up the Scrabble box to get the game set up. He helped her, taking out the board and unfolding it while she placed a tile holder in front of each of them and shook up the bag of tiles. He'd surprised them both by being extremely good at Scrabble, besting her by nearly fifty points the previous evening. Granted, he'd gotten fairly lucky with his tiles and managed multiple Bingos during the game. But she'd beat him tonight. No one was that lucky twice in a row.

They each chose a tile to see who would go first; his selection of a C, while she chose an R, should have been her first indication that she'd be gearing up for a long week of dishwashing. Clark smiled, cleared his throat, and settled back into the couch while he studied his tiles. She lifted her wine glass to her lips again and glanced sideways at him. He adjusted his glasses on his nose, his brow furrowed in concentration.

Gosh, he's even adorable when he's thinking. She pursed her lips and shifted her gaze back to her own tiles. A moment later, he coughed.

"Uh, well, Ms. Lane, I'll give you one chance to back out of our agreement before the game officially starts," he teased. She peered at him over her wine glass. His crooked smile and twinkling eyes made her heart skip a beat.

"Not a chance, Farmboy. Do your worst."

She crossed her arms over her chest mockingly and then sat back stunned as he nodded and picked up all of his tiles to place on the board, spelling out the word OCTAGON. He looked quite pleased with himself, and he reached casually over to the notebook they were using as a scorecard.

“That’s thirteen times two plus fifty. Seventy-six points.”

She shook her head in disbelief. Right off the bat, just like the day before. She was going to be washing dishes all week.

“You mean business. Okay. Okay. Here we go then.”

One hour and two glasses of wine later, Lois slumped back into the couch cushion laughing as Clark placed his final tiles on the board, forming the word GRAY. Boy, was he proud of himself. And he should be. He’d beaten her again, though this time only by twenty-three points.

“You know, I don’t know that anyone has ever beaten me twice in a row, Clark,” she admitted.

She leaned forward to the coffee table and set down her wine glass. He didn’t respond, except to flash her another of his dazzling smiles. God, she loved that smile. It was genuine, full, real. A memory flickered of the first time she’d seen him outside of that warehouse in the freezing cold; he’d been sickly, ill, and barely conscious. She gazed at him in awe as he began putting all of the tiles back in the bag.

He’s come so far in such a short time.

“It’s amazing,” she whispered, not meaning to.

“Hmm? What’s amazing? That I beat you — again?” He smirked at her teasingly, and she pretended to punch him in the arm before helping him put the final few tiles into the bag.

“No, not that. It’s nothing. I was just thinking.”

She felt his gaze on her, but she didn’t say any more. He didn’t need to know. She placed the top on the Scrabble box and glanced quickly at the clock on the wall. Only 9:30 p.m., but she was exhausted. She remembered how tired he’d looked earlier on their way out of the office, and she shifted her gaze back to him. He’d removed his glasses for a moment and was cleaning the lenses using his shirt. He squinted at them as though trying to check whether they were clean and then replaced them on his face.

“Is it bad? Your vision, I mean,” she asked quietly. Seeing his confused expression, she added, “When I visited Smallville, you only wore glasses when you were reading, but now you’re wearing them all the time. Has your vision gotten worse?”

“Oh.”

He looked down at his hands for a moment, and she had the distinct impression that he was embarrassed about having to wear glasses. He cleared his throat nervously.

“Well, uh, I guess, yeah,” he answered noncommittally. His lips twisted into a frown. “Mom said that — that I had perfect vision when I was a kid, and...and I guess I didn’t even realize how bad it was until she took me to see the eye doctor. We were hoping m-my headaches were related to my poor eyesight, but — but that — that the glasses...”

He shook his head and started again. “But that the glasses would help.”

“And do they?” Lois turned toward him and pulled both of her legs up onto the couch, sitting cross-legged. He grimaced.

“A little, but...no, not really,” he confessed, raking his free hand through his hair. “They — the glasses — they help m-my eyesight for sure; everything is blurry otherwise. But the headaches still come. Sometimes randomly.”

Lois hesitated a second, watching him. He shared his medical information with her willingly, but he seemed slightly uncomfortable about it, as shown by both his deteriorating speech patterns and his mannerisms. He shifted on the couch a bit, clenched his jaw, and crossed his arms over his chest. But then he looked up at her and held her gaze.

“You want to know a-about the, uh, the pills, don’t you?” He gave her a weak smile and then dropped his eyes to his hands.

“I’m curious,” she admitted. However, she quickly added, “But only if you want to share.”

He nodded almost imperceptibly, and then after another moment, he reached into his pocket and pulled out the small orange bottle. He turned the bottle around in his hands to read the label and then handed it to her.

“I can’t pronounce it. Pro — propran — something.”

She eyed the bottle in her hand, reading the label as he had. Propranolol. She was familiar with the drug. It was a beta blocker commonly prescribed to manage heart problems and anxiety. Her mother had been on it for a while several years back when she’d had high blood pressure due to stress.

“It’s supposed to help with my migraines. I get them every night at about the same time. At, uh, 10 p.m.”

Her eyes shot up and met his, but he immediately looked down with a sort of knowing frown, confirming her suspicion; 10 p.m., she remembered, was when he had been dosed with that drug every night.

“They also think there might be something wrong w-with my — with my heart. It, uh, starts with an A... Arrhy — arrhyth... I don’t remember. My heartbeat is not steady, I guess. Sometimes it’s too fast, sometimes it’s too slow,” he continued. “The pills could help with that too, they said.”

Lois nodded as she handed the bottle back to him. He took it and stuffed it back in his pocket. Then he closed his eyes for a moment, and she wondered if he regretted sharing too much. She moved closer to him on the couch and tentatively reached out to wrap her arm around his shoulders.

“Thank you for sharing that with me,” she said quietly, embracing him in a gentle hug. She felt the tension in him, and his breathing seemed to quicken slightly as she held him. Finally, he leaned into her a bit, his head coming to rest on her shoulder. She wanted to ask him a bunch of questions, but she knew now was not the time; if she pressed him any further, she’d likely make him even more anxious, which she definitely didn’t want. So instead, she held him, allowing her hand to rub his back soothingly.

He slowly relaxed into her, and his breathing stabilized as the tension left his shoulders. After another moment, he sat up and moved away from her slightly.

“A-another big day t-tomorrow, so I should — I should probably get to bed,” he mumbled, and he stood and took his mug to the kitchen.

Lois watched him, but didn’t move from her spot on the couch. She wasn’t ready to go to bed quite yet herself.

“Sleep well, Clark. I’ll see you in the morning then,” she told him, her voice low.

He started toward the hallway, but paused and glanced back at her with a sort of silly half-smile.

“And tomorrow night, when I win three times in a row, you can do my laundry for a week too, right?”

Her jaw dropped, and she broke into a fit of laughter as she grabbed the nearest thing — a couch pillow — and tossed it at him. He ducked as it launched over his head, landing harmlessly in the middle of the hallway. And then he turned back toward her and smiled again.

“Goodnight, Lois.”

“Goodnight, Clark.”

Clark stared at the ceiling again. 9:55 p.m. Like clockwork, the familiar pain began to pulse behind his eyes. But his mind was elsewhere tonight, and he blinked as he turned onto his side.

He’d had an incredible day. The best day he could remember, actually.

His first day working with Lois at the Daily Planet.

A small taste of what being a journalist — and a normal adult male with friends and a job — might be like.

Yes, there’d been a couple hiccups, he thought as he reached up and rubbed his eyes wearily. He’d been terribly nervous in the morning, and he hadn’t missed the fact that Lois moved them into the conference room to work to allow him time to get used to the busy environment of the newsroom. And then he’d stumbled a bit with his words when he’d had to ask Jimmy Olsen for help with downloading a file from Lois’s email. And of course, forgetting his medication; he’d been so angry with himself for that. Lois had assured him it was not a big deal, but he vowed to not make the same mistake twice.

And despite these few glitches, the rest of the day had been...fun, exciting, new. He’d thoroughly enjoyed working with Lois. Just being around her made him feel good. And he’d loved writing up the short article on the asteroid. His impulsive decision to write the story when Lois had texted him to tell him she’d be back late had really paid off.

He smiled to himself, even as the pain in his head intensified and nausea began to set in. Closing his eyes and taking slow, measured breaths, he recalled Lois’s surprise when he’d presented her with the article. The smile on her face as she’d read through the article was enough to make his day. No, his month. And Mr. White had even agreed with leaving his name next to hers in the byline.

His mom was going to be so proud.

The pain shifted to his chest, which was disconcerting but not unusual for him, and his heart began to race. The panic set in then, just like it always did, and the room swayed around him, little spots of light flickering in his vision. Not a good sign, he knew. The funny vision spots usually meant... He groaned out loud and shook his head as a distant memory echoed, pulling him in suddenly.

His small preteen body lay strapped onto the cold steel platform in the middle of the experimentation room; three men in white lab coats studied his naked form, poking and prodding him and chatting amongst themselves while he shivered with fear and cold. He didn’t dare move, speak, or cry; the large purple bruise on his chest reminded him what would happen if he disobeyed them again. It still hurt to breathe. So instead, he closed his eyes and imagined he was somewhere else. Outside a familiar yellow and white farmhouse. The bright sunlight shining down on him and making all the flowers bloom in beautiful colors around him. A warm breeze ruffling his hair. The smell of ripe red apples from the orchard, ready to be picked. And a bright blue sky. He loved blue; it really was his favorite. The sharp pain of a needle in his arm forced his eyes back open, and one of the men stood over him now, scowling as he injected the glowing green liquid directly into Clark’s veins. He couldn’t help it; he screamed in agony and writhed against the straps holding him down. He quickly weakened as the drug spread, but the pain only intensified. Ten million tiny daggers piercing through him. He couldn’t breathe, and he couldn’t move. His eyes closed as darkness overtook him.

With a start, Clark sat up in bed, beads of sweat dripping down his forehead and into his eyes. Hastily, he wiped the moisture away, swung his legs off the side of the bed, and stood. Nausea crept back up on him, but he ignored it as he began pacing the room.

He hated that memory. They hadn’t often injected the drug directly into his veins like that, but when they did, the

pain was so intense he knew he'd rather die than go through it again. He felt his fists clenching and unclenching almost rhythmically with his pacing, and he forced himself to stop and sit back down on the bed. He'd wanted to die that night. When he'd woken up after blacking out, the pain had been unbearable. And they'd also...

He buried his head in his hands, trembling.

They'd also performed some sort of surgery on him that night. He had no idea what they'd done to him, but he still had the four-inch-long scar down the center of his abdomen to show for it. It had been the first time they'd done anything like that. No anesthesia, no pain medication.

"Alien scum. I hope you feel this pain, because there's more to come."

The voice penetrated his thoughts and made him sick. For a moment, he worried he might vomit, but the feeling passed fairly quickly, and he resorted once again to his familiar breathing exercise to both distract him and calm him down. Lying on his side on the bed, he pulled the comforter back up to his chin and began silently reciting, *"One, two, three. Four, five, six. One, two, three. Four, five, six,"* as he breathed in and out regularly.

Several minutes later, his body relaxed; his heart stopped pounding in his chest, and the pain receded back to the single spot between his eyes, where a normal headache should be.

And he was again exhausted.

A gentle knock at his door forced his eyes back open.

"Clark? I heard some noise, and I just wanted to check that you're okay."

Lois's kind, soft voice brought a thin smile to his lips, and he slowly stood, flicked on the light switch, and opened the door. She shifted a bit uncomfortably a couple feet back, her arms crossed over her chest. Her dark hair was pulled back in a messy ponytail, and she wore an obviously well-used pair of blue plaid pajamas. As their eyes met, Clark let out the breath he'd been holding. Concern filled her gaze. Concern for him. He dropped his eyes to the ground and mimicked her stance, crossing his arms over his chest loosely.

"Sorry to wake you, Lois. I-I'm fine. It was just, um, a bad dream, I guess," he told her. Inwardly, he argued with himself; it was only a half-lie, really. But his jaw tightened.

"Okay. Um..." Her voice trailed off as she hesitated, stepping closer to him. A gentle hand lifted up to rest on his shoulder, and his eyes closed involuntarily as warmth spread through his body. "Do you want to talk about it?" she ventured cautiously.

He knew she just wanted to help, but he shook his head almost immediately. She didn't need to know about any of that — any of what he'd been through. And she definitely

didn't need to know that the past still haunted him, every night, like clockwork.

"No, no, I-I can't. It-it's fine, really. I'll be f-fine," he stuttered, shoving his hands into the pockets of his sweatpants. "Thank you — thank you though, Lois. I appreciate your — " He stopped abruptly as his brain chose that moment to shut off. He shook his head and swallowed hard. "I appreciate your — " He didn't know. What was he going to say? What were they even talking about? Frustrated, he turned away from her for a minute and ran a hand angrily through his hair. He hadn't had a problem like this in a while now. This forgetting what he was saying thing. "Sorry," he mumbled.

Two small hands touched his shoulders, and he twisted around toward her as she enveloped him in a quiet embrace. He leaned into her as his arms wrapped around her. His eyes closed, and his chest rose and fell rhythmically as he took deep breaths.

"No need to apologize, Clark. I just wanted to check on you," she soothed. After another moment, she added, "And I think you needed this hug. I know I did. So now, maybe we can both get back to sleep."

"Thank you," he managed, his breath escaping as a shuddering sigh. "Thank you for checking on me."

She pulled back and looked at him with a half-smile.

"That's what friends are for, Clark." And then she patted him lightly on the chest. "Now go get back to sleep. Perry is going to expect more from you tomorrow, and I'm sure you'll prove to him that you can handle anything he throws at you. But it will definitely be easier if we're both firing on all cylinders, if you know what I mean!"

He didn't know; he wasn't familiar with that expression. But he smiled and nodded anyways.

She grinned back at him and then stepped away and gave him a little wave before heading off down the hallway and back toward her bedroom. He watched her until she disappeared behind the door, and he then also retreated into his room, closing the door behind him and shutting off the light.

As he crawled back under the warm covers, he scolded himself again. A bad dream. No, it wasn't a bad dream. He'd lied to her. That wasn't okay. He could have simply said he would be fine, or that he didn't want to talk about it, or even the full truth — that along with his nightly migraines, which she already knew about, he also sometimes had panic attacks or flashbacks. He didn't have to give her more detail, but he definitely shouldn't have lied.

He closed his eyes, and as he drifted off to sleep, he vowed to tell her the truth in the morning.

Day two. He was all set. He straightened his tie and regarded himself in the mirror. Today was going to be even better than yesterday, he could feel it.

He exited the bathroom and moved toward the kitchen, where he heard Lois muttering under her breath and smelled the distinct fragrance of...burnt toast. He grimaced as he rounded the corner and saw her tossing the blackened, inedible food unceremoniously into the trash can, cursing as she did. He managed to suppress a laugh, but his shoe scuffed the floor as he stopped a few feet away from her, and she spun around, her face bright red with embarrassment.

“Clark! Oh, I just, well — so, what do you think about grabbing croissants from the bakery down the street? It’s a beautiful morning, so we can walk to work. Exercise is good, right? And then, I can show you where everything is — the market, and the convenience store, and... Just what do you think you are staring at, mister?”

He shook his head and tore his gaze away from hers. No longer able to hold back, he began laughing.

“You babble sometimes, you know?” he explained after his laughter died down. In a more serious tone, he added, “Croissants and walking to work sound great, Lois.”

He was relieved when she smiled back at him, and she grabbed her purse and led the way out of the building, Clark hurrying after her.

He quickly found himself staring in awe at all the sights as they walked briskly down the sidewalk toward downtown. Pigeons searching for crumbs next to a park bench across the street. A woman walking her tiny brown dog. A child sitting on a step outside another apartment building, tossing a coin into the air. And thousands of feet above them, an airplane soaring silently eastward, a faint white contrail lagging behind it. As they rounded the corner, Lois pointed ahead to a shop with a bright red sign out front. “JOE’S BAKERY” was written in block letters, followed by a listing of daily specials.

“Joe makes the best chocolate croissants in Metropolis,” Lois asserted. She grasped his hand and pulled him toward the bakery. “You’re gonna love it. Well, I mean, that is, if you wanted a chocolate croissant.” She stopped suddenly and turned to him. “You can get whatever you want, of course. They have muffins and donuts and regular croissants. They also have strawberry turnovers. Those are to die for. And coffee — we can get coffee here, too... What now?!”

He couldn’t help the grin that had grown on his face as he listened to her. But he just shook his head and lowered his eyes.

“Chocolate croissants are great, Lois. I’ll try one,” he said, and he raised his eyes to hers again, still smiling. *I probably look like a smiling fool*, he reprimanded. But try

as he might, he couldn’t tone down his grin. Especially when Lois giggled and smiled back at him.

“I knew you’d see it my way, Kent,” she countered. “Come on.”

He followed her into the bakery, and she ordered for them — two chocolate croissants and two coffees, one plain and the other with lots of milk and sugar. Several minutes later, food and drink in hand, they exited the building and started back on their way down the sidewalk.

As he bit into the sweet pastry, he glanced at his companion, and a sense of contentment washed over him. He smiled and shifted his gaze back ahead of them. Then, he remembered his resolution the night before; he had intended to tell her something closer to the truth.

His smile quickly faded.

“What’s up, partner?” Lois asked lightheartedly. She seemed to be able to sense when his mood changed, he realized, and he forced a smile back on his face as he shook his head.

“Nothing really. I just needed to — um — I needed to tell you something, and I-I d-don’t... It’s not easy to say.”

He took another bite of his croissant as they stopped at a crosswalk and waited for the light to change. The woman next to him placed a gentle hand on his arm.

“Is this about last night?”

He nodded, and then, realizing she might not have seen him, he added, “Yes. I-I didn’t exactly, um — that is, I meant to —”

The light changed, interrupting him mid-sentence, and Lois’s hand dropped off his arm as they moved in sync with the other pedestrians across the busy street. Once they stepped back up onto the sidewalk on the other side, he swallowed the last bite of his breakfast, washed it down with a sip of coffee, and cleared his throat.

She will understand. She’s always been nothing but understanding, even that first day, he told himself sharply.

Ahead of them, the Daily Planet’s landmark globe glinted in the morning sunlight, and he couldn’t help but smile as he raised his eyes.

“It’s still pretty incredible, isn’t it?” Lois commented, her arm looping through his as they continued down the street.

“It really is. I can’t believe how lucky I am to be here,” he agreed. Then he slowed slightly, and she copied him. Staring down at the concrete underneath their feet, he took a deep breath. “I wasn’t entirely truthful l-last n-night, Lois,” he started. He silently willed himself to speak clearly, without stuttering. “Um, I mean, I didn’t have a bad dream. I...you know how I said I get migraines every night at 10 p.m.? Well, sometimes I also have these sort of m-mini, um, mini p-p-panic attacks, and last night, it was kinda bad.”

There, that wasn't so hard.

Except it was.

His insides felt like they were twisted in knots, and a familiar pain began to grow at the base of his skull. He pulled his arm out of hers and reached up to adjust his glasses as a shuddering breath escaped him.

Lois nudged him a bit toward an empty bench under an elm tree along the edge of the sidewalk, and he followed her to sit. Then, she angled toward him, and he risked a glance up at her. The same kind, concerned eyes he'd always known her to have stared back at him, and a soft smile graced her lips. He quickly lowered his eyes back to his trembling hands and took a small sip of his coffee to try to steady himself.

Next to him, Lois shifted slightly, sipped her own coffee, and then swallowed.

"Clark, I can't even begin to understand everything you've been through," she started, her voice quiet and soothing. He allowed the comforting calmness of her tone to embrace him as she continued. "I only know what your mother told me about the day you were taken, bits and pieces from what the security guards told the police, and then the condition you were in when we found you. I'm entitled to nothing more, unless you want to tell me or need someone to talk to, in which case, I'm a really good listener."

He briefly glanced up at her, and, seeing her weak smile, he nodded slightly, then dropped his eyes again.

"I do appreciate your honesty. I don't think I've ever met someone as honest as you, actually. But I want you to know that it is one hundred percent okay for you to only share what you want to, when you want to, if you want to. You do not owe me or anyone else anything more than that."

He nodded again, and her arm moved to wrap around his shoulders in a now-familiar embrace. He allowed himself to lean into her; her strength gave him strength.

