

**SUMMARY:** It's the holiday season and someone's determined to make sure Lex will get the Christmas he deserves.

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**RATING:** PG-15

## THE CHRISTMAS TRAP

### CHAPTER ONE

"I should kill you, Julian. Mom asked me what I thought of having a little brother to play with when I came back from Excelsior that summer and, stupid me, I said there was nothing I wanted more. What was I thinking?" fumed Lionel Luthor's first born, looking daggers at his baby brother- the apple of his father's eyes.

"Come on, Lex! You know, deep down, you love me," responded the youngest Luthor sheepishly, with a smile that made the female teenagers of America go weak in the knees.

"Don't try to use your Luthor charm on me to get you out of this one, brother. I'm not one of your legion of swooning fans," added Lex, pouring himself a snifter of his best vintage bourbon. "Spit it out. What do you want?"

"Why in heavens do you think I might want anything?"

"Over twenty years as your eldest brother. Smallville and the entire female population of that girls' school next to the one you used to attend may think you're the next candidate for sainthood, but we both know better, don't we? You've got a hidden agenda. You may look like mom but Luthor blood runs through your veins."

"I hadn't seen my illustrious eldest brother in months and I thought... Christmas is almost here...what better way to drag him away from his cold sterile glass and crystal tower than to tell him Dad was with one foot in his grave?"

"I hate the old bastard, but that was a very cheap trick, Julian," Lex answered, swallowing the remains of his drink in one gulp.

"I couldn't think of anything to convince you to come home when I know you've always hated spending Christmas with the family."

Lex set down the empty snifter on the wet bar and took a deep breath. It hadn't always been that way. He used to love the season when his mother was alive, but everything changed when she passed away and both boys were left alone to be raised by Lionel. Julian couldn't understand him; the boy had been but a two-month-old baby when Lillian died; he'd never know what it was like for his eldest brother to lose the one person who made him feel loved.

"I'm not staying," Lex said, "so whatever plan you've concocted in that mind of yours will never see the light."

"What makes you say that?" Julian asked, using that tone of voice that had always helped him get away with anything while Lex got the blame for whatever mischief the youngest had been up to. Lex had tried hard to hate him for getting from Lionel what he himself had craved from the day he'd been born, but he couldn't; Julian looked too much like Lillian to hate him. There had been times during Lex's teenage years when he had thought of running away with his baby brother afraid of what Lionel's parenting could do to their fraternal relationship. Lionel hated his first-born; and Lex didn't want the only person he'd left in the world to learn to loathe him as well. It had been precisely that fear of losing Julian that had led them to this point. Lex had never been able to say "no" to him, and the little bastard knew it.

While Lex didn't have a hair on his head, Julian had inherited their mum's reddish-brown colouring- a much more attractive shade than the deep red one that used to make Lex look like a carrot when he was a child. Both siblings had the same intense blue-grey eyes but, unlike Lex, Julian was always wearing a smile on his face. Lex was the dark handsome brooding and dangerous brother of whom people permanently expected the worst while, at almost twenty-one and a sophomore, Julian was an angel in everyone's eyes- another Smallville aberration; a seraph born into a family of devils.

"Let me guess," Julian said, "your secretary's already booked you a fortnight in the Bahamas and you'll be bedding the daughter of the CEO of one of LuthorCorp's competitors. What better way to spend Christmas? Mingling fun and business."

Lex poured himself another bourbon and looked at his brother archly, "Is that what you think of me, Julian? That I only use people? That I'm incapable of having a meaningful relationship with a woman?"

"How do you expect the world to think any different with your one-night stands and your string of tall, cool brunette creatures? You deserve better and so do they," responded Julian suddenly sobered.

Lex looked at his Napoleon-franc watch. "I have to go. My jet is waiting." Julian looked at his brother finish his second bourbon and rise. "As much as I'd love to stay here with you discussing my love life, I've got things to do. "

"Save the irony for Dad, Lex," Julian said heavily. "We both know you bury yourself in work not to see how barren your life is."

"Don't talk about something you don't know a thing about, Julian. Once you've finished your university studies and have the responsibilities I do to keep a multimillion-dollar corporation afloat... then, and only then, you'll understand why I do the things I do."

"This isn't about business and you know it, Lex. I want to see my brother happy. Is that a crime? I'm not stupid, you know. I'm no longer a child; I can see what- or rather, who- you're looking for in those women. You're deluding yourself if you think you'll find Mom in them. There's someone out

there for you- someone who'll be able to see beyond your name and your millions. Not every woman is like Desirée, Helen and Victoria."

"Money and power's what runs the world, Julian. The sooner you learn that the better off you'll be. I'd hate to see you get hurt. There was a time I wanted so hard to believe what you've just said was true..." Lex confessed emotionally.