"Now, given that..." She paused, took a sip of her coffee, and pulled away from him slightly. "I don't know the first thing about panic attacks or um, post-traumatic stress, or how to deal with it. But talking about it might help. So, if you ever feel like you are ready to or need to or want to, like I said, I'm a really good listener."

Shaking. Now he was shaking, badly. He gripped his coffee with both hands, barely managing to keep from dropping the cup.

She wouldn't push him. But she was there if she needed him. Could she be any more understanding? He didn't think so.

"Thank you, Lois," he murmured, tucking his chin down into his chest. He felt the world closing in around him — all the sounds of the city seemed to blink louder for

a second, all the colors pulsed with energy, and the air felt momentarily electrified. Then everything settled back to normal, and even his headache faded. And he realized she was hugging him again. He smiled into her shoulder and returned the embrace.

"We should get to work. Perry hates when I'm late for the staff meeting, and you'll get to sit in on it today. That should be exciting! And then I have a few things I think we should get working on. Have you ever heard of Intergang?"

Lois stood abruptly, and Clark copied her, shaking his head in response to her question.

"Well, then, you've got some reading to do to catch up," she said, smiling and looping her arm back through his. "Come on, let's go. I have all my research compiled already. And yesterday, my source gave me a new lead. I think I might finally have a break in a story I've been working on for a while now."

Clark smiled again as he walked briskly beside her, her enthusiasm energizing him. He remembered his excitement earlier and channeled that feeling as they entered the lobby and headed toward the elevator. He knew he definitely loved Smallville; it would always be special to him. But this building, this city, it already felt like he was finally home. Like some force was telling him he was destined to be here.

He reached ahead of Lois and pressed the 'up' button on the elevator.

Day two. He was ready for whatever would come. He would tackle it — he and Lois together. Maybe he'd even get his name on another byline.

They stepped onto the elevator together, and Clark glanced at the woman next to him. She looked at him, almost shyly, he thought, and smiled.

And he remembered the first day he'd met her, when seeing her smile and trying to mimic it had seemed so foreign. Now, he couldn't keep the silly grin off his face. She nudged him playfully in the side and sipped her coffee as the doors dinged open on the newsroom floor.

"Let's go, Kent. See if you can keep up."

He chuckled and hurried off the elevator after her.

Chapter 9

Broken. Again. The third time this week, in fact. Lois frowned as she stared at the razor blade, which had literally snapped in two. Was Gillette having a manufacturing issue? Maybe they needed a different brand. She tossed the razor into the trash can and looked up at Clark, who grimaced as he rubbed his chin, now covered in a thin layer of bristly stubble. While she kind of liked the rugged look, he seemed completely uncomfortable with it. She sighed.

“I guess you should try a different brand, maybe? I’m not sure. I’ve never had anything like this happen before,” she conceded.

Clark eyed the clock on the wall anxiously. “I’ll make us late if I run to the store, won’t I?”

“Maybe, but that’s okay,” she said. She quickly poured herself a cup of coffee and moved to the table to sit. Her fingers tapped on the newspaper in front of her as a smile grew on her face. “I think we earned it. To be a few minutes late, that is.”

The morning’s edition of the *Daily Planet* boasted their first shared front-page byline, “Metropolis Mayor Resigns Following Campaign Scandal,” by Lois Lane and Clark Kent. And he’d done a lot of the legwork for this story, including his first solo interviews. She shook her head as she stared at the headline again. How had he managed to come so far in only a month? Talent and hard work, for sure, but to go from no experience and no schooling past part of fourth grade to having a byline on the front page of the best newspaper in the country... It seemed unreal. Perry had admitted to her yesterday that he was ready to offer Clark a permanent position, and Lois agreed with him. She picked at her breakfast — toast with strawberry jam — and began browsing the other stories on the front page.

“If you’re sure?” Clark asked tentatively. He inched toward the front door, keeping an eye on her. “I’ll only be a few minutes; they should have razors at the convenience store down the street, right?”

“Yeah, they should.”

“Great, okay, I’ll be back as quickly as I can,” he said, and he then hurried out the door, leaving Lois by herself.

She took another small bite of her toast and flipped through the rest of the morning paper. Not much caught her attention, however. Not that it had been a slow news day; no, yesterday had been quite eventful. But Lois was much more interested in planning out their follow-up story on the Mayor’s illegal activities and on who would be stepping in as acting Mayor until elections later in the year. Nothing else quite seemed as important.

She shoved the final piece of her toast into her mouth, stood, and moved to the sink. Her gaze landed on the broken razor in the trash can, and she grimaced again as she bent over and picked up the broken blade. Turning it over several times, she shook her head. How was it possible? It’s like he tried to cut steel with the blade, and it just snapped right in half. *Weird*. She tossed it back into the trash and turned on the water to wash her hands.

Outside, sirens wailed in the distance, and a distinct boom suddenly echoed nearby, rattling the windows. Lois jumped back, shut off the water, and hurried over to the window overlooking the street. Her eyes widened at the

sight. Flames engulfed much of the apartment building across the street, thick black smoke billowing up into the sky.

“Oh God —”

Another explosion rocked the building, fire blasting out of a fifth-story window. A small crowd had gathered on the street, and residents flocked out of the building’s entrance as the first fire truck drove up to the scene.

Lois grabbed her phone, notepad, and pen and hurried outside. The heat from the fire bombarded her as soon as she stepped out of her building, and she immediately scanned the area to assess the situation. Across the street, two men held the doors open to the apartment building as the final residents exited. They congregated in a large group on the sidewalk on her side of the street, directed by several firefighters. Many residents were still wearing pajamas, and parents carried crying children, attempting to soothe them as the fire grew. A young blonde woman wearing pink pajamas and fuzzy green slippers weaved through the crowd, mumbling something as tears streamed from her eyes. At the same time, a barricade was being erected by a police officer who’d just arrived at the scene. She waved as she recognized a familiar figure running down the sidewalk toward her, a small white plastic bag in his hand.

“Clark!”

She jogged down the steps in front of her building just as he halted next to her, his eyes trained on the burning building. He squinted and blinked several times, then looked at her frantically, his dark eyes wide with fear. His body shifted towards the apartment, and Lois grabbed his arm. Tension rippled through him, and she almost recoiled as he took another step forward.

“Clark, what is it? Are you okay?” she blurted out, tightening her hand on his arm.

“Can’t you hear him, Lois? Why is no one helping?” His eyes darted wildly to her and then back to the building. “He needs help. Why aren’t the firefighters going in? The floor is going to —”

“Clark, who? What are you talking about?”

“The boy, Lois. He — he’s g-going to die if —”

A huge puff of smoke rose out of another fifth-floor window, and Clark dropped the bag in his hand and dashed forward as though he could no longer wait for the firefighters to do their job. Lois’s stomach lurched. What was he doing?

“Clark, no, don’t!” She tried to yell, but her vocal cords seemed to be paralyzed with fear, and her voice came out as more of a weak squeak than a shout. Her breathing quickened as she watched him sprint across the street, effortlessly hopping over debris and dodging emergency personnel. His skillful and agile maneuvering would

probably have been impressive if she wasn't so completely terrified for his safety. "No, no, no, Clark!"

She tried to follow him, but a police officer moved in front of her, blocking her way. Panicked, she motioned toward the building, mumbling, "He's going in. He doesn't know what he's doing. Stop him, please!" But the officer didn't seem to hear her, and she stood stunned as Clark took the steps in front of the apartment complex two at a time and disappeared into the burning building.

A tear ran down her cheek, and she hastily reached up to wipe it away. *Stupid, Clark, that was stupid. Please be okay. Please be okay.* She stared at the building's entrance, her hands clasped together in front of her in an attempt to get them to stop shaking. *Please be okay. Please be okay.*

The woman in the pink pajamas suddenly screamed and tried to rush toward the building, but two large men stopped her, holding her arms as she cried out, "Luka! My baby! He's still in there. Please, someone, help him! Please!"

The building again shook, fire and more black smoke bursting through windows on the fourth floor now. Glass flew as far as Lois's feet, and she jumped back involuntarily. The firefighters and policemen on the scene began pushing the crowd back more as they brought out their fire hoses. Lois's view of the front entrance was suddenly blocked as two police officers stepped up to her and forced her and the others around her back several steps, and Lois heard a collective gasp from the rest of the crowd.

"Luka!"

The woman in the pink pajamas shouted and rushed forward toward the building, and Lois reached up on her tiptoes to get a better view. She choked back a sob as her eyes fell on Clark, his once-white dress shirt now blackened with soot, torn, and even burned away in places. His hair was tousled and full of dull, dusty debris, and his glasses, now sporting a broken left lens, sat crookedly on his nose. Soot covered his face and arms.

And he cradled a small child wrapped in a blue striped quilt.

The young boy, who couldn't have been more than five years old, clung tightly to Clark, tears streaming down his face. He turned his head as he heard his mother's voice, and his deep blue eyes widened as his mother approached.

"Luka. Oh my God, thank you, thank you, thank you," the woman wept. Clark smiled tightly and said something too quietly for Lois to hear, and the woman nodded, wiped the tears from her face, and reached out to take her son. "Thank you so much. Thank you."

With a quick nod, Clark turned back to the burning building for a second, his head cocked slightly to the right. A moment later, he seemed to sigh and spun back around,

hastily scanning the crowd for Lois. He found her fairly easily and then hurried over toward her. She held up the yellow police tape for him as he stepped up onto the sidewalk.

"God, Clark, I'm so glad you're okay," she breathed, and she released the police tape and looped both arms up around his neck, pulling him into a tight embrace. He didn't reciprocate the hug, but she didn't really care. He was alive. "What were you thinking?"

With a start, she realized that she was actually shaking; her fingers tingled, and her knees wobbled with fear. She closed her eyes and held him tighter for another moment, only vaguely aware of the lingering crowd and chaos around them. When she relaxed her grip on him, he cleared his throat and backed away a step, an uncomfortable frown on his lips. He raised his eyes to look past her, back toward the burning building for another moment, and then he took a deep breath.

"C-can we, uh — I n-need to get — to get — to get cleaned up, and I — I — where's my — my bag? I must've dropped it here s-somewhere," he stammered. His eyes shifted uneasily from Lois to the sidewalk around them, and she followed his gaze until she saw the small white bag he'd been carrying with him when he returned from the convenience store. She gently took his hand and guided him with her over toward the steps to her building, and she stooped and grabbed the bag on their way.

"Come on, let's get you inside."

She didn't want to let his hand go. Ever. And so she held him firmly as they walked up the stairs, down the hallway, and onto the elevator. Rank smells of chemicals, fire, and burnt rubber wafted off him, and she found herself studying him as the elevator lurched into motion. His hands and face and the parts of his back and chest that were visible underneath his partially burned shirt showed no evidence of redness or blistering, which might be expected after exposure to intense heat. *How? How is this possible, Clark?*

She led him into the apartment and closed the door behind them. In a daze, Clark took a few more steps and then stopped, his eyes staring at the floor. Lois moved back to his side and gently touched his shoulder; he flinched and turned his head to look at her. The cracked lens of his glasses obscured her view, but he didn't seem to notice it.

"The — the ceiling — the ceiling, it fell on me, Lois."

His words made no sense to her, and he looked as shaken as she felt. She stepped closer to him and wrapped her arms around his waist.

"What do you mean, Clark?" she asked softly. To her relief, he leaned into her and hugged her back, lowering his head to her shoulder. His glasses slid off his nose and

clattered to the floor, but he didn't react. Instead, he sighed shakily and cleared his throat.

"On the fourth floor," he began, his voice wavering. "The boy was stuck in his bedroom. Apartment 405. I picked him up and — and I st-started b-back out — back out to the hallway. But there was another explosion, and the ceiling, it fell on top of me. I-I protected the boy. I shielded him from the fire and the debris and — but — but it fell on me. I — How am I alive, Lois? How am I fine? What is going on?" He became progressively more agitated as he spoke, and Lois rubbed his back lightly as he continued. "And how did I hear him in the first place? I can hear the people talking outside right now if I...I c-can hear — I can hear things I shouldn't be able to. And I can — I can see — I don't need the glasses anymore. I can see —" He paused, pushing himself away from Lois and shaking his head. Trembling, he closed his eyes and reached up to rub the bridge of his nose. "I can't even explain it. Lois, something is happening to me."

She closed the distance between them again and took his hand in hers.

"Clark, I'm not really sure, um... How about you take a quick shower and get cleaned up and changed, and then we'll sit down and talk and see if we can figure out what is going on? How does that sound?"

He just nodded feebly in response and started to turn away. But she stopped him, squeezing his hand in hers.

"Hold on a sec, wait." She stepped in front of him again, and her hands carefully reached out to his chest. Shaking, she allowed her fingers to trace along a large hole in the shirt. The edges were blackened and jagged, as though the shirt had been burned away, but underneath, his skin was smooth and undamaged. "You're not hurting anywhere? You're not injured at all?"

"No, not at all," he confirmed, his voice low. "I...I didn't feel a thing. The heat of the fire didn't feel hot. The support beam that landed on me split in two. The fire, it — it didn't hurt. I didn't feel anything."

"I see."

Lois slowly lowered her hands, and Clark seemed to nod as his shoulders hunched even more. He stepped around her and toward the hallway, but paused after only a couple feet. Quietly, he asked, "What am I, Lois?" And then he spun back around toward her, his eyes filled with fear. "Wh-what if they were right? What if — what if I'm an alien?"

Orange. Orange was fire. Orange and yellow and even some blue, flickering menacingly, angrily, destructively.

He closed his eyes as he shut off the water and grabbed a towel. Images from only a few minutes ago continued to bombard him — the young boy's panic-stricken face,

clutching his blanket to his chest; the fire licking at the doorway that he knew he had to exit back through; the floor boards about to give way beneath his feet; and the mishmash of colors collapsing on top of him as the ceiling fell in, covering him in fire, wood, and burning debris.

God, what was he?

He stepped out of the shower and dried himself off quickly. He then paused in front of the mirror and studied...himself. Based on everything he knew about anatomy, which he admitted wasn't much, he sure looked human. He was tall, but not too tall; muscular, but not body-builder huge. He seemed to have all the...parts of a human male. At least, he thought so.

A frown edged its way across his face as he eyed the short dark hairs growing on his chin, and a horrifying idea popped into his head. What if there was no problem with the razors? What if his hair just couldn't be cut? Like how his skin hadn't burned in the fire. No, he couldn't believe that. Nervously, he ran a hand through his damp hair.

None of this made sense.

Unless Trask was right.

The thought made him physically ill, and he shuddered and turned away from the mirror, closing his eyes. *Freak. Alien. Abomination.* The words echoed in his head, and he slumped against the bathroom wall, sinking down to the floor. Shaking hands covered his face, and images of the fire again assaulted his brain. The orange wall of flames had blocked the only way out, and he'd covered up the boy, ducked his head, and leapt through the doorway, prepared for the intense and overwhelming pain that should have come; but nothing had happened. He'd glanced behind him, pausing only briefly to stare at the fire again. Why had there been no pain?

He knew pain. He'd endured it every day for fifteen years. And he knew fire caused pain. He'd burned himself not more than two months ago when he'd been helping his dad grill some chicken for dinner one evening. Fat from the chicken skin had dripped down into the flames just as he'd reached out to flip the meat over, and the fire had flared up. Almost immediately, his skin had turned red and blistered; the pain had been intense and lingering. He still had the scar...

Eyes wide, he jumped back to his feet and stared at himself in the mirror again. Curious hands grazed over the skin on his abdomen and chest. The flawless, smooth skin, devoid of any scarring. Scarring that had been there only yesterday. He held his right hand up in front of his face; it too was without blemish.

His scars were gone. Overnight. Disappeared as though they had never existed. That didn't just happen, did it?

Without looking at himself again, he tugged on a set of clean clothes. Whatever was happening to him, it certainly was not normal.

He certainly was not normal. And the realization terrified him. He grabbed the doorframe and inhaled sharply. Not normal.

“No, Perry, I got it. I just need a little bit of time...” Lois’s voice, low to the point of almost being a whisper, filtered into his ears loudly, as though she stood next to him and shouted.

“Sure, uh, okay, Lois. But I want the story on my desk in time for the afternoon edition. Capiche?” And now through the phone speaker, Perry White’s voice, which should have been inaudible to anyone except Lois, rattled his eardrums.

He clapped his hands over his ears, but the action did nothing to stop the barrage that hit him. A million sounds suddenly bombarded him. Talking of the crowds of people still gathered outside. Someone tying their shoelace blocks away. A dog snoring three floors down. Tires screeching somewhere, the driver singing to a loud rap song while munching on chips. A siren. A bird call. A dog’s bark. A squirrel chewing. Lois’s footsteps. Lois’s heartbeat.

Too many sounds overwhelmed him, and he groaned and fell to the ground again, this time to his knees. His hands stayed glued to his ears, the only defense he felt he had. Now he heard things even farther away. A pilot speaking to his copilot on an airplane thousands of feet up in the air; a fisherman muttering curses at a seagull miles out to sea; a city bus careening out of control, passengers screaming; a bank alarm.

“Please stop.”

His own voice disappeared into the cacophony of all the other sounds attacking him. Then, over it all, one sound emerged stronger and louder than all the rest — Lois’s heartbeat. The steady, rhythmic da-dum. How he knew it was hers, he wasn’t sure. But he latched onto the sound and focused on it, and gradually, all the other noises dulled to a low humming. Da-dum. Da-dum.

Carefully, he opened his eyes and inched his hands away from his ears.

Da-dum. Da-dum.

“Clark? Are you okay in there?”

Everything faded back to normal. Normal. Right. The humming disappeared, and silence met him. Crisp, clear silence.

He clumsily pushed himself to his feet and opened the door.

“Um, yeah — I-I think so. I’m —”

“Good, then come on out here,” she interjected as he began shuffling toward her down the hallway. “We have the story on the fire to write up for Perry, but first I think

we need to figure this out, with you and the fire and stuff. So, um, I think we should run a few tests, you know, to see what’s going on. What do you think?”

All the air left his lungs.

Run a few tests.

Just like Trask had done.

“T-t-tests?” The terror in his voice must have been evident because Lois immediately backtracked.

“Oh, Clark, not like that. No, not tests. Just — oh, God, I’m sorry, Clark. I didn’t think before I spoke. I do that sometimes. I — Clark?”

He’d stopped moving and stood, shaking, one hand on the wall to support himself. His eyes shut tightly, and he felt her hands grip his shoulders. He shook his head as though to rid himself of the fear, but it stubbornly clung to him.

“Clark, look at me, please,” Lois begged. Her hands squeezed his shoulders gently, but he shook his head again as a chill settled in his bones.

“*What the hell do you think you’re looking at? Freak alien. Close your damn eyes. Don’t look at me.*” Pain as a fist slammed into his jaw. Shaking in fear. He wouldn’t look. No.

He stepped backward and then froze. *Don’t move. Don’t move. No crying, or else.* He held himself as still as possible, but he couldn’t stop his hands from shaking and his knees from trembling.

“Clark, you’re home. You’re safe here, Clark,” a kind voice murmured. Warmth enveloped him.

A hug. Gentle hands rubbing his back.

Da-dum. Da-dum. Her. It was her.

“Lois?” His own voice croaked with emotion, and again he heard the rhythmic da-dum of her heartbeat, so close to him.

“Yes, Clark. You’re home. You’re safe here, Clark,” she repeated softly.

His arms moved, seemingly of their own volition, to return her embrace, and he sighed into her as he buried his head in her hair. She smelled sweet — like strawberries, he decided.

“I’m sorry, Lois,” he breathed into her, holding her tighter to his chest. “I-I lost myself for a m-minute.”

“Shhh. You’re okay.” She didn’t say anything more, but her embrace continued to comfort him, anchoring him to the present.

The present. When he’d now discovered he could hear things miles away with great clarity and walk straight through fire without getting burned, and when his scars mysteriously disappeared overnight. There was more, too. He’d been fast, strong, unbreakable. He’d leapt up five or six steps at a time in the stairwell of the apartment building

on his way to the fourth floor. And his eyesight had improved substantially.

He was scared. He had to tell her all of this. She had to know. If anyone could figure him out, it was Lois Lane. She was the most brilliant person he knew. But he hesitated as his earlier words and thoughts echoed in his mind.

What if I'm an alien?

"Lois, you have to help me." His request, delivered in the most pathetic voice he'd ever heard, dripped with fear. "I'm scared."

"Shhh. You're okay, Clark," she repeated calmly. "You're okay."

"No. No, I'm not. I'm — something is wrong with me," he argued. But he didn't let her go, not yet. He couldn't. Just like that first day, during that terrifying ride in the ambulance, she was his lifeline. He clung to her as words eluded him, yet again. "Something is — I can't — I just..."

"We'll figure it out, Clark. Everything will be okay. Trust me," Lois promised. And again, he felt her hands gently soothing him, circling slowly.

He did trust her. He did. And that's why he had to continue to be honest.

"They — Trask — he did things to me. T-t-tests. Experiments. S-s-surgeries. It — it always was...it always hurt. Everything they did, it always hurt. I-I know you didn't mean...I know you didn't...but —"

"No, of course not, Clark. I'm so sorry," she interjected, her voice trembling slightly. "I didn't mean those kind of tests. Of course not."

He nodded into her and continued to hold her.

She would help him. Maybe it was all just a fluke. Just something weird that would never happen again. Just stupid, dumb luck and a little bit of his own craziness. He had to be crazy, after all; there was no other explanation. Right?

Unless he really was an alien.

And then what?

"Come on, Kent. Let's figure this thing out."

With an attempt at a smile, Lois pulled away from the embrace, took his hand in hers, and led him the rest of the way into the kitchen.

Yes, he trusted her. She would help him. And they would figure it out. All just a fluke. It had to be a fluke.

Yet as they stood there, Lois starting to talk through what had happened, he heard it again. Da-dum. Da-dum. Da-dum. Clear as a bell. And he saw the orange, yellow, and blue flames around him, licking harmlessly at his apparently impervious skin. And he felt the slight clunk of the rafters and debris falling on top of him, eliciting absolutely no pain. And he pictured himself in the mirror

again, lacking the multiple unsightly scars on his chest, abdomen, and hands that he'd had only the day before.

Not a fluke. He shuddered and returned his attention to the woman standing in front of him, talking animatedly, a gleam in her eye.

"Okay. So, where should we start?"

Chapter 10

"What if I'm an alien?"

"Clark, that's ridiculous. There has to be a reasonable explanation. Go shower and get changed, and we'll talk about it when we're both cleaned up."

That had been two hours ago.

Before they'd tested his fire-proof skin.

Before they'd seen just how good his hearing was.

Before they'd discovered that he could actually see right through objects.

And before he'd broken a fourth razor trying to shave the stubble off his chin.

Now, she sat across from him at the table as she closed her laptop. His chin rested on his hands, and he stared off somewhere at the far wall, or maybe beyond it, she supposed, looking utterly lost. He hadn't moved in nearly thirty minutes — the time that it had taken her to write up a quick story about the apartment fire, email it to Perry, and call the office to explain that they both needed a personal day. She frowned and pushed her laptop aside as she scooted her chair closer to his.

"So, um, maybe we should call your parents?" she suggested quietly, reaching her hand out to touch his arm. His eyes shifted first to the table and then to her, and he shook his head slightly.

"No, I, uh —" He coughed and cleared his throat.

"Um, not yet, I think. I-I'd like to get — to figure out what — to figure out what — to —"

Apparently frustrated with his stammering, he growled and pounded his fist down on the table. The simple gesture shouldn't have done any damage. Lois herself had done it hundreds of times. However, apparently these normal rules no longer applied to Clark Kent. The thick hardwood instantly fractured, breaking in half and collapsing in on itself. Lois jumped up and back, almost tripping over her chair, but a pair of strong arms caught her before she could fall.

"I'm so sorry, Lois, I —"

"What was that?!" Her words sounded louder and harsher than she intended, and Clark immediately recoiled, his hands dropping from her arms and disappearing as he shoved them deep in his pockets. He turned away from her, shaking visibly.

“I’m sorry,” he repeated. “I didn’t mean to — to do — to...” He paused and took a deep breath. Then, he forced the words out slowly. “I didn’t mean to do that.”

Lois stared at the remnants of the table as she crossed her arms over her chest. She’d been meaning to replace the table for quite some time, but this was not how she’d pictured getting rid of it. Her eyes drifted from the splintered wood to Clark. He’d moved several more feet away from her, and although his back was still to her, she was familiar enough with his mannerisms by now to recognize the tension in his shoulders. She suppressed a sigh.

“I know, Clark, I know. I, uh, it just startled me,” she admitted, trying to sound calm. But she was not feeling calm. Not at all. This man standing just a few feet from her, he had become her best friend in the last month. And now, almost overnight, he’d seemed to have changed — to have developed abilities unknown to the human race. Her thoughts echoed his earlier words. What if he wasn’t human?

“Maybe I should call my parents,” he mumbled. Keeping his hands in his pockets, he turned around to face her, and as their eyes met, Lois had to blink back tears. The guarded expression he’d had when she’d seen him in Smallville, one month after he’d been rescued from that warehouse, had returned, erected like an emotional barricade; he looked aloof, indifferent, distant. His lips tightened into a frown, and he lowered his gaze to the table. He spoke slowly and deliberately, carefully controlling each word. “Maybe I’m not safe to be around. Maybe I should go back to Smallville. I don’t want to hurt anyone. I don’t want to hurt you, Lois.”

“No, Clark.” The words came out of her mouth before she could think, but she stood by them. “No, you wouldn’t hurt me.”

He may not be human, neither of them really knew, but she did know who he was. He was a kind, gentle, caring man with the biggest heart of anyone she’d ever met. He loved good food and silly movies and taking late night walks to the park, especially when the sky was clear and the Moon was full and bright. He loved settling down with a good book and reading until the early hours of the morning. He loved sports and math and poetry, and he was annoyingly good at Scrabble. He wanted to travel the world someday, if he could get over his fear of flying. And, most importantly, she knew — somehow, she knew deep down — that he would never hurt her. No matter what sort of weird abilities manifested next, he would never hurt her.

She closed the distance between them and immediately wrapped her arms around his waist in a now familiar gesture of the friendship they’d built in the last month. As

she expected, his body tensed, and he tried, albeit feebly, to move away, but she held him tightly.

“I know you wouldn’t hurt me,” Lois repeated.

“I would never intentionally hurt you,” he corrected quietly, his body still stiff and his hands still shoved in his pockets. “But maybe Trask was right to keep me locked up. Maybe that drug they gave me...” His voice trailed off, and Lois felt him start shaking again.

“No, Clark. Don’t ever believe that. Please,” she begged.

Still holding him, she lifted her head until their eyes met. He didn’t look away this time. However, she sensed that he wanted to run, far away from her and anyone he cared about. He was absolutely terrified.

She reached up with one hand and touched his cheek, and then, carefully and slowly, she stretched up toward him and did something she’d wanted to do for months now. She kissed his lips softly. Maybe she shouldn’t have. Maybe he still wasn’t ready. But she wanted — no, she needed him to understand. She trusted him completely.

It was a brief kiss, barely more than a whisper of a caress. The surge of heat that spread all the way down to her toes, however, was much more than just a whisper. Her lips twisted into a weak smile as she pulled away, struggling to keep herself from deepening the kiss into something she knew he wasn’t ready for. He stared at her, his eyes wide, and then he swallowed nervously.

“Lois, I —”

“I have an idea. Just go with it, okay? Put on your shoes. We’re going on a drive.”

Forty-five minutes later, Lois pulled off the road onto a narrow dirt driveway barely wide enough to accommodate her vehicle. Branches from overgrown bushes scraped the mirrors, and the car bumped around as she navigated over and around potholes and sudden dips in the unpaved path.

“My Uncle Joe used to own this land and the cabin up there,” Lois explained, pointing ahead to a small, run-down log cabin at the end of the road. “We’d come up here to go camping when I was a kid. He left the land to me and my sister when he passed away a few years ago. Lucy never comes up here, and she’s in California now anyways. So, we’ve got privacy here.”

Clark twisted his head toward her. He’d been silent for most of the trip, staring off out the window with his hands clasped carefully in his lap, as though he was afraid to touch anything.

“Privacy...for what?”

Lois slowed as she pulled up into the clearing in front of the old cabin. She smiled sideways at him and parked the Jeep.

“For seeing what you’re capable of.”

She didn't wait for his response. Instead, she unfastened her seatbelt and hopped out of the Jeep. It was comfortably warm out, and she closed her eyes as she inhaled the fresh mountain air, the strong scent of pine filling her nostrils. Her tennis shoes kicked up dust from the dry clearing, a reminder that they hadn't had rain for nearly a month now. However, despite the lack of life-giving precipitation, the forest was still full. Bird calls echoed from far away, and several curious squirrels peeked out around branches, eyeing the newcomers with interest. Clark shut the door behind him and walked slowly around the front of the vehicle, his eyes scanning their surroundings.

"Lois, I'm not sure this is a good idea," he mumbled, stubbing his shoe into the parched earth. His hands found their familiar hiding place in his pockets.

"Now, hear me out," she said, and she stepped over to him and looped her arm through his. Together, they began walking down a narrow trail that led off into the woods. "All of these...abilities of yours are brand new, right?"

He nodded, and she pushed a branch out of the way as they continued down the trail together.

"Okay, so you're suddenly invulnerable and strong, and your senses are all enhanced. And your biggest concern is that you don't want to hurt anyone, right?"

"Well, yeah, but —"

"So if you don't want to hurt anyone, the way I see it, you have two options."

She stopped walking as they reached another small clearing. The clearing had a huge log from a fallen tree along one side and an old fire pit lined with blackened stones at the center. She scanned the small space and nodded in approval. This would do. Then she turned back to Clark.

"One, you could go home to Smallville, maybe build yourself your own little house on your parents' farm, and live life as a recluse, isolated and alone. That way you'd be sure to never hurt anyone." He grimaced and rolled his eyes at her, and she grinned in response. "Or, two, you could test — err, I mean evaluate yourself and practice. Right now, you don't even know your own strength. But if you learn to control your abilities —"

"Then I can be sure that I won't hurt anyone," he finished for her.

"Exactly."

She stooped down and picked up a large gray rock about the size of a cantaloupe. The heavy stone required two hands for her to lift. She offered it to Clark, and with a frown, he accepted the offering, holding it easily in one hand. He turned it around, studying it for a moment.

"Without meaning to, you easily broke my table, which was three-inch-thick maple," Lois said, her voice low. He

clenched his jaw, but continued staring at the rock. "I wonder what you can do when you're trying to test your strength."

"Y-You mean you want me to try to crush this rock?" he blurted out, his eyes darting up to meet hers. She simply nodded. "I-I mean, it's a rock. Not wood. It's a..." He lowered his eyes back to the rock in his hand, and, still scowling, he shifted a few feet away from her, placed both hands on the rock, and squeezed. Instantly, and seemingly effortlessly, his hands collapsed in on the gray stone, which crumbled into smaller pieces with a loud crunch. His eyes widened as he looked at her. "Oh, God, I-I just did that."

She shook her head as a smile grew on her lips. *Wow. Incredible.*

But as she watched the evolution of emotions in his expression, she saw he wasn't in awe of his apparent strength; he was fearful. He backed away from her another few steps. She glanced around until she found another suitable rock.

"Here, take this one," she said, and she again lifted the heavy rock, straining a bit, and handed it to him. He took it, but shook his head frantically.

"No, I —"

"Clark. Look." She placed her hand on top of the rock, and he bit his lip nervously as he lowered his eyes to the stone he held easily in one hand. His fingers wrapped around the bottom of the rock, exerting just enough pressure to hold the rock without dropping it. "You are not out of control. Are you?"

"No, but —"

"You can hold the rock without damaging it. Yes?"

"Yes, but —"

"So, to me, this is proof, Clark. You can control this strength of yours. You may have to concentrate on it at first, but I'm sure it will become easy and natural after a while."

She stepped back from him again and nodded to the rock.

"Apply pressure again, but this time don't break it," she instructed. "I mean, grip it stronger, but not to the point where it breaks."

The frown on his face tightened again, but he did as she instructed. With one hand, he held the rock a bit tighter. It didn't crack or break. He exhaled sharply.

"Just because I can do it with a rock doesn't mean I won't ever accidentally hurt you," he argued. He turned away from her and raised his arm, then tossed the rock out into the woods. Maybe tossed was not the right word, Lois realized as they both flinched in unison. Hurlled. Propelled. Launched. Launched was probably most accurate. The

rock disappeared high out above the treetops, and Clark grimaced as he turned to her. “Oops?”

She couldn’t help it. She broke into a fit of laughter, shaking her head as she moved to the fallen tree to sit. She picked up a pinecone off the ground and tossed it to him. He easily caught it and sighed.

“Throw it back,” she said, smiling as she added, “Gently, please.” He rolled his eyes, but then tossed the pinecone to her in a perfect arc. It landed in her lap, and she smiled again. “See? You can control it, if you concentrate.”

They tossed the pinecone again a few times, and then she stood up and motioned for him to follow her as she set off deeper into the woods. About another three or four hundred feet down a trail sat a large boulder approximately twenty feet high. Lois stopped in front of it, staring up at the top.

“We used to climb this as kids. My mom would get so nervous. But my Uncle Joe would bring us out here when she was busy cooking or...drinking, and he’d have us race to the top. Lucy always beat me.”

She turned to Clark, who looked quite serious again. She wondered what he was thinking, but she didn’t have to wait long. He glanced at her, then stepped toward the boulder and squatted down next to it as though preparing for a deadlift. After a second of trying to find appropriate handholds along the bottom edge, he stood again, and Lois gasped as the boulder rose up off the ground several feet.

“It’s not even...” His voice trailed off as he narrowed his eyes for a moment and then shifted his grip to lift the boulder up over his head. “It’s not even heavy,” he confessed. He again shifted his grip to balance the rock on one hand, and then looked at Lois and shrugged. Carefully, he set the boulder down, back in its place, and dusted his hands on his jeans. “I-I just lifted that boulder over my head with one hand. This is crazy, Lois.”

“I was going to ask you to race me to the top,” she said, raising her eyebrows at him. “But that was much more, uh, impressive.”

Finally, a bit of the tension that he’d built up that morning seemed to ease, and he laughed weakly as he rubbed the back of his neck. However, he quickly became serious again, and he turned back to the rock.

“When I was — when I w —” He hesitated and shoved his hands back into his pockets. “When I was trying to hurry up the stairwell to save that boy on the fourth floor, I felt like I was running much faster than I should have been able to... And then I...” He trailed off again, his eyes shifting toward the top of the rock. He glanced back at Lois over his shoulder and opened his mouth as though to say something, but then shook his head, turned back to the boulder, and knelt down, his

hands touching the forest floor. A second later, he pushed off the ground and leapt up into the air, easily sailing up to the top of the boulder. He landed almost lightly, as though he was in complete control of his descent, and he spun around toward Lois, a mixture of excitement and trepidation in his eyes.

“Wow.”

“Wow is right,” he agreed, and he jumped back down from the top of the boulder, again landing lightly on the ground next to Lois. “That was...fun, actually.” She smiled at him and watched as he turned back toward the boulder again, an inquisitive glint in his eye. He once again knelt down, readied himself, and leapt up into the sky. This time, however, the ground cracked underneath his feet as he shot up much, much higher. Lois watched as he continued rising until he disappeared from her view. She raised her hand to block the sunlight as she searched the sky for him.

“Clark! Where did you go?” she yelled, spinning around as she continued scanning the sky.

“Right here, Lois.”

She turned toward his voice and looked up. *Impossible. It’s not possible. Wow.*

“You...you’re...you’re...”

He beamed down at her from about thirty feet in the air, where he hovered stably, his arms crossed lightly over his chest.

“I can fly, Lois! This is so cool!”

She was speechless. Very few times in her life had she ever been speechless. But now, her mouth hung open as she stared at him. He floated slowly down and landed next to her, nearly bouncing off the ground with pure joy.

“Clark, I — wow...”

His eyes, now wide with excitement, met hers, and she smiled reflexively back at him. In the entire month they’d been living and working together, she’d never seen him like this. It was almost as though all of his burden had disappeared as he learned he could defy the laws of physics.

“Lois, this is the most amazing feeling. And the view — you have to see it,” he insisted.

He stepped closer to her and reached out a steady hand. Any shakiness he’d had earlier was gone, and as she took his hand, she felt his strength and a newfound confidence. Her eyes lifted to meet his again, and her breath caught in her throat as she saw his wonder and joy and elation, mixed with an unshakable certainty. This was the real Clark Kent. She was meeting him now, for the first time.

And, God, she was totally in love with him.

The thought startled her, and she almost backed away. But then, he pulled her in close to him and wrapped his arms around her waist, still smiling. After a second, he tore his gaze away and looked up, and she felt the ground drop

away from under her feet. Instinct forced her to cling to him, her arms looping up and around his neck, and she screwed her eyes shut and buried her head into his chest, gasping involuntarily.

Clark laughed and tightened his arms around her.

“Don’t worry, I’ve got you,” he assured her, his voice strong and confident.

Lois blinked open her eyes but quickly closed them again as she saw only the tops of the huge pine trees from the forest.

“You’ve got me, but who’s got you?” Her voice came out a bit higher and faster than she’d wanted, betraying her unease. Sure, she trusted him, but... She forced her eyes open again and gripped him tighter as she raised her head off his chest. “Oh, wow.”

“Isn’t it incredible?”

The view stretched out in every direction — miles and miles of unperturbed forest, steep mountains, and clear blue skies. An eagle flew just above the treetops to their right, soaring regally as it scanned the forest floor below, and off in the distance, the skyscrapers of Metropolis appeared insignificant and small, though she knew otherwise. Cautiously, she glanced down; from this height — she guessed maybe two hundred feet up — the boulder that Clark had lifted over his head just a few moments prior now appeared unintimidating.

Her eyes shifted to Clark, who gazed off toward the city with the same brilliant smile on his face. Carefree. No, that wasn’t it. Just *free*. He was free, liberated, no longer bound by the confining white walls of the small cell he grew up in.

Her lips parted, and she breathed his name as her eyes studied him.

“Clark.”

“Hmm?”

He continued staring out over the forest for another moment, until he seemed to realize she hadn’t responded, and she felt his arms pull her closer into his strong chest as he lowered his eyes to hers. His smile faded.

“Is something wrong?”

She quickly shook her head; her expression must have been quite serious, but that was not her intention. Her lips twitched back up into a smile, and her hands slid from around his neck until they cupped his cheeks.

“This is amazing, Clark. You...you are amazing,” she whispered, her voice trembling. Before she could change her mind, she reached up and brushed her lips gently against his. Just like she’d felt when she’d teased him with a brief kiss earlier, her stomach seemed to flutter, and warmth pulsed through her. His lips were soft and pliant, and he — and he was losing altitude rapidly. Her eyes widened in alarm as she pulled away from him slightly, but

he quickly leveled them out. His cheeks had turned bright red with embarrassment, and he blinked several times.

“Sorry, I-I, uh...” He frowned and looked down at the ground, and she felt them slowly descending. His arms tightened around her waist as he landed them lightly on the forest floor, but he didn’t let her go. Instead, he moved one hand to touch her cheek and then tucked a strand of loose hair behind her ear, a nervous smile flickering on his lips. “Maybe we can try that again, now that we’re safe on the ground...?”

She giggled and nodded. “I’d like that.”

He swallowed anxiously and ducked his head for a moment, and Lois gently touched his cheek again.

“Y-you know that I’ve never...” His voice trailed off as he raised his eyes slightly to meet hers.

“I know, Clark,” she assured him. Then she shook her head and lowered her own eyes for a moment, a feeling of guilt washing over her as she contemplated whether her forwardness now was fair to him. In all the time they’d spent together, he’d shown no indication of being attracted to her, but she’d finally realized how deep her feelings for him were. Did he even have any feelings for her? Was he ready to have a relationship? Did he want a relationship? What exactly was she expecting from this?

“Lois?”

With a weak smile, she looked up at him. He watched her expectantly, hopefully even, his deep brown eyes studying hers. He definitely wanted to kiss her again, she knew that. The way he still held her — one arm tightly around her waist, the other drifting lightly up and down her forearm. God, that felt good. How did he know to do that? She blinked and inhaled sharply; she’d never felt like this before, not in any of her previous relationships. She’d never felt even a hint of this.