"It is true, Lex. I've seen it," said Julian passionately, getting closer to his brother and grabbing his arm in a tight grip as if he were afraid he'd overstepped his boundaries and lost the brother he'd idolised from day one. "I need your help," he added with a hint of despair in his voice.

Julian never asked for help unless he really needed it, so Lex decided he could put off his departure for a short while and hear him out. The deal with the Japanese wouldn't fall through if he delayed the conference call till the afternoon. Family was as important to the oriental as it was to the Italian; they'd understand if he told them he'd had some family business to take care of.

"What is it? And how much will it cost me?" sighed Lex. "You know that whatever you need, if I have it, is yours."

"Not everything can be bought, I'm afraid," murmured Julian, sounding defeated and walking towards the fridge under the wet bar to grab an imported bottled beer and a cold glass.

Lex eyed Julian speculatively. He'd never seen his little brother have an alcoholic drink in his life- true he hadn't been of age before, but when had that stopped a Luthor?

"I've fallen in love," Julian said blushing; then when no answer came out of his brother's mouth, he looked up and saw one of Lex's trademark smirks on his face.

"And?" Lex asked. "What's the problem? Doesn't she like you? Has Dad forbidden you to see her? Or is it our damn surname getting in the way?"

"Dad doesn't know. And... she's not like that, Lex. She doesn't give a damn about who I am."

"So what do you think you need me for? What do I know about love? With my lousy record when it comes to the opposite sex, I'm the last person you should turn to for advice."

"But you know everything there's to know about dating and romancing a woman."

"Not the kind of women you might be interested in, Julian," said Lex with a smirk.

"Think of Mom, then. How would you go about romancing someone like her?"

Lex looked at him with a puzzled frown. "You got it big, Jules. Who's this paragon of virtue? I'm really intrigued... who's this woman? And how can I help you?"

Julian took a deep breath. "She's a young widow... and... a mother "

“A widow with a child? How old is she? “

“What does it matter? “ Julian glared.

“Calm down. I’m not criticising her. Go on, “ responded Lex seriously.

“She lived with her dad and the baby’s father in Chicago until she moved back to Smallville at the beginning of this year when both men were killed in a car accident. She’s living in the apartment above The Talon. “

“The Talon? The old movie theatre? “

“It’s a cafeteria now. She used to be friends with Nell Potter’s niece- Lana Lang- and now that Lana’s married to Pete Ross and no longer needs the accommodation, she’s let it to Chloe.”

“And what does ‘Chloe’ do for a living? “

“She works at The Ledger. “

“A reporter? “ asked Lex, cocking an eyebrow.

“Not all journalists are like the ones you’re used to, Lex. She’s the sweetest person I’ve ever met.”

“If dad gets wind that his precious little son is in love with a single mother and that she’s a journalist to boot, hell will break loose.”

“He doesn’t know I’m attracted to her, but he admires her a lot,” Julian told him, sipping at his lager.

*‘Dad admires this girl? A reporter? She’s definitely someone worth meeting,’* mused Lex, keeping a straight face.

“She’s amazing, Lex. But... no man will ever get a chance with her with that boy of hers around. He’s jealous. He’s got her twisted around his little finger. He absorbs her completely. “

“Young children tend to be like that with their mothers, Jules. Oedipus complex, remember?” said Lex smugly.

“To the extreme of making it impossible for her to work? You know, Smallville isn’t Metropolis. The Ledger doesn’t offer its employees a day care centre and she needs that job. I babysat the monster a couple of times but... you don’t know what he’s like! I had to take him to the newspaper to his mom because he just wouldn’t stop crying and screaming. Chloe hasn’t got anyone to leave the boy with and she can’t afford a babysitter.”

“Mm. That can be solved. Let me make a couple of phone calls,” said Lex, taking out his mobile phone.

“Wait!” exclaimed Julian when his eldest brother was starting to dial his office number. “I haven’t finished yet. I think I could handle the kid... I’d be willing to do it ... if only I had some time alone with her. I’ve already got the person for the business. I even showed her a picture. Lex, I was so desperate. You’ve got to believe me...”

“Oh, no, you didn’t! You’re not getting me into this. I have places to be and deals to close.”

“How long has it been since you gave your employees time off at Christmas? I know Jennifer, that gorgeous secretary of yours, will thank you for it. I’ve never felt this way about anyone, Lex. All I need is some time alone with Chloe. If I could get her alone, I know I could...”

“Make her fall in love with you? That’s not the way it works, Jules.”

“Maybe not,” said Julian, “but at least I’d like to try.”

“You’re turning twenty-one next month, Jules. Say she falls for you... do you think you’re ready to take up the responsibility of supporting and raising a family?”