“W-we don’t have to — to kiss again if — if you don’t want to,” he stammered, dragging his gaze away from hers and loosening his arm from her waist.

“No, no, no, wait, Clark. I definitely want to,” she blurted out. Her hands moved to rest on his chest, and she felt him tense slightly. He raised his eyes again to hers, and for the first time, she saw desire in them. A sort of knowing smile flickered across his lips, but was then buried again in an expression of confusion and embarrassment. “I just want, um...” She hesitated, unsure of how to phrase her concerns. But he seemed to understand, somehow, and she felt his hand once again begin to stroke her arm gently, eliciting the same sensations as a few minutes ago. She shivered involuntarily.

“You want to know how I feel?” he asked, his voice low. He swallowed again and then added, “And you don’t want to pressure me into something that I’m not ready for.”

She pursed her lips into a frown and nodded in agreement.

“Yes, to both of those.”

He smiled; not the brilliant, joyful smile from his antigravity escapade of a few minutes ago, but rather a soft, comforting smile that warmed her deep in her core. God, what was this? The thought hit her again, and she pressed her fingers into his chest as he pulled her closer to him.

“It’s, uh, hard for me to know what these feelings are,” he told her honestly. His eyes didn’t leave hers, but his hand stilled on her upper arm. “But I’m pretty sure this, whatever it is, is, um, more than just friendship.” His cheeks reddened again, and he finally lowered his eyes. “I’ve felt this way since you came to Smallville, but I didn’t really know what it was until…”

“Until what?”

“Until you kissed me earlier at your apartment.”

“Ah, right, that.” Lois leaned into him, resting her head on his chest. This felt so right. He felt so right. “I, uh, felt it then too. I mean in Smallville, that is. But it wouldn’t have been, um, appropriate then, I think.”

She shifted slightly so she could look up at him. Something glistened in his eyes, and he loosened his embrace just enough for her to bring her arms up around his neck again. Her fingers grazed the skin on the back of his neck, and he inhaled sharply as she smiled and inched closer to him. His lips were so inviting; she stretched up toward him, and her eyes closed as their lips met.

And there it was again. Warmth. Belonging. Love.

His lips caressed hers as he tentatively kissed her back, and she smiled into him, her fingers threading up and into his thick black hair. The kiss ended too soon; he pulled back slightly, his eyelids half closed, and she rested her forehead against his, her breathing shallow and rapid. Her whole body felt warm, and her lips — God, her lips still burned from his touch. A shiver ran up her spine, and she clung to him a bit tighter.

“Wow.”

That was about all she could manage at the moment. Any other conscious thought evaded her. He seemed equally as affected, although he recovered maybe a bit more quickly than her. He lowered his head to her shoulder and breathed into her hair deeply as his arms wrapped around her waist.

“That was incredible,” he murmured, his voice almost a whisper. “I-I mean, I know I h-have no frame of reference, but…”

She just nodded into him, unable to speak. How could one kiss light such a fire in her? They stood for another couple minutes, just holding each other, until he finally pulled away, swallowing hard as his eyes seemed to study

hers. His arms loosened from around her, and his hands then slid from her back to her hips. A small smile grew on her lips as she watched the emotions dance across his face, and she reached up to touch his cheek softly.

“It was incredible by any standard, Clark,” she assured him.

Still, he trembled slightly and dropped his eyes to the ground as he stepped away from her. She allowed him space and simply watched as he turned away and shoved his hands into his pockets — a now all-too-familiar gesture that she knew reflected his anxiety. He moved just a few feet away, his back to her, and then stopped and raised his eyes up to the sky.

“I think I’m… I think I’m not human,” he said quietly, his shoulders tightening. His eyes wandered rapidly from left to right, as though he searched for something far away, and then closed as he absently scuffed the ground with his shoe. “I think Trask was right. I think I’m not from Earth.”

“Clark —”

“Think about it, Lois,” he interrupted, turning back toward her abruptly. No longer hidden behind his thick-framed glasses, his eyes bore into her, and she stepped back involuntarily. “I can fly. And see through things. And…” He shook his head and dropped his gaze to the ground again as his hand ran nervously through his hair. “And I can’t shave because the razor keeps breaking. I’m really not looking forward to growing a beard.”

The weak attempt at humor caused her to smile, and she closed the distance he’d put between them. Her hands reached out to take his, and he allowed it, raising his eyes to meet hers.

“We’ll have to figure that out. Although I kinda think you look good like this,” she admitted with a crooked smile, releasing one of his hands to caress the stubbly skin along his jawline. He chuckled and shook his head.

“No, it’s itchy and —”

She brushed her lips against his again, effectively cutting him off, and she felt him lean into her as the kiss deepened, his hands venturing out of his pockets and to her waist again. Before she could get lost in this wonderful feeling of belonging and warmth, she broke the kiss, and her eyes opened slowly as she caught her breath.

“We’ll figure it all out. I’ll help you, if you let me,” she promised. He inhaled sharply and screwed his eyes shut tighter.

“And if we figure it out and discover that I’m really not human? What then?”

His quiet voice trembled, like his hands, and Lois pursed her lips together as she considered how to respond. At her hesitation, he opened his eyes; the same dark brown irises she’d seen the very first day they’d met outside that huge warehouse stared back at her. And saw his intense

and undeniable fear. Fear of rejection. Fear of being different. Fear of himself and his newfound abilities...

And most of all, fear that he might be forced back into captivity.

Into a tiny room with white walls and no windows and no color and no sound.

He hadn't told her much about the room or about the missing fifteen years of his life and whatever horrors he'd faced and been subjected to. But she'd noticed his reactions to certain things — being enclosed in small spaces, like on an airplane or in an elevator; needing all the lights turned out at night; even something as simple as a door locking behind him in a room — and she knew his fears ran deep. His experiences were not forgotten or hidden or gone. He remembered them. And tried valiantly every day to push them out of his mind so he could function. She'd never pushed him to reveal any specifics to her — after all, it wasn't really her business, was it? And now, as she watched him and saw the intensity of the fear in his eyes, a surge of protectiveness washed over her.

She shook her head and wrapped her arms back up around his neck, tears pricking at the corners of her eyes. He was warm, and his skin was soft. She kissed his cheek, stubble and all.

"Oh, Clark. I promise I won't ever let them take you back there again. I don't care if you're human or Martian or whatever. Do you remember what I told you in the hospital that first day? And what I said earlier today?"

She shifted away from him slightly so she could see his eyes again, but he couldn't quite look at her. He nodded feebly.

"You told me I was safe," he said in a low voice.

She enveloped him in another hug, this time opting to move her arms down around his waist, and she rested her head on his shoulder.

"You're safe here, Clark. Always."

A long shuddering breath escaped him, and he held her tightly, as though his life depended on her.

Beauty surrounded him. The forest, the sky, the mountains — it was all nothing short of incredible.

Then of course there was Lois. She was beautiful inside and out. And she had kissed him! Him — Clark Kent! More than once. It had been the most extraordinary experience of his life — even better than the sensation of flying. Although, he admitted, flying was a very close second.

They walked slowly back toward Lois's Jeep, her small hand tucked safely away in his larger hand, and his mind raced. They'd spent the better part of the last three hours exploring his capabilities, and they had found no limits. He'd raced on foot to the top of a distant mountain peak

and back within a second, and then flown there and back even faster, managing both times to break the sound barrier. From the top of that mountain, he'd quickly learned to focus his hearing, and he managed to listen to a conversation between Jimmy Olsen and Perry White, discussing Jimmy's most recent front-page photos over coffee at a café just down the block from the Daily Planet. He all but mastered his remarkable telescopic vision as well, using it to watch a young couple stroll arm in arm down a path in Centennial Park from his vantage point nearly twenty-five miles away. And finally, he'd lifted the massive twenty-foot-tall boulder again, flown straight up into the air several miles, dropped it, and raced down beside it as it fell; just before impact, he'd poured on a bit more speed, moved underneath the boulder, and slowed its fall, setting it down back carefully in its resting place on Lois's property.

Now he was exhausted. No, not physically. Physically, he still felt exhilaration, buoyancy, power, like he'd never imagined. But mentally, he was a wreck. His brain felt foggy, like he was functioning within a haze of various emotions, unable to decide which one to embrace. And a constant hum in the back of his mind reminded him that none of this was normal and that Trask might have been right — he was probably an alien. He'd had to shake his head too many times to rid himself of the three words branded into his brain early on in his captivity. *Freak. Alien. Abomination.* Until today, he'd assumed Trask was just insane — a raving lunatic who'd become fixated on Clark for whatever reason and who'd kidnapped and tortured him based on a false premise. Now...now he didn't know what the real truth was.

One thing was certain, however — he was definitely *not* normal.

In addition to this simple observation, that is, that he could no longer think of himself as just another ordinary man, their extensive exploration of his newfound abilities had brought him to reach two important conclusions.

First and foremost, these new abilities were incredibly dangerous to those around him. His strength couldn't be matched. With a tiny flick of his finger, a single uncontrolled movement, he was capable of more destruction than he cared to consider. Yes, he could control himself; he'd discovered that quickly enough. However, he knew he had to be extremely careful all the time, always cognizant in any interactions with people or objects...or someone could be seriously injured. Even now, as he walked quietly next to Lois, he was acutely aware of her fragility. One stumble, one error of judgment and... He didn't even want to think about it.

The second thing he knew with perfect clarity was that Lois was the most incredible woman he'd ever met. And

he was pretty sure he was falling in love with her. Scratch that — he was very much already in love with her. He moved slightly closer to her as the trail narrowed, and she let out a contented sigh and leaned into him a bit. His heart leapt in his chest. He didn't know what he would have done without her today. Every step of the way, she'd directed, encouraged, and reassured him, even when he'd been close to panicking after crushing that first rock at her suggestion. She seemed to have a confidence in him that he didn't understand — a sort of unshakeable conviction that he could and would handle whatever they discovered. So far, she'd been right; he hadn't found anything that he couldn't control, with enough effort. However, he didn't yet have the belief in himself that she did.

He felt her hand slip from his and then wrap tightly around his waist. And as though it were the most natural thing in the world, he allowed his arm to drape over her shoulders lightly. He'd never touched anyone like this before — or had anyone touch him like this. Yet, holding her this way seemed to come easily, like something he'd done countless times.

God, he loved her. His heart felt like it was about to burst out of his chest.

They pushed through some overgrown bushes, and Lois's silver Jeep came into view. Two squirrels paused near the front driver's side tire, and the larger of the two rose slowly up onto its haunches, eyeing the newcomers warily. As they neared, the two squirrels scampered off toward the cabin, their cheeks filled with seeds and nuts. Clark smiled as he watched them, using his newly discovered vision abilities to follow their path around the back of the cabin and into a small hole in the roof.

"Those squirrels have taken up residence in the attic of your cabin, Lois," he said teasingly. He stopped and continued watching the squirrels as Lois leaned into him. He suddenly felt very warm. "They have three little baby squirrels in a little nest, and —"

"Clark, we have to talk to your parents."

The change in her tone startled him, and he pulled his gaze away from the squirrels inside the attic to look down at her. Her hands rested on his chest now, her open palms pressing against him, and her earnest expression worried him. He dropped his arm from around her and shoved his hands into his pockets as he studied her eyes.

"I-I don't know, Lois, I — what if they...what if they don't —"

Again, she cut him off, this time by abruptly turning away from him and taking several steps toward the Jeep. He heard her heart rate increase substantially, its now familiar and comforting 'da-dum' becoming less regular.

"I know it might be scary, Clark, but I think they can probably help us figure out...where you came from."

He could tell she chose her words carefully to avoid upsetting him. He lowered his eyes to the ground and absently scuffed at the dirt. *Freak. Alien. Abomination.*

"I was adopted, Lois. I think they would have told me if —" His voice caught in his throat as an old memory surfaced. Something he'd definitely buried and planned to never let back out. A mild pulsing headache began to build between his eyes.

"If...?" She'd turned back to face him, and he felt her watching him, studying every move, every expression.

He shook his head and looked away from her. No, it couldn't be true.

"You said I was adopted, Dad."

"Well, technically, son, yes. But the truth is, your mother and I, we —"

"Jonathan, please. He's still too young to understand."

"Understand what, Mom? Dad? I'm ten years old. I'm practically an adult. You have to tell me now."

But they hadn't. That had been as far as the conversation had gone. And he'd been so angry with them that he'd never brought it up again. He'd pushed the memory back into a deep crevasse in his mind, hoping to forget about it forever. He'd been adopted; his birth parents hadn't wanted him. Wasn't that bad enough without having some other variable hanging over him as well? Apparently not. Apparently, his parents might have more information that they hadn't wanted him to know.

"But the truth is, your mother and I, we —"

"I'll go talk to them," he asserted, raising his eyes to the sky. Clouds had moved in within the last thirty minutes, blocking out the light from the Sun, and a light rain began to fall. His new senses heightened his perception of everything, he realized, and it took him a moment to orient himself to the rain falling. If he didn't deliberately concentrate on blocking it, he heard every individual raindrop falling on the trees and on the forest floor; he could perceive every drop with such speed that the raindrops could appear suspended in midair, hanging there, frozen; he could feel the very subtle drop in temperature. It was overwhelming. He shivered, and two small hands came to rest on his chest again.

"We'll go together."

"No."

The word slipped out before he could think, but he knew he needed to talk to them alone. He wasn't even sure why.

"No? But Clark —"

"Please, Lois. You asked me earlier to trust you, and now I'm asking you to trust me." He opened his eyes to meet hers and forced a weak smile. God, she was beautiful. He raised his hand to cup her cheek and then brushed a

strand of her dark hair back behind her ear. “I-I’ll meet you back at your apartment as soon as I can.”

Her brow furrowed in confusion.

“Wait, are you going to...? Are you thinking you can fly there? That’s over a thousand miles, Clark,” she argued.

He allowed a small smile to grow on his lips. He knew how far it was, and somehow, he knew the trip would be no problem for him. The fog that had clouded his brain only minutes before had lifted, and certainty and confidence flooded him. The jaunt would take him a mere minute, maybe two. Actually, the task of confronting his parents seemed much more daunting than the flight itself.

He briefly considered making some joke about how much he’d prefer flying himself rather than flying on an airplane, but seeing the concern on her face, he changed his mind. Instead, he took her in his arms, closed his eyes, and held her to him. Her arms slid around his waist, and he felt her tremble weakly.

“I’ll be careful. I promise,” he told her quietly. He momentarily forgot everything else as her fingers pressed stronger into his back, pulling him even closer to her. Her warmth filled him, and he turned his head ever so slightly and brushed a gentle kiss against her cheek.

She pushed him away and looked up into his eyes. Small beads of water dripped down her forehead and cheeks as the rain started to fall harder. Her deep brown eyes blinked the rain away and shifted uneasily up to the cloud-covered sky.

He inhaled sharply as he watched a drop of rain slide down her throat and disappear under the light blue cotton of her t-shirt. A strong desire to kiss her neck right there — right where the raindrop had disappeared — threw him off guard, and he pursed his lips and looked up, following her gaze.

“You’ll meet me back at home then? And if it’s too far and you get tired, you’ll land somewhere and call me?”

Their eyes met again, and he nodded.

“And you’ll drive carefully down this mountain?” he countered.

She smiled and nodded as well. And then he swallowed nervously and leaned in toward her. Seconds later, their lips met in a gentle, unhurried kiss. He tasted the rain on her lips and the faint hint of coffee from hours before. And contentment, warmth, and love filled him. She kissed him back, softly, almost playfully, and her hands moved back to his waist and then around his back. After a moment, she broke the kiss, her chest rising and falling breathlessly, and he stepped away from her a few feet, grinned, and rose up off the ground.

“I...I’ll see you soon, Lois,” he promised.

She bit her lip nervously and nodded again. Her mouth opened as though she wanted to say something, but then shut just as quickly, and she sighed.

“Be careful.”

He smiled again and took off, disappearing into the thick cloud layer, a sonic boom echoing in his wake.

Bright sunlight filtered through patchy clouds, bathing the ground below him in a mosaic of light and shadow. From his spot, hovering thousands of feet above his parents’ farmhouse, Clark scanned the farm, noting the subtle changes in the fields and barn that had occurred during the last month in his absence. His mom had planted more flowers, which bloomed bright pink and yellow, in her garden next to the house, and his dad had painted the new barn doors red to match the rest of the structure. Everything else looked the same.

And yet, for him, so much had changed.

He narrowed his eyes and focused his vision to look through the walls of the familiar farmhouse. With a crooked smile, he watched and listened as his mom playfully teased his dad about eating an extra brownie while at the same time setting a bowl of vanilla ice cream in front of him. His dad laughed jovially, kissed his mom on the cheek, and picked up the newspaper sitting on the table next to him as he dug his spoon into the cold dessert.

Boy, were they going to be surprised to see him!

Before he could lose his nerve, he dropped down just in front of the barn, landed lightly on the dry ground, and took a deep breath as he jogged up toward the house. He hadn’t really planned his approach, but he figured once he explained his new abilities to them, they would not hold back any information they had about his origins.

At least, that’s what he hoped.

The desire to know where he came from drove him to hurry up the steps, the floorboards creaking loudly underneath his feet. He grasped the handle and opened the door, pasting a smile on his face. A sharp intake of breath from the kitchen was followed closely by hurried footsteps coming his direction as he shut the door and turned back toward his parents.

“Clark! What are you doing here?” his mother exclaimed. He was immediately embraced in a tight hug, her arms wrapping around his waist. His dad stood from his spot at the table and lumbered over, reaching out to hug Clark after Martha released him.

“Mom, Dad, it’s really good to see you both,” he greeted, his smile growing. He hadn’t quite realized how much he’d missed them, and despite the serious reason for his visit, he relaxed almost immediately into his dad’s hug.

“Son, we, uh, weren’t really expecting you back for at least another couple of months.”

“I know, Dad. I —”

His mom moved to embrace him again, and he chuckled to himself as he rested his head on top of hers.

“S-something came up, and I needed to talk to you both...in person,” he admitted in a low voice, pulling away from his mom.

“Well, we’re very glad to see you of course, honey. But you didn’t have to fly all the way out here... Did you?” The puzzlement in her voice and her misunderstanding of his mode of transportation sobered him up, and his smile faltered.

“Speaking of which, son,” his father piped in, glancing out the kitchen window into the driveway. “How did you, well... There’s no rental car. So, how did you...?” The older man’s voice trailed off as he turned back toward Clark.

The moment of truth. A wave of fear washed over him, and he swallowed tightly and glanced quickly from his dad back to his mom.

“Well, I flew,” he said simply, knowing that did not clarify anything for them.

“Yes, of course, honey,” his mom replied, and she began moving back toward the kitchen. “Obviously. What your father meant was how did you get here from the airport?”

He nodded solemnly, looked both of his parents straight in the eye, and said again, “I flew.” And then, because he knew they wouldn’t otherwise understand, he demonstrated the most impressive of his new abilities by floating himself about two feet off the ground and hovering for several seconds.

Neither of his parents moved or reacted right away; in fact, they both appeared almost frozen in place. He lowered himself back to the ground slowly and stood quite still, waiting for any reaction from either of them. His father seemed to break out of his trance first, shaking his head and blinking several times, and then his mother turned away and walked back into the kitchen, mumbling to herself as she did.

Uncertainty hit him, and he ran a nervous hand through his hair as he watched his mother robotically pour herself a cup of coffee. His dad stared at him still, his forehead wrinkled in apprehension.

“That, uh, that’s some neat trick you did there, Clark,” Jonathan started, turning and sitting down heavily in his seat at the kitchen table. Absently, he picked up his spoon, scooped up some ice cream, and then froze again, the spoon lingering a few inches above the bowl. Drops of melted ice cream fell back into the bowl, but Jonathan made no effort to eat the dessert.

“I don’t really know how to tell you both this, so I-I’m sorry to just d-drop in like this, um, I —”

“You flew here, Clark? You flew, of your own power, from Metropolis all the way here?” Martha’s voice trembled as she addressed him, her hands gripping her coffee mug tightly. From behind her glasses, her blue eyes watched him, a serious expression hidden in their depths.

Clark nodded, forcing himself to maintain eye contact.

“Just today, Lois and I, we found out that — we found out that I can do some p-p-pretty incredible things, actually,” he stumbled. His hands found their familiar place in his pockets as he silently berated himself for stuttering. Taking a deep breath to steady his voice, he continued, letting everything out all at once. “I can fly and move really fast and see and hear things from far away. And — and I can s-see through objects and I’m really strong and can walk through fire...”

Seeing his parents’ bewilderment again, he dropped his eyes to the floor, and for the first time, he wondered briefly whether they might not accept him like Lois had. But, no, they had to. They would. They probably just needed a few minutes to process.

Right. Process this crazy shock that he’d just given them.

That he was not normal.

He shook his head. Not normal. *Freak. Alien. Abomination.*

He turned away from them to hide the strong shame he felt.

Freak. Alien. Abomination.

“I-I’m r-really s-sorry. Both of you. I...I’ll just — you can just forget that I came. Um, I’ll head back tto — I’ll head back — I’ll go now,” he stammered. His hands shoved deeper into his pockets as he angled toward the door.

“Clark, son, now wait just a minute,” Jonathan’s deep voice boomed, and Clark heard the other man stand up and step toward him. A strong hand settled on his shoulder. “You should sit, son. I think we have a lot to talk about.”

“Yes, Clark, honey,” his mom added insistently. “Please, don’t leave.”

His heart pounded in his chest, but he rotated around slowly to face both of them, his hands shaking as he pulled them out of his pockets. His father hadn’t left his side, and the older man patted Clark on the back and motioned to the kitchen table. Martha had also moved to the table, and she blinked several times as she held back tears.

Willing himself to be strong, he took his seat at the table with his parents and listened, numbly, as they told him of the night they’d found him twenty-five years ago.

Chapter 11

Her hands had stopped shaking an hour ago, and she’d just now convinced herself to stop pacing. But as the

afternoon wore on, the pounding rain turning to a light mist and the hint of sunlight through the cloud layer fading into evening darkness and shadow, there was still no sign of Clark. And she was starting to feel anxious again.

She picked up her phone and began dialing his cell for the tenth time, but hesitated. He'd said he would call if he had any trouble, and she trusted his word. So why was she so worried?

She knew the answer, of course. She knew it was because six hours ago, he'd left her up on top of a mountain in the pouring rain to fly off to talk to his parents about whether he was human. Because he'd suddenly become distant and agitated right before he'd left. And because she desperately missed him.

Staring at the phone in her hand, Lois mentally shook herself. She had to trust him. He told her he'd come back, and she knew he would.

She shoved the phone back in her pocket and moved into the kitchen; she wasn't hungry, but she should probably eat since she'd skipped lunch. However, a quick look at the contents of her fridge told her that she'd either have to cook — nope, not happening — or order takeout. Briefly, she wondered whether Clark's flying abilities might give them access to much better takeout options than Ralph's Pagoda, a Chinese restaurant they'd tried last week that had turned out to be a bit subpar. She laughed as she shut the refrigerator door, and the sound seemed to echo through the room before dissolving back into a chilling silence.

A silence that crept up around her and engulfed her.

Something was wrong.

She exhaled sharply and shook her head as she scanned the empty room. He should be there, sitting on the couch, readying their nightly board game — tonight was supposed to be chess; Clark really loved playing chess. Instead, the couch was empty, like the room. She stumbled over to where he normally sat, collapsed, and buried her head in her hands. She'd gotten so used to him being there. She'd gotten used to his smile and his laugh and his silly jokes and his thoughtfulness...and him.

She raised her eyes and glanced at the clock again. Six hours. That was too long.

Something was wrong.

She stood decisively, pulled her phone out of her pocket, and hit several buttons to dial his number. However, after three rings, his voicemail picked up, and she hung up rather than leaving a message. Her fingers trembling, she quickly dialed the Kents' number, and she then closed her eyes as the line began, once again, to ring.

"Hello?"

Lois immediately recognized Martha's voice and heard the strained, tired tone to her single-word greeting. She crossed her free arm over her chest and took a deep breath.

"Martha, hi. It's Lois."

"Lois, hi..."

Lois began pacing along the wall, her feet forcing her to move. The hesitation in Martha's voice and the uncomfortable silence that followed did nothing to alleviate her concerns. She stopped and closed her eyes.

"Is he...Clark, is he still there?"

There was no answer right away, and Lois wondered briefly whether the call might have dropped. She started to pull the phone away from her ear to check when Martha spoke again.

"No, dear... He left hours ago. You mean he didn't... he's not with you?"

Lois shook her head and squeezed her eyes shut tightly.

"No, Martha, he never came back. Hours ago? He left hours ago?" Lois's voice cracked as she spoke, and she forced herself back over to the couch to sit as her knees began wobbling and her heart started racing.

"Yes, dear. He... Well, Jonathan and I, we told him everything we knew about the night we found him, and he became quite...upset. We tried to get him to stay, but he said he needed to get back to Metropolis because he —"

Martha's words cut off into a sharp sob, and Lois heard Jonathan's voice in the background, soothing his wife. The older man then cleared his throat and spoke into the phone so Lois could hear him more clearly.

"Lois, it's Jonathan. Clark, he...well, he got quite upset when we told him about..."

"About what, Jonathan?" The words escaped her mouth as a dry whisper, and she once again stood up on shaky, unsure legs. She moved over to the open window, and her eyes drifted out and up toward the bright Moon lighting up the evening sky.

On the other end of the line, Jonathan Kent's voice became lower, unsteady, and faltering.

"Lois, the night we found Clark, we — Martha and I — we found him in a small spaceship that had crash landed in a neighbor's field. There's a good chance that..."

Jonathan's voice trailed off, but he didn't need to finish his thought. Lois already knew what he was going to say.

Clark may not actually be from Earth. Clark may actually be an alien.

If Clark had come to that same conclusion...

She remembered how distraught he'd looked earlier in the day, when he'd wondered out loud whether he might be an alien. Whether Trask might have been right. She remembered seeing the dark panic in his eyes and the way he'd almost shrunken in on himself.

A tear slid down her cheek.

"I'll find him," she stated, her voice now clear and strong. "I'll find him. Please, Jonathan, tell Martha that I'll find him, and then I'll call you, no matter what time it is."

There was a brief silence, and Jonathan's voice then rasped, "Thank you, Lois. Please do call us as soon as you know that he's okay. And please, please tell him that we love him."

"I will."

She heard a few more mumbled words, which might have been Martha's attempt to thank her, and the other end of the line then went silent as the Kents hung up.

She wiped the tear from her cheek, closed her eyes, and took a deep breath. Then, she composed a quick text.

"Clark, I know you are confused right now, and you have every right to be. But please, please respond and let me know you are okay. I'm very worried about you, as are your parents."

She hesitated and then tagged "*Love, Lois*" onto the end of the message before hitting "Send."

For several agonizing moments, she stared at the phone, willing it to light back up with any response, no matter how brief. Even just, "*I'm okay.*" Even, "*I'm not okay.*" Anything at all.

But it remained stubbornly silent and dark, and when she couldn't stand to wait anymore, she spun on her heel and grabbed her purse and car keys.

She would find him. She'd found him once, six months prior. And she'd do it again. Even if he could literally be anywhere in the world right now. She would find him.

An hour later, Lois stood up from her desk near the center of the Daily Planet newsroom and hurried to the back copy room, where the printer had just whirred to life. It ejected a single page into the tray and then once again went silent with slumber. She lifted the page up with one hand while cradling her phone against her ear with the other.

"I got it. Thanks, Jimmy. I owe you for this," Lois said, her eyes already scanning the printout. "I'll call you back later if I need more help."

"Sure thing, Lois. Because you know I have nothing better to do at seven o'clock on a Friday night," Jimmy retorted in a teasing tone. His voice became serious, however, as he quickly added, "I hope you find him. Keep me updated, okay?"

"Me too, and I will. Thanks, Jimmy. I gotta go."

She turned off her phone and stuffed it back in her pocket as she jogged out of the copy room and toward the elevators, once again silently thanking Jimmy Olsen for his uncanny understanding of how to hack into and interpret cell phone location data.

She glanced back at the paper in her hand as she punched the 'down' button and waited for the elevator. Tears threatened to fall, yet again, as she recognized the location information printed at the top of the single page.

Grant Mountain Pass and Route 22. Just north of the city and miles from any civilization. Where she knew there happened to be a huge, nondescript warehouse that had been raided by the police, emptied out, and abandoned about six months ago.

That's where his cell phone was, and that's where his cell phone had been for the better part of three hours now.

Her eyes closed tightly as she tried unsuccessfully to push away her memories of that night they'd met six months ago. That whole investigation — culminating in his rescue from the evils that he'd been subjected to for fifteen years — it had changed her. She'd always known that her job as an investigative reporter was important; she'd always known that her work often helped save lives and make the world a better place. But Clark's rescue...

She remembered how she'd thought there was no way he'd be alive, if they could even find him. She remembered how desperate Martha had been and how she'd chased down lead after lead after lead, always running into dead ends. Then, she remembered seeing Clark for the first time, wearing nothing but a thin blue hospital gown in the freezing cold. She remembered the slow trudge through the woods, hoping she'd be strong enough to keep supporting him if his legs gave out. And she remembered her decision to omit so many of the details of his capture, imprisonment, and rescue from her short article, which she'd requested Perry *not* place on the front page of the paper.

It had been the first time that the person had truly been more important to her than the story.

It had changed her.

He had changed her.

And now, he needed her again.

Her hands began shaking as she folded up the paper, shoved it into her purse, and boarded the elevator. She only hoped she could get to him fast enough.

White. Plain white. The floor, the walls, the ceiling. Plain white. And cold. And evil. So much evil. It surrounded him, pressed in on him, suffocated him.

He pushed himself back against the hard wall across from the room that had been his prison for fifteen years and slid down to the ground, lowering his head into his hands. The nausea came again, and he nearly choked as his body tried to expel more of the contents of his stomach. But he had nothing left to vomit up, and so he collapsed onto the ground, coughing violently, as pain began to grow

behind his eyes. He curled up against the wall, screwed his eyes shut, and sobbed.

Why had he come here? Why had he needed to see it again? And what had he expected?

He should have expected the overwhelming terror, the fear and panic, the dizziness and nausea and inability to breathe. He should have. But he hadn't. And now, he was paying the price for that.

His body continued to shake as he pressed his palms into his eyes. Memories tugged at him; old memories of a time when he'd clung to an inkling of hope that he'd be found and rescued and brought home to his parents, and then more recent memories filled with the pain and desperation and despair of knowing he was alone and no one would be coming to save him.

Freak. Alien. Abomination.

True. It was all true. He was all of those things. He'd come to Earth as a baby in a spaceship. From where, he didn't know. And why, he didn't know. But did it really even matter? He was an alien. He was not human. He was everything Trask had said.

And now, he'd developed these superhuman abilities that made him the most powerful being on Earth, which therefore also made him a threat to all of mankind.

Just like Trask had said.

No crying, or else...

His stomach lurched again as the words haunted him, and he curled up more as his hands scrubbed down his cheeks in a futile attempt to eliminate the evidence of his tears.

No crying. Don't move.

Freak.

Alien. Dirty alien filth.

His breath came in short gasps, and a hazy red glow began to fill his vision. He shook his head and blinked, but the haze grew and heated up. He again squeezed his eyes shut and covered them with his hands as he sat up, his back to the wall. A pain not unlike that he experienced every night when his migraines hit ballooned between his eyes, and he groaned and pushed himself to his feet. He blinked his eyes open again, but the red haze still blurred his vision.

Blindly, he stumbled back toward the entrance to the building, away from the small white room with its plain white walls, his hands once more pressed tightly over his eyes.

Freak.

Alien.

One day...we will kill you. A long, slow, painful death fit for the disgusting abomination you are...

Dirty alien.

Trask was right.

No. He growled angrily. No.

"No!"

Trask was wrong.

"No! I'm not like that! I'm not!"

He reached out ahead of him with one hand, feeling for the door that should be there while keeping his eyes tightly closed. His hand hit smooth glass, which immediately shattered into a cacophony of spilling shards.

Freak.

Not normal.

Abomination.

His chest constricted, and the pain between his eyes grew to an almost unbearable pulse.

"I'm not... I'm... I'm not..."

Heat began pouring out of his eyes, stinging his hands, burning his eyelids, and he instinctively ducked his chin down and turned back around toward the room — toward his prison — as he could no longer keep the heat contained.

Some sort of sound — somewhere between a scream and a growl — erupted from his lips as red beams of intense heat burst from his eyes. Instantly, the ground in front of him cracked and caught fire, flames exploding up several feet. To his horror, the heat beams continued burning a path along the ground as he raised his eyes up. He tried again to close his eyes, to cover them up with his hands, to stop the destructive heat from engulfing everything in its path. But the heat was too concentrated, too powerful, and he screamed as he dropped his hands away from his eyes, a searing pain radiating from his palms.

He backed up against the shattered glass door, shards crunching under his feet. The heat ripped through the building now as his eyes swept sideways and then up toward the ceiling. Fire surrounded him. Walls began crumbling and crashing down, feeding the flames — the orange, yellow, and blue flames, which consumed the white walls.

Orange, yellow, blue, filling up the parts of his vision not tinged red.

No white. Nothing white was left.

Something inside him latched onto that, and the power streaming from his eyes intensified.

Destroy it. Destroy it all.

He backed up more, pushing the door open behind him, and then continued inching back down the hallway, the beams of heat still pouring uncontrolled from his eyes. Uncontrolled...and yet... He turned up the heat more. And more.

Destroy it all.

He turned his head one way and then the other, allowing the heat to wash over the formerly untouched

hallway and bathing the white walls in bright orange flames.

His hands balled up into fists, and his jaw set in a tight scowl.

Destroy it all. Nothing left. Nothing of this. Nothing.

He felt sweat pouring down his face now, mixing with his tears. He clenched his fists tighter.

More power. More heat. Destroy it all.

Ahead of him now, the roof began to cave in, chunks of wood and metal toppling down into the flames. The sounds roared in his ears, and he growled in frustration. He wanted it all gone, now. Faster. More heat. The beams coming from his eyes focused from diffuse to razor-sharp, and his next sweep across the room sliced the remaining walls of the structure in half. He backed up to another door — the final door to the building — and pushed it open, stepping backwards out into the warm night air just as the walls of the warehouse all collapsed inward.

Trask was right.

“No! No. I’m not...”

Destroyer. Destroy it all. Alien. Freak.

Trask was right.

He blinked and then forced his eyes closed as he tripped and fell backwards onto the hard cement. His hands cracked the ground as he caught himself, and his chest heaved with effort as he again yelled, “No! I’m not like that! I’m not...”

The red glow began fading as his eyes stayed tightly shut, and when his vision returned to normal, now only bathed in the bright orange glow from the fire, he buried his head into his knees and sobbed.

“I’m not like that... It’s not true. No...”

In the distance, sirens began blaring, but Clark didn’t hear them. His crying drowned out all of that and all the crackling of the flames and all the crashing of support beams and pillars and debris as the fire continued to rage.

He’d caused all this destruction. On accident or on purpose, it didn’t matter. He’d caused it.

Trask was right.

No. Yes. No.

Trask was right.

“Clark?”

Lois.

His heart leapt in his chest. She’d found him. She’d come for him. She’d come to save him. To rescue him. Again. He inhaled deeply and smelled her, sensed her, felt her.

Then, he tensed and covered his eyes with his hands again.

No. Not safe. Can’t hurt her. Need to go.

“Clark, hey, I’m here,” her voice soothed. She was only a few feet away now, just behind him, and inching closer slowly.

No. Trask was right. Not safe.

He shook his head violently and then tried to stand. However, his legs refused to hold his weight, and he collapsed back onto the ground. The pain between his eyes intensified. He shook his head again.

“You can’t be here, Lois. It’s not safe. I’m not safe. Trask was right,” he wept, lowering his head between his knees. “Trask was right. Trask was right. Trask was —”

“Clark!”

Her hand touched his shoulder gently, despite the firm tone of her voice, and he fell silent as she knelt down next to him and spoke again.

“Clark, Trask may have been right about your origins, but he was not right about who you are,” she said.

Her hand shifted from his shoulder and around his back until she embraced him in a careful hug, but he remained as still as a statue, afraid to move, afraid he’d hurt her. So, so very afraid.

“I did all this, Lois,” he admitted, his voice barely a whisper. “This fire. This was me. My eyes — they are dangerous. You have to leave me here. I can’t be near you. It’s not safe. Trask was right.”

But she didn’t let him go. In fact, she tightened her hold on him, and again, he didn’t dare move. Her lips brushed against his cheek.

“No, Clark,” she murmured, resting her forehead against his. “No. The fire was an accident, and you are in control now. You can control it, Clark, just like you control all of your other abilities.”

He felt another kiss, this time on his forehead, and she then shifted to sit down next to him on the hard ground. She pulled him gently toward her, and he allowed himself to lean into her; he didn’t have the strength left to resist. He sucked in a deep breath and then let it back out, shuddering.

“You are not what he said, Clark. You are kind and gentle and compassionate and loving.”

“Lois, but I...I did all this. The fire — it came from my eyes. And I wanted to destroy it all, Lois. I wanted it burned down. I —”

“Shhh, Clark.”

Her hand began rubbing slow, soft circles on his back, and he sighed and leaned into her more as he tried to stifle a sob.

“It’s okay, Clark. You can cry here. You’re safe. I’m safe. He wasn’t right, Clark. Please trust me, and trust yourself, Clark.”

Her words drifted off into a fog that seemed to settle over him, and he found himself nodding as she kissed his cheek again.

He blinked, and then, somehow, they were in her Jeep and driving away from the blaze, passing by a long line of fire trucks and police cars. He couldn't remember having gotten into the car with her, and a haze still blanketed his thoughts, slowing his thinking and making everything fuzzy.

He blinked again, and they were at her apartment. She unlocked the deadbolts, took his hand, and led him inside and over to the couch. And he sat, his hands in his lap, and collapsed into her as he cried.

Her arms enveloped him, warding off all of the evil of that place and that part of his life, protecting him from it somehow. She pressed her lips against his cheek.

After some time, his sobs quieted into shaky breaths. He buried his head into her hair, and in a low voice, muffled against her, he murmured, "Trask...he wasn't..."

"He was wrong, Clark," she soothed, still holding him, still rubbing gentle circles on his back.

He shuddered and squeezed his eyes shut tightly.

"He wasn't right about me."

"That's right, Clark."

"Please, Lois, tell me again."

"He was wrong, Clark. You are kind and gentle and caring. And you are safe here, Clark. He was wrong."

And he continued to cling to her as she brushed another kiss on his cheek.

Chapter 12

Her phone vibrated in her pocket, and she snuck out of Clark's bedroom, where she'd just gotten him settled into his bed, and tiptoed quietly down the hallway to the living room. Only then did she pull out her phone. She recognized the number and answered immediately.

"Hello?"

"Lane, it's Henderson."

She sat heavily on the couch and pulled her knees up to her chin.

"Bill, hi," she sighed. Before he could explain to her why he was calling, she continued. "Yes, Bill, we were out there tonight at the warehouse. And yes, I know it looks suspicious since Clark and I took off before the fire trucks showed up. But I promise you Bill, the fire was an accident, and I just needed to get Clark out of there as quickly as possible. He was... He needed to get far away."

She hadn't lied. None of that was untrue, she reasoned. But she still held her breath as she waited for Henderson's response. The line stayed silent for several agonizing seconds. Then, Henderson cleared his throat and spoke slowly and clearly.

"I was just calling to tell you that there was an electrical fire at that old warehouse tonight. The place burned to the ground. No evidence of arson or foul play or...tire tracks or footprints. Just a good old electrical fire. Thought you should know."

Lois nearly wept with relief.

"Thank you, Bill. I appreciate the phone call," she said, somehow managing to keep her voice from trembling.

"You're welcome, Lois. I'd better get back. Take care."

And the line went silent.

Lois reached up and wiped the tears from her eyes, then dialed the Kents' number. She should have called them earlier, but her first priority had been ensuring that Clark was safe. The entire drive home from the warehouse, he'd been shaking, mumbling to himself incoherently, and alternately staring out the window with wide, unfocused eyes and pressing his palms into his eyes while sobbing. She hadn't felt like she could take her focus off of him or off of the road long enough to call the Kents.

The line rang twice before Martha answered, her voice shaky.

"Lois?"

"Martha, hi. Sorry it took me so long to call you back, I —"

"Clark, is he okay? Please Lois, tell me," the older woman begged. Lois heard rustling, a cough, and then Jonathan's voice in the background, murmuring something to his wife.

"He's back home with me. He's resting now," Lois started, keeping her voice quiet. She shifted a bit back into the corner of her couch and settled her head on her knees again.

"But how is he, Lois?" Jonathan asked, an urgency to his tone that Lois had never heard from him before.

She hesitated before answering. Not because she wanted to keep anything from them, but rather because she wasn't sure of how to answer. She didn't quite know how to put into words what had happened in the last two hours.

She'd shown up at the warehouse, fully expecting to find him in the middle of some panic-induced meltdown somewhere inside the facility. But what she'd found had been an order of magnitude worse. He'd been flailing backwards out of the facility while it burned — the whole thing engulfed in hot orange flames. And red laser beams had been streaming from his eyes.

Igniting.

Burning.

Destroying.

She'd driven her Jeep right through the chain link fence blocking the entrance to the facility and stopped about fifty feet from him. Then, he'd tripped and fallen backwards, and the heat coming from his eyes had slowly faded.

Only then had she approached him.

Only then had she seen the burns on his hands, and the tears streaming from his eyes, and the sheer panic on his face.

And his words... He'd been mumbling about Trask being right and him being a danger to her...

She choked back a sob and closed her eyes.

"He... He wasn't okay when I found him. He had gone back to...that warehouse. And he..." Her voice trailed off. She couldn't possibly tell them about the fire. Not yet. She continued, carefully choosing her words. "He's resting quietly now. I think he's okay... I think he'll be okay."

The Kents were both quiet for a moment, although Lois heard a few muffled sounds come through the phone's speaker. She lifted her head and twisted back toward the hallway, where Clark hopefully still slept peacefully. Her stomach lurched as she pictured him again, his head buried in his knees, his blistered hands gripping his legs, words stumbling out of his mouth on repeat. *"I'm not like that. It's not true. Trask was...Trask was right. No. Yes. No. Trask was right."* And then later, sitting here on this very couch, he'd begged her to reassure him again that Trask was wrong. And he'd clung to her.

The urgency, the need, the terror in his voice — it had been painful to see. It had been just like back then, on that very first day.

"He will be okay, Martha, Jonathan," Lois repeated, and she stood decisively. "He will be. He...he has to be."

Lois heard Martha murmur an indistinguishable assent, and they shared a few more words, including a promise from Lois to call them or have Clark call them first thing in the morning, before hanging up. She then stuffed the phone back into her pocket and shuffled quietly down the hall toward Clark's bedroom.

The door remained cracked open a couple inches, just as she'd left it, and when she pushed it open a bit more, the light from the hallway danced into the room, illuminating Clark's features. His face looked peaceful in sleep, and his chest rose and fell rhythmically. His hair, still damp from the quick shower he'd taken just before collapsing into bed, fell loosely over his forehead, and Lois found herself drawn to him, for the sole purpose of pushing back that errant lock of hair. She crept slowly across the dimly lit room and then lowered herself to sit next to him on the bed. He didn't wake, but he shifted slightly and mumbled something she couldn't quite make out. Carefully, she reached out and brushed the hair back off his forehead. Then, she leaned over and kissed him in that same spot.

She sat there for a long time before she allowed herself to leave him again.

Lois didn't sleep well, which she figured was probably for the better, since she managed to be up, showered, and dressed before Clark even stirred. She'd just stuck two bagels in the toaster when she heard quiet footsteps approaching from down the hall. She turned toward the hallway, and a big part of her expected to see Clark emerge, fully dressed and ready to go to work, with his huge signature smile on his face. She couldn't say why she expected that; after all, yesterday had probably been the most traumatic day Clark had experienced since being rescued. And unfortunately, her expectations were not reality.

Clark did emerge from the hallway, but he wore the same clothes he'd gone to bed in — a long-sleeved white shirt and black pants. His hair was ruffled and out of place, his chin and jawline were still covered in a growing layer of dark stubble, and his eyes were red and puffy. Although he stepped toward her, he didn't look at her, and his arms remained stiffly at his sides, his hands balled up into fists.

Lois swallowed and took a tentative step in his direction.

"Hey, you," she said softly. He still didn't look up at her. "I'm making bagels. You must be hungry. Honestly, I'm starving, you know, since we didn't eat last night, and..."

Her voice trailed off as she watched him lift one hand up and wipe a tear from his cheek. He then raised his eyes, and her breath caught in her throat.

"Oh, Clark..."

Haunted.

His eyes had the same haunted look that they'd had the first time she'd seen him six months ago.

Immediately, she forced herself to move around the kitchen table toward him, but he shook his head and moved back a step. His hands tightened more against his sides, and he let out a shaky breath.

"Last night... I-I burned down the w-warehouse...with my eyes," he stumbled, his eyes not leaving hers. Another tear slipped down his cheek, but he made no move to wipe it away this time.

"It was an accident, Clark," she murmured, and she hurried to close the rest of the distance between them. Her arms wrapped around him, and she enveloped him in a tight hug. She then buried her head into his shoulder. "It was an accident."

His large body shuddered against her, but he made no move to reciprocate the embrace right away. He did, however, lower his head onto her and let out another long breath.

"Lois, I...I didn't... I'm not..." His hands finally slid around her waist and settled on her back, and he shook as he pulled her up against him, tightly but carefully. His

voice barely as loud as a whisper, he murmured, "Please tell me again, Lois," and he buried his head into her hair.

She turned her head and kissed his cheek, then hugged him tighter.

"Clark, you are the kindest and gentlest person I know. You are cherished and loved. And he was wrong, Clark. He was wrong," she assured him, one hand rubbing soothing circles on his back.

"My eyes can shoot heat beams... That — that f-fire... Lois, I..."

"I know, Clark. I know. But it's just like your other abilities. I promise, you can control it."

He again shuddered against her, and she felt his breath hot on her neck. She closed her eyes and leaned into him.

"I-I'll have to control it. I-I have to. It's..."

He finally pulled away from the embrace, although he didn't move far, just enough to be able to see her. His jaw trembled as he seemed to study her eyes, and she frowned and reached up to touch his cheek. He screwed his eyes shut, but didn't move away.

"You will control it, Clark. You —"

"It's angry, Lois. The heat, it's...anger and rage and destruction, and I don't want it. I don't...I don't want it. It's dangerous to you and everyone and — and Trask was right, Lois. I'm an alien, and I'm a threat to the whole world. They should have killed me, not let me escape. I shouldn't be here. I shouldn't..."

She shook her head and pulled him back to her. His arms stayed at his sides as she hugged him, and he remained stiff and tense, his body shaking.

"No, Clark. No, you listen to me, now," she said firmly. "This ability of yours may feel scary, but you will learn to control it, just like you learned to control your other abilities. You are not dangerous, Clark, because you are kind and gentle and strong, and you can control it. He was not right, Clark. You are not dangerous. He was wrong."

A small sound escaped his lips as he lifted his arms, once again, and wrapped them around her waist. And they stood there for several more minutes, her murmuring quietly into him and repeating her assurances in a soothing voice as he clung to her, listening and nodding.

After a bit longer, when a comfortable silence had grown and Clark's breathing seemed to have stabilized, he raised his head up off her shoulder and glanced toward the kitchen.

"The bagels are cold now," he said.

She laughed quietly, squeezed him one more time, and then backed away a step, turning to follow his gaze toward the toaster. She patted his arm.

"Maybe you can heat them up for us then," she joked, her eyes twinkling as she shifted in his arms to look at him again.

A brief smile flickered on his face, replaced quickly by a thoughtful, tight-lipped frown and narrowed eyes. He swallowed, and she watched with fascination as he straightened up, clenched his jaw, and then stepped over to the counter.

She'd been kidding, of course. He wasn't really going to try to heat them up with his eyes...was he?

But that's exactly what he did. Methodically, he removed the bagels from the toaster, placed them on a ceramic plate, and hesitated for a second before he set the plate back on the counter right next to the sink. She watched, curious, as he turned on the water in the sink — just in case, she figured — and then moved back a step and shifted his focus to the bagels.

Her hand shot up to cover her mouth as she watched two weak red beams radiate from his eyes toward the bagels. A second later, tendrils of smoke began rising up from the bagels, and the edges began turning darker brown. And then darker still, and then... He blinked, and the red beams disappeared.

And he let out a huge sigh and slumped down into the nearest chair, burying his head into his hands.

"Clark, you... You did it!"

She moved closer to him, sat in the chair next to his, and wrapped one arm around his shoulders. Although he nodded mutely in response to her praise, he remained silent, his body still shaking. She continued to hold him until he no longer shook. Until his breathing was regular, and his heart no longer pounded in his chest.

And then, she kissed his cheek and held him just a bit longer.

Clark stepped out of the shower, wrapped a towel around his waist, and wiped the condensation off the mirror. Dark brown eyes stared back at him. They were his eyes, he knew, but he barely recognized them. They held extraordinary, dangerous, incredible power, his eyes. They could see things with great detail miles away. They could look right through solid objects. And...they could heat things up, light things on fire.

They were destructive.

He blinked and shook his head. A big part of him wanted to just turn back the clock to a week ago — before he'd developed any of these weird abilities. Before so much had changed.

Couldn't he...couldn't he just be normal?

He clenched his jaw and stared at himself again. His hand reached up and rubbed the dark, rough stubble along his chin. This had all started with a razor blade. A razor blade that had snapped in two as he'd tried to shave off the unwanted hair growing on his face.

At least now, he knew why.

Freak. Alien. Abomination.

But knowing why and understanding how different he was — how not human he was — didn't change the fact that he really, *really* needed to shave.

His gaze shifted down to his hands, and he turned them over, remembering the night before. He'd tried to stop the deadly red beams of heat pouring from his eyes; he'd tried to cover his eyes with his hands to stop the heat from destroying everything. However, the intensity of the beams had burned and blistered his palms. They'd already healed. They'd healed almost immediately, actually. And now, there was no evidence of the pain he'd accidentally inflicted on himself. He closed his hands into tight fists.

Fire didn't hurt him, but the heat from his own eyes could.

He raised his eyes again to the mirror and took a deep breath.

He'd heated up the bagels a bit ago by controlling the heat. Low-intensity, diffuse beams. He'd been able to control it then, despite his fear. He'd been able to start it up and then stop it again, and he'd been able to keep the intensity low. Not like...not like the destructive heat that had escaped him the night before.

So, he wondered now, as he stared at his face in the mirror...he wondered if maybe he could do the same thing, reflecting the light in the mirror and back at himself... Maybe he could create his own "razor." Maybe he could use this new ability — this ability that he desperately didn't want and that terrified him.

Maybe.

He took another deep breath, concentrated, and switched on his heat vision.

Clark stared at the ground and followed quietly along behind Lois as they walked down the street. He wasn't sure how she'd convinced him that it would be a good idea to go to work today. In fact, he wasn't sure how she'd convinced him that he could and should stay in Metropolis with her rather than head back to Smallville...where he could build himself some sort of a fortress to live in alone, in solitude. Away from anyone he might accidentally injure.

But here they were, approaching the Daily Planet building as though yesterday hadn't even happened.

He stopped abruptly, still about thirty feet from the building's entrance, and he raised his eyes up to the landmark globe, which gleamed in the bright morning sunshine.

He wanted to be here. More than anything else, he wanted to stay here with her, work with her at the Planet, see her every day. Bring her coffee in the morning. Find

the typos she always somehow seemed to overlook in her copy.

Yes, he wanted to be here. But fear kept him from following her inside.

There were too many people.

Flames flashed in his vision. Bright orange and yellow, leaping up into the sky. Cement and wood and metal crashing down all around him as the flames consumed it all.

He squeezed his eyes shut for a long moment, trying to block it all out. But even that was futile, and he staggered back a step and opened his eyes again. From a few feet in front of him, Lois stopped and turned around. Their eyes met, and he quickly blinked and looked back down at the ground.

There were too many people inside.

He'd been able to control it this morning, twice in fact. But reheating bagels and managing to shave the stubble from his chin in the controlled environment of his living space, with Lois there to help keep him calm — that was much different. And if he lost control here, while inside the Daily Planet building...

The fire, the flames, the destruction...

Hundreds of people would be in danger.

He couldn't do it. He couldn't follow her in.

A soft hand grasped his and tugged him forward. And despite his thoughts of only seconds ago, he found himself following obediently. His feet began moving again, and the two reporters soon pushed through the revolving doors that led to the lobby and worked their way through the crowd to the elevators.

He closed his eyes once more as they waited for the elevator to arrive, and he felt Lois lean up against him in a supportive gesture.

"There's too many — too many people here, Lois," he rasped, shaking his head. "Too many."

"Clark, look at me," she told him, her voice kind and gentle as always.

Again, he couldn't find it in himself to disobey. And so, he opened his eyes and raised them to meet hers. Immediately, he felt better, more confident, and safe, and he couldn't stop himself from squeezing her hand gently.

God, she's so beautiful.

A breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding escaped him, and he blinked several times as he held her gaze. She offered him a small smile, and it lit up his whole world...

Sunshine. She was like sunshine to him. Bright and warm and revitalizing and...he loved her so much.

Her other hand slipped into his as she stepped in front of him.

He wanted to be here. He needed to be here.

Most of all, he needed her. He needed her more than he'd ever needed anything ever.

"You'll be okay. We'll take it easy and work in the conference room today, where it will be quiet. Okay?"

He needed her. So he nodded and followed her onto the elevator.

She stayed right at his side, even as the small space seemed to close in around him. He sunk back against the wall and again screwed his eyes shut.

Freak.

"No," he mumbled, shaking his head.

Alien.

"Clark?"

Abomination.

"No."

"Hey, here, come on. The elevator stopped. Follow me."

Once again, he obeyed, his hand carefully — very carefully — tightening around hers as she led him down the ramp, through the bullpen, and into the smaller of the two conference rooms. She shut the door behind them and helped him over to the table, where he sat and immediately lowered his head into his hands.

"I shouldn't be here, Lois," he repeated. "There's too many people. I —"

"I know it's scary, Clark. But you're okay, and you're in control. Remember that, okay?" she soothed.

Her hand touched his back, and a calming sensation washed over him. He chuckled, despite everything, and then raised his eyes up to hers again. She looked down at him with a relaxed smile.

"I don't know how you have such faith in me, Lois, when I don't even — I don't — I don't even trust myself." He shook his head, unhappy with himself for stammering, and then lowered his head into his hands again.

He heard her pull up a chair next to him, and a soft touch brushed against his cheek. Her arms enveloped him, comforting him yet again, and he sighed and leaned into her.

"It's you, Clark. From the moment your mom showed me your picture and asked me to help find you," Lois said quietly.

Clark shifted in her embrace and pulled away from her slightly. His eyes met hers, without the barrier of the thick lenses he usually wore, and his breath caught in his throat. *Beautiful. God, I love her.* Her hand reached up and cupped his cheek, her soft skin touching his, making him feel calmer, stronger, warmer. He tilted his head into her touch, and she smiled.

"It's you. It's who you are. You are the kindest, gentlest person I know. And I just...I know it, Clark. I know you."

He shook his head slightly, disbelievingly, and he let out a shaky breath before scooting his chair closer to hers and moving to wrap his arms around her.

Several minutes later, a soft knock on the door startled both of them. Lois recovered first and pulled back out of the embrace as she cleared her throat.

"Come in," she called, her voice steady and strong.

Clark kept his head down and stayed perfectly still as he heard the door open behind him.

"Lois, Perry wanted you to check in with him when you can. Let him know what you're working on."

Jimmy's voice was unusually subdued, a notch quieter than normal, Clark thought, but he didn't turn around or raise his eyes up to greet his colleague. He wasn't ready yet to face anyone else. His hands shook as he reached up and covered his eyes with his palms.

"Thanks, Jimmy," Lois answered, her voice also low. "Can you tell him I'll be right there?"

She squeezed Clark's knee, and he lowered one hand to cover hers. The touch felt so good, so comforting to him, and he had a sudden urge to pull her back into him and kiss her, like they'd kissed yesterday.

Yesterday... It had only been yesterday that they'd shared their first kiss. And it had only been yesterday that he'd felt the joy of realizing he was in love and the joy of flying for the first time. Only yesterday, although it seemed like so long ago now. Everything seemed so far away, so mixed up and unclear and hazy.

"Sure thing, Lois," he heard Jimmy reply. The door then shut again, cutting them off from the rest of the newsroom, and he frowned as he shook his head.

"I-I'm sorry, Lois," he mumbled. "I don't know if...if I can..."

"It's okay, Clark," she assured him. "Will you be okay if I go chat with Perry and then grab us coffee?"

He nodded in response, and she patted his shoulder and then disappeared from the room, closing the door behind her.

Alone.

He was alone again.

Part of him sighed in relief, and another part of him shook with fear.

He turned in his chair and blinked for a moment, then focused his vision to look straight through the wall and into Perry's office. Lois stood, her arms crossed over her chest and a grimace on her face. She nodded at whatever Perry had just said and then spoke. And he heard her as he also focused his keen hearing, tuning out all the other sounds of the newsroom and his colleagues at their desks just outside the door. He heard her sweet voice, telling Perry confidently that they would indeed be able to attend a press conference being held in about an hour at EPRAD

and that they'd get their story on the governor's new proposed tax hikes written up before deadline.

Then, he heard Perry's quiet, "How is he doing?"

He inhaled sharply and closed his eyes for a moment, but didn't shut off his hearing. What had Lois told Perry? How much did he know? And Jimmy, for that matter. Did Jimmy know what had happened yesterday? He felt his hands start to shake again.

"He'll be okay, Perry. He just wasn't feeling well yesterday is all. We need to get working, and he'll be right back to himself. I'm sure of it."

He found himself nodding, silently thanking Lois. Of course she hadn't told Perry his secret. She wouldn't do that. She knew their need to keep it quiet.

He raised his hands up again to rub his eyes in an attempt to keep exhaustion from overwhelming him. The last twenty-four hours had been filled with so much. So many emotions, discoveries, surprises. He'd saved a young boy's life. He'd had his first kiss. He'd found out he was an alien. He'd flown fast enough to break the sound barrier. He'd burned down the warehouse that was his prison for fifteen years. He'd realized he'd fallen in love. It was all so much.

Now, he had to pick up the pieces and pull himself together. Be an adult and get to work. Pretend like he was okay. Control his emotions.

He could do this. He had to. He needed to.

He needed her.

He stood slowly, gathered himself, and took a deep breath. One thing at a time.

First, coffee. Straight black for her, lots of milk and sugar for him.

He could do this.

And then, they could go about their day. Press conference at EPRAD, article on the governor's tax hikes. Maybe lunch. Maybe dinner and a board game.

And maybe he could also continue to practice using his abilities, covertly, like he just had watching Lois in Perry's office. And he'd get better at it. And maybe he'd learn to trust himself like Lois did.

Maybe he could. Maybe he had to. Because he needed to. Because he needed her.

He headed out of the conference room and toward the coffee station.

He would. Because he had to.

Chapter 13

"Lois Lane, *Daily Planet*. You're telling us that this asteroid is the same one that was supposed to be passing several hundred thousand miles away from Earth? How could all of your scientists have been so wrong about the asteroid's trajectory? And what is being done about it?"

Lois stood at the front of the group of reporters inside EPRAD headquarters, her mind racing as she waited for Professor Daitch to respond to her questions. Next to her, Clark stood still as a statue, and when she glanced at him, she saw his eyes unfocused, his head tilted slightly to the right. She narrowed her eyes briefly as she studied him, but then shifted her focus back to the front of the room.

She tried to pay attention, but her thoughts flew around her head distractingly, leaving her feeling somewhat dizzy. The announcement they'd been given just moments ago had left the entire room of reporters speechless, her included.

The seventeen-mile-wide asteroid was apparently not going to pass harmlessly by the Earth. No, apparently, the seventeen-mile-wide asteroid was on course to hit the northeastern part of the United States. The scientists had refused to divulge just where they expected impact to occur, but they had not denied that the death toll and devastation of impact would be massive. Evacuation efforts would be too slow and ineffective. And given the repercussions — earthquakes, dust and debris filling the atmosphere, fires, climate change — the fate of the entire world was at stake.

Professor Daitch tapped his fingers on the podium, which brought Lois's attention back to him, and then cleared his throat.

"Unfortunately, there were several factors that led to our estimates being a bit...off. Some data anomalies led to incorrect calculations. I won't bore you with the details. And anyways, Ms. Lane, your final question is the more important one." Professor Daitch turned and motioned to a man standing just to his right. "General Zeitlin, would you like to explain the military's plan for dealing with the asteroid?"

General Zeitlin nodded and stepped up to the podium.

"Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen. As Professor Daitch explained, this asteroid, which we are calling Nightfall, is now known to be on a trajectory to hit Earth in approximately four days' time. The asteroid is traveling at a speed of nearly thirty thousand miles per hour and is one of the most massive asteroids we have tracked this close to Earth. The US military has weighed all options available to us, and, working together with EPRAD as well as the European Space Agency and the China National Space Agency, we have developed a plan to intercept the asteroid before it hits Earth using a powerful explosive, which we have designated the Asgard rocket. The asteroid will be close enough for Asgard to reach it in three days. We plan to release more details of the launch as we get closer to the launch window."

Another man, who had been waiting patiently next to the podium for several minutes, inched his way forward and leaned in toward the microphones.

“What we need for now is for no one to panic. We have a good, solid approach, and we will be successful. We will have another press conference tomorrow to give updates on the Asgard rocket launch. Thank you all for coming. No further questions.”

Behind them, the crowd poured out of the small briefing room. Lois didn't hurry to follow. Instead, she looped her arm through Clark's and looked up at him. The faraway look still hadn't left his eyes, but his hand traveled to cover hers, and he tilted his head again as though listening to something only he could hear.

Which may very well be what he was doing.

After another moment, he inhaled sharply, blinked, and looked down at her, concern in his eyes.

“We should go,” he said simply, and she nodded, her heart racing. What had he seen or heard or...?

Once they squeezed outside and through the crowd of reporters still congregating around the entrance, Lois felt Clark tense, and he stopped rather abruptly, tugging her to a halt with him. She tightened her hand in his and followed his gaze, upwards and slightly to the south.

“Clark...”

“It's out there, Lois. I can't... I can't quite see it, but... I can almost feel it.”

A sudden sense of foreboding and urgency consumed her, and her eyes darted around them — first back toward the EPRAD headquarters, where Professor Daitch stood speaking with a reporter from the *Metropolis Star*, and then out to the south, where Clark still gazed, his expression taut with uncertainty.

Her hand gripped his again, and he turned toward her as he lowered his eyes from wherever he'd been looking out somewhere far away. She tensed and leaned against him.

“We should...go back to the Planet and write up the story,” she suggested, her voice still low and shaky. She started to walk, but Clark didn't move, and since her hand still held his firmly, she was forced once again to stop. She glanced back over her shoulder at him. “You're coming, aren't you?”

He stared at her for several seconds, his mouth tightened in a frown and his dark eyes flickering with fear. But then he dropped his chin with a sigh and nodded as he followed her down the sidewalk.

She tried more than once to get him to talk to her on the way back to the Planet, but he remained stubbornly silent. Even when they'd reached the newsroom floor, gotten fresh cups of coffee, and settled in the conference room again to regroup, Clark still kept quiet.

So, Lois sat next to him, opened up her laptop, and spread her notes out on the table between them, hoping maybe the thrill of writing up the story could help him come out of the silent daze he was in. On the top of her pile of notes sat the article Clark had written up on the very first day he'd come to the Planet. Ironically, the article described the same Nightfall asteroid that now threatened the entire world — the asteroid that was supposed to be harmlessly passing by Earth on a safe trajectory hundreds of thousands of miles away.

She watched as Clark's frown tightened, and he reached out and picked up the newspaper clipping. His eyes skimmed the page quickly, and he then blinked several times as he set it back down.

Without looking at her, he finally spoke, his trembling voice asking, “H-how much do you — how much do you think something like Nightfall weighs? And the momentum because of its velocity... H-how... I mean, maybe...” And then he shook his head again, stood, and began pacing along the edge of the room, his arms crossed over his chest and his eyes narrowed in thought.

She had no idea how to answer his question, except by saying “a lot,” which she knew would be less than helpful. However, as he continued pacing and began mumbling to himself, her stomach lurched at the implications of his inquiry. Why would he want to know how much the asteroid weighed? He couldn't be thinking that *he* could... destroy it? Redirect it? No, no, he couldn't think that. Could he?

Pushing her chair back from the table, she stood abruptly and moved to intercept him.

“Clark, please... Tell me what you're thinking,” she pleaded, reaching out to grasp his shoulder as he marched by her.

At her touch, he immediately paused, but then shrugged his shoulders and started walking again, shaking his head and continuing to mumble to himself.

“Clark?”

This time, as he approached, she stepped directly in his path, forcing him to stop. She closed the distance between them and reached out to place her hands gently on his arms. He lifted his chin as he swallowed hard.

“The boulder was about twenty feet in diameter, Lois,” he said, his voice almost monotone. His expression then hardened as he added, “The asteroid is seventeen miles across, which means it would be almost a hundred billion times the size of the boulder.” He shook his head and lowered his eyes. “That's a lot. Maybe too much.”

“The boulder? What? Clark, what are you talking about?”

He sighed, took her hand, and led her back to the table. She sat as he sat, and her hands automatically found his

again. He hesitated for a second and then answered her in a low, shaky voice.

“The boulder I lifted yesterday. It wasn’t heavy to me. But the asteroid is so much bigger, Lois. If I — even if I could fly out into space... It might be too heavy. I don’t know if I can do it.”

She froze as he spoke, trying to process his words. He *was* considering whether he could fly out to space and redirect the asteroid. No, it was too risky. Too dangerous. And why would he even consider it? They had a plan, after all. The military had a plan that they said would work.

Her hands tightened around his, and he raised his eyes to meet hers again. He looked determined, but terrified.

“Clark, you...you can’t... They’re going to hit it with that rocket. The Asgard rocket. They said it will be fine, and we have nothing to worry about. Really, Clark, it will be fine,” she assured him.

She leaned toward him and brushed a gentle kiss on his lips. She meant to pull back, but he scooted his chair closer to hers, wrapped his arms around her, and pulled her into him, deepening the kiss with an urgency and need that she both recognized and felt herself. A warm tingle spread all the way down into her toes, and she moaned into him and slid her arms up around his neck, threading her fingers into his hair. His mouth slanted against hers one more time before he pulled away, breathing heavily, and she whimpered a tiny protest as she rested her forehead against his.

“S-sorry,” he mumbled, and he shifted a bit to pull her closer to him still as he planted a light kiss on her cheek. “Sorry, but I-I’ve wanted to kiss you all morning. I-I hope that’s... It was just something...I just needed...”

She laughed and nodded an agreement. However, a moment later, he pulled away from her and stood again, moving several steps away.

“There’s a lot of things that I still don’t understand, Lois,” he started, his voice low. “I...I’m still adjusting to being a part of this world, and maybe in a way I always will be. But I do know...” He exhaled sharply and turned back toward her as he ran a nervous hand through his hair. The fear was back in his eyes again, she noted, and he blinked several times before he continued, his voice oddly steady and clear. “At the press conference today, I was listening to the scientists talking in one of the back rooms, away from the public, and what they told us — what they told the press, which we are then supposed to faithfully pass on to the world — it was not the full truth. Lois, they... The Asgard rocket is not expected to work. They don’t believe they have anything powerful enough to destroy the asteroid, if they are even able to intercept it. They are going to try, but they have calculated the chance of success at less than five percent.”

Lois closed her eyes and leaned back in her chair as the room began to spin.

So that’s what he’d been listening to during the press conference. Scientists discussing how their plan to save the world was not actually going to save the world.

They were all going to die.

And no one knew it, because they’d been lied to.

They were all going to die.

Unless...

She forced herself to take a deep breath as she looked up toward him — the man who, until six months ago, had been isolated from the world, kept in a small white room with nothing but hate surrounding him. The man who had somehow overcome all of that to become the kindest person she’d ever met.

The man who, just yesterday, had found out he may very well not be human. And, at the same time, the man who might be humanity’s only hope...

She shook her head, but held his gaze, and as she studied his eyes, she knew. She knew just as well as he did.

He had to try. He couldn’t just sit back and do nothing.

He’d just gained the world. He’d just gained his freedom.

And he was going to fight to keep it. He was going to fight to save it.

She stood up, closed the distance between them, and wrapped her arms around him as she buried her head into his chest. And her world, which had just begun to spin out of control, started to feel just slightly less terrifying as his strong arms embraced her.

He would fight to save everything. No matter the cost.

The Kansas cornfields stretched out in front of him, acres and acres of green stalks set in nice neat rows. He’d helped his dad plant the corn just before he’d left for Metropolis, and he’d assumed he’d be coming home to help during harvest. He’d looked forward to it, actually — spending time with his dad, learning all the things about running a farm that he’d never gotten a chance to learn after his childhood had been so abruptly stolen from him.

His jaw tightened as he stared out over the fields, and he desperately hoped he would still get to help with the harvest. He desperately hoped the farm and his parents and...everything would still be around in two more months when the corn would be fully mature, the bright yellow cobs safely tucked away in their husks.

He closed his eyes, knelt down, and rested his hands lightly on the ground, the soft dirt shifting under his fingers. And then, he raised his eyes up to the bright afternoon sky, filled his lungs with as much air as he could handle, and launched himself upwards.

Within only seconds, he felt the air around him thin, and he had to force himself not to exhale. He continued up and up and up, farther and farther and farther away from the ground and the safety of knowing. For up here, beyond the edges of the Earth's atmosphere, lay regions of vast space unexplored by humankind, and he had no idea whether his body would handle the bone-chilling cold, the airless vacuum, the darkness...

All afternoon, they tested his abilities, and they hadn't yet found his limits. He'd been up as high as about two hundred fifty miles, looping around the International Space Station before flying back to Earth. But this time, his goals were higher. This time, he would completely leave the Earth's atmosphere. There would be no air to breathe, no heat to warm him. And only his own powers to guide him back home.

He slowed for a moment and hovered. He could still feel the pull of Earth's gravity, faintly tugging him back toward the safe, solid ground. But he easily resisted. He turned to the Sun, now a massive ball of bright yellow and white light filling him with energy. Then, he looked back toward the ground and zoomed in his telescopic vision on Lois and his parents, who stood huddled together at the edge of the cornfields, where he'd been only seconds before.

They'd supported him when he'd asserted his need to try whatever he could to stop the asteroid. His parents had been devastated by the alarming news at first, just as Lois had...just as he had. But they'd supported him. And then, his dad — always logical and thoughtful and coolheaded — had suggested they use the next three days as wisely as possible. Clark would learn his limits — find out how fast and strong he was, find out how high he could fly...find out how long he could hold his breath.

And then, in three days from now, they would hope that the scientists were wrong and that the Asgard rocket actually worked, so he didn't have to try to push the massive asteroid off its collision course with Earth.

He twisted around to face the great dark unknown and shivered, not from the cold, but from the sinister blackness ahead of him. He steeled his nerves, clenched his hands into tight fists to stop their shaking, and propelled himself out further, thankful that at least space was not a tiny room filled with plain white.

Two hundred forty thousand miles in five minutes. Approximately.

Clark lowered himself onto a rock and sat, his fingers sifting reverently through the fine layer of Moon dust covering the ground beside him. He vividly remembered wanting to be an astronaut when he was a kid; he remembered staring up at the Moon on clear nights and

imagining that someday he'd be one of the few humans to walk on the Moon's surface.

But he wasn't human.

Yes, he'd now left footprints from his Nikes in the loose lunar soil, several miles from the site where Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin had first stepped foot onto the lunar surface.

But he'd flown here of his own power, not in a space shuttle. He'd flown two hundred forty thousand miles in five minutes. Approximately.

And he still hadn't needed to take a breath. In fact, he hadn't felt the urge to breathe in several minutes.

And he didn't feel cold or hot or whatever he should feel.

All this absurdity. All this abnormality.

Clark closed his eyes for a moment as he tried to push away his intrusive thoughts. However, all of his doubts and insecurities continued to scream at him, reminding him that he *was not* normal. Trask's voice echoed loudly, and he almost felt the man's presence next to him, shouting hate-filled words into his sensitive ears.

Alien. Abomination. Dirty alien scum.

Threat to humanity.

He shook his head, forced his eyes back open, and stared back toward the crescent-shaped blue and green globe that had been his home as long as he could remember. Billions of lives were at stake.

The sheer weight of that fact seemed to press down on his chest, and for a scary moment, he choked on the nothingness around him, gasping for a breath that he could not take. His eyes screwed shut as the darkness seemed to close in on him, shrinking his world back into a ten-by-ten cell with white walls and a constant chill. Pain radiated from his right arm, spreading through his body. A rough hand grabbed him, hauled him up out of his cot, and shoved him down onto the floor. And a hard boot kicked him in the side, forcing all the air out of his lungs.

He couldn't breathe.

He was going to die.

"Clark?! If you can hear me, please come back now!"

Da-dum. Da-dum. Da-dum.

Lois.

"Clark?! You've been gone for thirty minutes now!"

Please, Clark..."

Lois.

He pushed himself up from the ground, his eyes still shut tightly. How had he been gone for thirty minutes? And how was he hearing her, all the way from here? Two hundred forty thousand miles away. Approximately.

He groaned and shook his head again as he pressed his palms into his temples. His lungs didn't burn. He didn't need to breathe. He was fine. Except that his head pounded

with the same stabbing pain he'd felt every night for fifteen years — a million razor-sharp blades piercing into his skull. And except that the fate of the whole world rested on his shoulders.

Him.

An alien.

Not even born on Earth.

A twenty-five-year-old alien who, just yesterday, had had a major mental breakdown.

He wasn't fit to save the world. He could barely hold himself together.

"Clark?!"

The voice he heard resonated at three different tones now, and Clark could clearly make out his parents' voices intermingled with Lois's.

They called out to him to come home. They wanted him back. They believe in him.

Straightening himself up, he lowered his hands to his sides and opened his eyes. He'd somehow gotten turned around, and he now stood facing away from Earth. Black space extended out as far as he could see. And out there, another two million miles away, approximately, a seventeen-mile-wide asteroid raced toward him.

He stood between it and Earth.

Just him.

The freak alien abomination Clark Kent.

Nothing else was going to save the world. Not the Asgard rocket. Not some random miracle or some other force of nature or some other super-strong being.

Just him.

With a final decisive glare out toward where he knew the asteroid to be, still beyond his visual capacity, Clark set his jaw and then turned and leapt off of the Moon, propelling himself back toward Earth.

Chapter 14

The four adults really did not fit on the Kents' small couch. But they squished together anyways, and Lois was glad of the comfort of their closeness. She and Martha sat on either side of Clark, and each of them held one of his trembling hands. Jonathan sat at the end opposite Lois, his arm draped supportively around Martha's shoulders.

All of them kept their eyes trained on the small television sitting on the other side of the coffee table. Professor Daitch paused in his prepared speech, and his eyes panned nervously left and then right before he cleared his throat and continued.

"The Asgard rocket is currently en route toward Nightfall. Impact is expected in...two minutes thirty seconds. We will switch on our live feed of the rocket's progress and impact momentarily. In the meantime, are there any questions?"

Lois felt Clark tense up next to her, and she squeezed his hand gently in a silent reminder of her support. She knew he could hear her heart racing, however, and she was fairly sure he knew she was just as terrified as he was.

Lois, Jonathan, and Martha had spent the last two and a half days doing the best they could to build him up. They'd encouraged him, pushed him, consoled him, hugged him. On that first day, they'd stood terrified as he'd leapt up into the sky and not returned for over thirty minutes; they'd listened in awe when he'd finally come back and explained that he'd lost track of time while sitting on a rock on the Moon, waiting to see how long until he felt the need to breathe; they'd pushed aside all their own disbelief the next day, when he'd sped around the Earth thirty times in less than ten minutes, representing the distance he'd have to travel to get to Nightfall should Asgard fail; and they'd worked for hours the night before discussing all possible attack plans.

They'd done everything they could to make him feel confident and capable and strong. And every time he'd expressed doubt, they'd reassured him.

But they couldn't hide their fear and concern now. Lois couldn't stop her heart from beating faster and harder, just as Clark couldn't stop his hands from trembling. And from her spot on the end of the couch, Lois saw Martha's free hand search out Jonathan's.

They were all terrified.

If Asgard failed, Clark was set to go. He had a plan and a back-up plan and then another back-up to the back-up plan. But he would be seven hundred thousand miles from home with no one to help him. He would be on his own.

Lois let out a shaky breath, and she felt his fingers tighten around hers.

"Here it goes," he said quietly.

And they all watched, holding their breaths, as a small dot flashed on the television screen, heading at a high rate of speed toward a larger dot. The small dot, representing the Asgard rocket, blipped forward, closer and closer to the larger dot, representing the asteroid. Vaguely, she heard Jonathan mumble, "It's off. It's wrong. Dammit. It's not gonna..."

Lois forced herself not to look away, but tears quickly formed at the corners of her eyes as she too saw the slight misalignment of the rocket's trajectory.

A voice from the television set began counting down the seconds until impact, but it didn't matter. They all knew.

It had failed.

None of them moved or spoke as the small dot continued blipping along, skirting just past the asteroid and continuing on out into space.

It had failed.

Next to her, Clark shuddered and lowered his head. She released his hand and shifted to wrap her arm around his broad shoulders.

The evening before, as they'd sat outside together on the front porch and watched the sunset change the sky from blue to vivid pink and orange and yellow, he'd confessed to her that the time he'd spent sitting on the Moon had not all been pleasant. He'd told her he'd had a minor panic attack as he'd realize that billions of lives might depend on him. He'd told her how he felt terrified of failure. Terrified knowing that, if Asgard failed, he would be the only other option. And that if he also failed, the world would be doomed.

These abilities of his, these superpowers that had somehow emerged just in the nick of time, they might be the only chance humanity had at survival.

She couldn't imagine having that much pressure on her. And, given his past...

She tightened her grip on him and felt him lean into her slightly. He then cleared his throat and stood, slowly but decisively, and her admiration of him grew even more.

Trask had vilified Clark, even as a young, innocent child, for being an alien. Trask had surrounded Clark with hatred, tortured him, and convinced him that he was a threat to the world.

And yet, he now stood, tall and strong and ready to risk his life to save that very world Trask had said he would destroy.

Trask was so wrong.

"I should go now. The longer I wait...people will start to panic." His voice was quiet but firm.

Lois stood, as did Martha and Jonathan, and the three of them pulled him together with them into a hug. Lois felt Martha shaking, her quiet sobs muffled into Clark's chest.

"It'll be alright, Mom," he murmured, and his arms shifted to fully embrace his mother. "I can do this. I have to."

Martha said nothing, and Lois watched as the older woman pulled out of her son's arms, wiped her cheeks, and then reached up to place one hand on either side of his face. Clark smiled down at her, a smile full of love and gratitude, and then he once again pulled her in for another hug.

"Thank you for everything, Mom. I owe you so much. I owe all of you so much," he said softly. He buried his head into his mother's hair and kissed her. "You all mean more to me than you know... Mom, Dad, Lois... I..." He raised his head up and met Lois's eyes, and she saw the briefest flicker of fear before he blinked it away. "I love you all. I will do this. I promise you."

Lois pursed her lips, gave him a slight nod, and then hastily wiped the tears from her cheeks. She reached

forward toward Martha and pulled Martha back toward her. Jonathan's hand set solidly on her shoulder.

"Remember, Clark, use your head," Jonathan said. "I know we all agreed your first plan should just be to try to stop it and push it back out into space, but if it's too heavy and moving too fast, you can try to —"

"I know, Dad."

Lois suddenly felt lightheaded, and she leaned back into Jonathan a bit as the three of them watched Clark nod, turn away, and then disappear out the front door, a slight breeze in his wake.

She immediately turned and collapsed into Jonathan, as did Martha, and they stood there, crying together, as a sonic boom echoed outside, high above them.

The minutes ticked by, and the three soon found themselves sitting on the couch again, staring at the television. A group of scientists stood on a stage next to the President of the United States, who had started into a grim speech urging the public not to panic, but to spend the next twenty-four hours before impact with their loved ones. When the short speech concluded, the local Kansas newsfeed panned to a view of Wichita from above, maybe from a helicopter, Lois thought. The highways were quickly becoming parking lots, deadlocked with people trying desperately to evacuate to...wherever. Rioters had also begun to fill the streets of downtown, marching, pillaging, and looting.

It was such needless insanity.

Next to her, Jonathan glanced down at his watch and inhaled sharply.

"He...should be there by now. He thought maybe ten minutes. It's been fifteen."

Martha sobbed again and curled her knees up under her as she leaned into Jonathan.

"My poor boy. All I can think of is how he's out there, all alone. He..." She choked back another sob and shook her head. "...he spent so long alone at that...place. And I promised him he'd never be alone again. But now..."

"He's not alone, though, Martha," Jonathan soothed, his voice strong and deliberate. "He's not alone because he knows we're here, waiting for him to return."

The older man paused, and Lois thought she heard him sniffle, but he quickly shook his head and continued.

"More than anyone else, he knows what it's like to have no hope left. He knows what despair is. He...he told me one night — remember, Martha, that one night that he and I stayed outside too late, and you got worried? I think he'd been home for only a week, maybe two — anyways, he told me that he'd lost hope years ago. That it had been too dangerous and too difficult for him to continue holding onto the hope that he'd be rescued. It had just hurt too

much and caused him too much additional pain. And he said he felt ashamed of that. He'd wished he'd been strong enough, he said, to keep hopeful, even in the face of what they'd done to him."

Martha opened her mouth as though to speak, but Jonathan stopped her.

"My point, Martha, is that the man who just left the house — our son, who right now is making his very best effort to save the world — he knows we're here waiting for him. He knows he's not alone anymore, even if we're not physically with him. He knows we believe in him and love him and will *never* give up on him. And because of that, he will not lose hope, ever again. And so I know he is going to succeed."

"We can't lose our hope either," Lois whispered, and she hastily wiped the tears from her cheeks again.

"Right," Jonathan agreed.

The three settled back onto the couch once more and continued to watch the scene unfold on the television.

The massive crater-pitted rock hurled at an enormous speed along its uncompromising path, its target set and its impact imminent. It did not deviate. It would not deviate. Unless he managed to convince it.

Clark looped around it once, fear making his heart pound harder in his chest as he took in its immense size. He then settled into an easy pace alongside it, one arm extended out in front of him as he flew. It was even more massive than he'd expected, a roughly oval-shaped, highly dense rock closer to twenty miles wide than seventeen. Yet another thing EPRAD had either miscalculated or misrepresented.

Not that it mattered.

There was no way he'd be able to push this rock back the way it had come. No way. He was just one man, after all. Not even a man. An alien.

He closed his eyes briefly, pushing away his negative thoughts, and reminded himself that he still didn't know the limits of his strength.

Maybe he could. He would have to try.

"I love you, Clark."

She'd told him that the night before. She'd kissed him on the forehead and held him and reassured him. And then she'd gifted him with those four wonderful words.

And he forced himself to hold onto those words as his eyes flew back open and his mouth set in a tight, determined frown.

She was depending on him. She'd saved him six months ago, and now it was his turn to save her.

He would. He could. Because he had to.

Their first plan, after much brainstorming, was just to put Clark's strength to the ultimate test. He would fly in

front of it, find some good handholds, and try to slow it and then push it back out into space, where it had come from. It seemed like the safest approach and, if he was indeed strong enough, the easiest.

He nodded to himself, clenched his fists tighter, and sped up substantially, moving out in front of the massive rock. He soon found himself flying backwards at about thirty thousand miles per hour, something he hadn't thought to practice, and he hesitated as he studied the rock in front of him. He reached out with a tentative hand and pressed his fingers into the rock. The surface felt a bit like rough granite, not unlike the boulder he'd lifted in the forest several days before, albeit cold to the touch. He placed his other hand on the rock as well, both palms flat, and straightened his arms fully, which shifted him backwards slightly.

Then, he allowed the rock to push him along with it for several seconds, feeling its tremendous power.

And his heart started racing with doubt again.

Before he could talk himself out of it, he repositioned himself horizontally along the path of the asteroid, shifted his hands on the rock, and tightened his jaw as he began applying a gradually increasing force in the opposite direction. He pushed more and more and more until his arms hurt from the strain.

And nothing seemed to happen.

He growled in frustration, propelled himself away from the asteroid, and looped back around behind it for a moment to regain his bearings, shaking out his arms as he flew.

Maybe he just needed to push longer. Maybe it had slowed slightly, and he didn't even know it. It was a bit difficult to judge speed out here. But if that was the case, he would fail from exhaustion before he made any real progress.

Scowling, he raced back around to the front of the rock and tried again. This time, he pushed harder and faster and longer, forcing himself to continue against the pain growing in his hands and arms and shoulders. His eyes screwed shut as he groaned in frustration when the rock again did not seem to slow or deviate from its set path, even after several minutes. Once more, he angled himself away from the giant asteroid and sped around to fly next to it as the pain from his efforts subsided.

Plan one had failed.

He really didn't like the back-up plan or the back-up to the back-up plan. In fact, just a few minutes ago, he'd decided the back-up plan would be a bad idea; if it didn't work, it might make the asteroid hit Earth even sooner and at an even higher rate of speed, and that would be worse than failing all together.

And the back-up to the back-up plan was pretty much a last resort. He doubted he'd survive if it came to that.

He felt his hands shake and his chest begin to burn.

Failure.

Freak alien Clark Kent couldn't even save his family.

Pain began to grow behind his eyes, and he shook his head and tried to blink it away.

"Trask was wrong, Clark... Trask may have been right about your origins, but he was not right about who you are."

Lois was right, and he trusted her.

He had to believe in her words, not Trask's. He did. He believed her words. He may be an alien, but he was not a destroyer. Not a threat.

He continued to fly alongside the asteroid for another moment as he gathered his thoughts. If he tried to push the asteroid at an angle, rather than stop it and send it back the way it had come, he could inadvertently make it travel faster. So that meant plan two was out. And plan three... Flying full speed at the asteroid and hitting it with all of his power seemed like a sure way to hurt or even kill himself. He really, really didn't want to try plan three.

And so, he really had no idea what to do now.

"Remember, Clark, use your head..." his father had told him.

He gritted his teeth and looped around in front of the rock again, flying backwards about a mile ahead of its leading edge. His eyes scanned along the length of the asteroid. It was just too massive. Maybe if it had actually been seventeen miles wide instead of twenty, like they'd said... Maybe then he could have moved it.

The pain pulsed behind his eyes again, and he reached up with one hand and rubbed the bridge of his nose. For a moment, a vision of bright orange flames danced in front of him, and sounds of a roaring fire and of wood and concrete and metal collapsing down around him rattled in his ears. He shook his head.

Destroy it. Destroy it all.

His vision tinged red.

No.

Yes.

No.

...Yes!

He blinked again, no longer fighting the growing red heat wanting to escape his eyes. He could. He could destroy it. Like the warehouse. Or at least, he could maybe break it up into small enough chunks that he'd be able to move it.

He closed his eyes for just a moment as he felt the power growing inside of him. He focused it, concentrating it in his eyes, and just as the power began to overflow, his eyes flew open again. Red beams of heat immediately

burst out, cutting into and through the massive rock in front of him. With another growl, he increased the heat even more and began to methodically cleave large chunks of smoldering rock off the asteroid, keeping himself moving as fast as he could manage. Left and right, up and down — he sliced through the solid rock, weakening its destructive strength.

Within minutes, he had successfully chopped the asteroid up into hundreds of much smaller pieces. The chunks still flew toward Earth, but now he thought he should be strong enough. He could do this.

After blinking away the red heat still itching to destroy more space rocks, he moved to the far edge of the broken up asteroid, selected one of the outermost rocks, and reverted back to plan one. Modified plan one, that is. Push the rocks back out the way they'd come.

One at a time, he moved them, and his progress was slow but steady. Each rock felt slightly heavier than the last, but he forced himself to continue working until the last rock had been redirected back out toward the vast blackness of space.

Away from Earth.

Away from his home and his family.

And only after that — after every single one of the rocks had been diverted — did he allow himself to stop. Exhausted, he hovered in place for several more minutes, closing his eyes. He almost desperately wanted to take a breath and refill his lungs with sweet, oxygen-rich air. But he was still hundreds of thousands of miles out in space, and there was no air here.

He turned back toward Earth as he opened his eyes again.

Home.

He needed to go back home. Back to his parents. Back to her.

He felt a pull in his chest, urging him forward, and he began to fly, faster and faster and faster. They would be waiting. In fact, the whole world would be waiting.

He slowed a bit as he passed the Moon and then again as he re-entered the atmosphere. He came to an abrupt halt a couple hundred miles above the ground as millions of sounds bombarded his sensitive ears. Cheering, chanting, singing, crying. Sounds of the entire world rejoicing as word of the miracle spread around the globe.

No one was going to die today. And he had done that. He had saved all of them.

One sound filtered through above the cacophony of all the others. And it was steady and rhythmic and familiar. It was her. Lois. Her heartbeat. Guiding him back.

He drifted downward, floating himself toward Smallville, and he scanned ahead with his telescopic

vision, easily finding her. She stood outside with his parents.

They all smiled as they looked up toward the sky.

They were waiting for him.

They'd always waited for him.

He smiled as happiness and joy filled his heart, and then he turned and sped down toward home.

Chapter 15

"You have to fold the dough together and then flatten it with your hands, not... No, Lois, don't use the rolling pin..."

Lois sighed in exasperation as Clark gently reached over and removed the rolling pin from her flour-covered hands.

"You said this was going to be easy," she hissed, dusting her hands on her apron. "And you didn't say it was going to be so messy."

Clark laughed, brushed a light kiss on her cheek, and set the rolling pin down near the sink. He then moved back to her side and, with steady, skilled hands, began to fold the dough.

"It is easy, and, uh, you didn't have to get quite so messy," he teased, and he flashed her another silly smile as he pressed the dough out to about one inch thick. When he was finished, he glanced around the kitchen briefly. "Ah ha, here. This part, this is really easy, I promise."

Lois's hands settled on her hips as she scowled at him. However, he didn't seem to notice. Instead, he opened up a drawer just to his left and pulled out a small, round biscuit cutter.

"All you have to do is dust it with flour first so the dough doesn't stick, and then..."

Patiently, he showed her how to cut each of the biscuits and move the dough to the baking sheet. He then handed her the biscuit cutter and allowed her to take over as he moved back to the stove and continued cooking up sausage for the gravy.

She did her best. Several of the biscuits somehow ended up not quite circular, but good enough, she decided. And when she finished, she moved the baking sheet into the oven, which was already preheated to the correct temperature, and set a timer. Ten to twelve minutes, he'd told her. Then, she lazed back against the counter, sipped her coffee, and watched Clark cook.

It was the morning after.

The morning after the day the world had almost ended.

The morning after he'd flown nearly a million miles out into space, chopped up a giant asteroid into less-giant pieces, and pushed those less-giant pieces back out into space.

The morning after he'd returned to them exhausted, but alive and...different.

He turned to grin at her, and she returned his smile with one of her own. Different indeed.

"I think I like this, you know," she ventured, setting her coffee cup down and moving closer to him.

"What? Cooking together?" he asked. He shot her a brief sideways glance before shifting his focus back to the sausage gravy.

"No," Lois said coyly. She closed the final few inches between them and pressed herself against him as she stretched up on her tiptoes and peeked over his shoulder. "You cooking. And me watching you cook."

He laughed again, a deep rumbling laugh accompanied by a huge bright smile. Her heart melted, and she wrapped one arm around his waist and leaned her head against his shoulder.

"Well, I think we can come to some sort of arrangement," he smirked. And, after taking a quick taste of the gravy, he added, "Mmmm, here. Try it."

He took up a small spoonful of the gravy into a fresh spoon, blew on it lightly to cool it, and held it out to her, offering her a taste. She eagerly obliged, closing her eyes as he fed her the small bite.

"Mmmm, oh, wow. Clark, this is amazing," she admitted.

Her eyes opened again to meet his, and her expression softened as she saw the pure joy in his smile. So much of the darkness that used to hide in his deep brown eyes was now just...gone. Instead, his eyes seemed to twinkle with amusement and love and gratitude. They held a sort of newfound confidence and certainty. And it enticed her.

She leaned in toward him, seeking out his lips to fulfill the deep yearning she felt in her chest, and he tilted his head downward slightly to meet her.

However, the loud beeping of the kitchen timer startled both of them, and Clark jumped back a step as he nearly dropped the spoon into the pan of gravy. Lois whimpered a protest, but managed to recover quickly, flashing Clark an apologetic smile as she hurried around to his other side to switch off the timer.

A quick peek inside the oven revealed nicely browned, mostly round biscuits, and she quickly grabbed a hot pan holder, removed the biscuits from the oven, and set the baking sheet down on the counter.

"Oh, Lois, dear, they look perfect! Did you make those yourself?"

Martha's voice carried from across the room, and Lois looked up with a grin as the two older Kents padded into the kitchen together, still in their pajamas. She smiled but shook her head.

“No, not really. I just helped the Master Chef over there,” she joked, tipping her head toward Clark, who had finally regained his bearings from their almost-kiss and was now scooping the gravy out of the pan and into a serving dish.

“Breakfast is almost ready!” he said cheerfully, and he set the serving dish of sausage gravy on the table before angling over to give his parents a brief hug.

Lois smiled yet again as she watched Martha hold onto him just a bit longer than necessary while Jonathan clapped him on the back. She’d been more than willing to help Clark when he’d suggested they get up early to cook for his parents. After all, Martha had spent the last several days cooking incredible meals for all of them, and it seemed appropriate that Clark had wanted to do something nice in return. However, Lois was quite thankful that Clark seemed to know his way around the kitchen much better than she did; with her help — what little she’d been able to provide, that is — he’d prepared quite the feast. She transferred the warm biscuits to another serving dish and moved the biscuits, along with two other platters piled high with hash browns, eggs, and bacon, to the table.

And the four of them sat down together and ate and chatted and laughed. And when they were all fully sated, Lois offered to do the dishes while Clark helped his dad with the morning chores and Martha tidied up a bit.

An hour later, they said their goodbyes to the Kents, promising to return for dinner the next weekend, and Clark gently lifted her into his arms and leapt up into the sky, flying northeast toward Metropolis.

It felt different this time — flying in his arms. He felt different. His grip on her was steady and assured, and he flew with purpose and confidence. The direction, speed, and altitude were all controlled and in control. And he occasionally glanced down at her and gifted her his incredible smile.

They soared high up through clouds, passing in and out of the misty white fog as the ground sped by below them. Beautiful. It was amazing and wonderful and beautiful, she thought. She shivered, not because she was cold, but because something just felt so...right. Sighing contentedly, she rested her head on his shoulder and closed her eyes. And his fingers seemed to tighten around her just a tiny bit more, sending waves of tingy warmth through her.

Although she knew he could cover the distance in seconds by himself, the flight to Metropolis took them several minutes, and she opened her eyes again to watch the buildings below as the familiar skyline came into view.

“I missed the city,” he said quietly, stopping to hover thousands of feet up in the air, roughly over downtown. “I love Smallville, but I think Metropolis is my new home. I mean, that is, if...”

His voice trailed off, and she shifted in his arms slightly as his gaze drifted to her. He didn’t look troubled, just thoughtful, and a wide smile broke out on her face.

“If you want a real job, I think you’ll have it. Let’s get changed and head into work, and we can sit down and talk to Perry,” she suggested.

He nodded, tightened his grip on her, and continued toward her apartment. Moments later, he landed them on the roof, and they took the stairwell down to her floor.

Being home, back in her apartment after having been gone for four days, felt almost surreal to Lois. Everything was just as she’d left it, and yet everything seemed different — more colorful, more alive, more important. Clark appeared equally as affected, and he stood just inside the doorway for several seconds in a sort of stunned silence until she moved back to his side, took his hand, and led him over to the couch.

“Last time we were here together seemed like a lifetime ago,” he admitted.

They both sat, and he immediately pulled her back into his arms, cradling her against him. She didn’t resist.

“It may as well have been,” she agreed. “So much has... So much is different now.”

“I’m different, you mean,” he stated bluntly, and he lowered his head to rest against the top of hers.

She felt one of his hands press into her back gently while the other caressed her upper arm. A long breath escaped her, and she snuggled up against him more as she nodded into him.

“I think you’re more...you. I mean...”

He kissed the top of her head.

“I know what you mean. And I think you’re right.”

They sat in silence for a few minutes, and she thought that maybe she never wanted to move from his arms, from this spot right here with him, ever again. However, she knew they did need to go to work; although Perry had told her — and all of his other reporters and staff — to take as much time as they needed given the whirlwind of the global crisis from the last four days, she had called Perry the night before and let him know they were planning to be in today. And given their abrupt disappearance after the EPRAD press conference four days prior, citing the urgent need for Clark to get on an airplane back to Kansas right away, she felt strongly that they needed to show up, on time and ready to work. Especially since she was sure many of her colleagues would not be back yet.

She moved her hand to rest on Clark’s chest and then pressed her fingers into him as she pushed herself away and looked up into his eyes.

He gazed down at her with what she could only interpret as adoration and raised one hand up to cup her cheek, his fingers brushing her hair back behind her ear. It

felt so right; his touch felt so right, and she leaned into him and closed her eyes again.

“May I kiss you?”

She felt his hot breath just inches from her face, and she nodded, even without opening her eyes.

“Yes. Please.”

He didn’t hesitate, and his lips quickly met hers in a tender caress as both of his arms wrapped around her again. She slid her hands up his chest and around his neck, tugging him to her as she deepened the kiss with a quiet moan. She felt him smile into the kiss, and she pulled away, breathing heavily.

“Wow again, huh?” she murmured, shifting her hands around to touch his face. His eyes were still closed, and he nodded and cleared his throat.

“You could say that, yeah,” he agreed.

With a low groan, he buried his head into the crook of her shoulder and pulled her back into him again, his lips grazing her neck. She returned the embrace.

“I love you, Lois,” he whispered, and she felt him shudder as his arms tightened around her. Hesitantly, he added, “Out there... When I was out there, trying to figure out how to...” He shook his head into her and then kissed her cheek and her lips again before lowering his head back onto her shoulder. “I beat him, Lois. I...overcame all of the...ideas that Trask put in my head. And that — and I was able to do that because of you. Everything I’ve been able to do is because of you. And I hope you know... I hope you know how much you mean to me. I hope you can feel how much I love you. And I hope you...”

“I love you too, Clark,” she said, her voice low and full of emotion. “I’ve loved you...since the beginning.”

With the admission, a single tear slipped down her cheek, and she reached up hastily to wipe it away. He lifted his head off her shoulder, and their eyes met again as he raised one hand up to cup her cheek, his thumb brushing away another tear just as it fell from the corner of her eye.

“Thank you, Lois. Thank you for loving me.”

And he seemed to blink away his own tears as he leaned in and kissed her again.

Freedom was a blue sky filled with puffs of gray and white clouds, soaring high up over a colorful, loud city dotted with buildings and cars and people. Freedom was sunshine and warmth and love.

And Clark finally felt it. He was finally free.

Not the same free he’d been six months ago, when Lois had first rescued him. No, it was much more than that.

This freedom was unburdened and lofty and limitless. This was freedom of his mind as well as his body. He was no longer a prisoner, in every sense of the word.

And this freedom was bright and hopeful.

Clark smiled as he cradled Lois in his arms and flew them toward the Daily Planet, marveling at how perfectly she seemed to fit snuggled up against his chest. Perfect. She was perfect. And he was so incredibly lucky to have her in his life.

He landed them on the roof of the Daily Planet building, setting her feet gently on the ground next to him. And when she looked up at him and smiled, her eyes lit up with love and wonder, his whole world felt brighter.

He knew that he’d never forget the tiny white room where he’d lived for years, alone, away from his family, away from sunlight and warmth. He’d never forget the fear and pain. Those memories couldn’t be erased.

But here, now, with her...

“Come on, partner. Let’s go get you a job,” she quipped. Her hand tightened around his, and she leaned into him briefly as she planted a kiss on his lips.

She then led the way, and he followed. He’d follow her anywhere, he decided, because anywhere she’d lead him would be filled with sunshine and color and love.

And there was nowhere else he’d rather be.

THE END