“I know you’re too cynical to believe what I do but, trust me, I know when two people are meant for each other,” Julian persisted.

For a moment Lex studied his brother in silence. Julian *never* asked for help for himself; he’d made a habit of being the champion of the underdog... always talking Lex into contributing to his latest project- more often than not lost causes.

However, this time Julian was asking Lex to help him with something personal, something that didn’t involve his drawing a fat cheque.

“Didn’t she recognise me when she saw the photograph? Excuse me if I’m sceptical but I’m far from forgettable. Besides, she’s a journalist and I’ve been on the front page or in the society section more times than I care to remember,” he said with a smirk.

“Well... actually... she did...” answered Julian hesitantly.

“There’s nothing more to say then. I’ll phone Jennifer and ask her to get the most qualified babysitter in Metropolis,” Lex cut him off, slipping his hand into his Italian suit to take out his mobile again.

“Wait! I told her Lex Luthor was a cousin of yours and that when you were children you used to drive our parents nuts by posing as each other. I told her only Mom could tell you apart.”

“And she believed you?” he frowned. “I guess she did. Who wouldn’t believe whatever comes out of Julian Luthor’s mouth? OK, I’ll do what I can. I don’t know what the hell I’m doing because I don’t know a damn thing about kids. Never been around them. Don’t even know if he’ll like me. Still... I’ve never said ‘no’ to a challenge. Four hours a day looking after a boy... .”

“Lex, there’s more.”

“More?! What exactly did you *have* in mind?”

“To live with her,” mumbled Julian.

“What!? You expect me to *live* with her? And she said *yes*?”

“Please, Lex, there has to be someone in that apartment who can keep that kid away from her. And it has to be someone she can trust or she won’t allow him to babysit.”

“I’ll call Jennifer. She’ll get me the best Swiss nanny in the market—”

“No! It has to be you! Not a Swiss nanny. You,” Julian pleaded vehemently. “Timmy needs a man’s touch. You’ve got something... I don’t know how to call it... I wish they sold it in bottles over the counter, Lex. You were great with me as a child...”

Lex felt flattered and exasperated at the same time. He knew he was being manipulated and, what was even worse, that he wasn’t far from capitulating. The boy had a point in what he’d told him, Lex had been as much a father as a brother to him, being eleven years his senior. Lillian had died when Julian was just a couple months old and Lionel hadn’t stopped working- he’d buried himself in paperwork for hours and was absent from home for countless days a month- so they just had each other. Pamela, Lex’s nanny had been fired after Lillian’s death and Lionel had sworn never to engage the services of another woman who could grow soft on the children and try to pollute Julian against him the way Pamela had tried to with Lex.

“All right. I’ll do it. I’ll look after this kid for a week. Seven days’ll be enough to see if you get a chance with the mom, right?” he answered reluctantly. If the LexCorp Board of Directors could see him now, they wouldn’t believe it. The unflappable and ruthless tycoon who’d never budge caved in with a few well-chosen words delivered by his goody-two-shoes little brother.

“It won’t be easy, Lex. “

“Have you forgotten who you’re talking to? Nothing’s come easy in my life. And I’ve never been one to back away from a challenge. So... let’s go and meet this monster and the paragon of journalism who’s not only got my baby brother entranced but managed to charm the old cobra, “ the eldest brother responded.

“I need you to promise me you won’t turn this job to your secretary or to someone else. “

“Have I ever broken my word to you, Julian? I said I’ll do it, and I will.”

“OK. Thanks, Lex. See the bright side, bro’. You’ll be home for Christmas. Isn’t that better than spending the holidays alone in this cold lifeless penthouse of yours? “

“I hope I won’t live to regret this, “ mumbled Lex under his breath as they left the penthouse for the town he had only visited once after the meteor shower which had left him bald when he was ten.

## CHAPTER TWO

The Talon had been Smallville's only cinema for almost sixty years when it closed down and Lana's natural father, Henry Small- a descendant of the town's founder, Ezra Small- helped her recycle the building and transform it into a coffee shop and popular teen hangout. Lex had to give the owners credit for the effort- the Egyptian decor and the warm colours gave the place a homely and welcoming feel. His business mind couldn't help but start thinking about the potential of backing a chain of cafeterias moulded after The Talon in Metropolis and some other major towns in the state of Kansas. He'd phone Jennifer later to have her tell the Food Division of LexCorp to begin some market research and elaborate some projections. There was nothing like presenting a prospective partner with a business proposal holding all the cards in one's hand.

"Nice, isn't it?" Julian asked him, noticing Lex's interest in the surroundings. "You should see the place with the lights on and the patrons sharing a latte and doing their homework or making plans for the weekend."

"They've done a great job with the place, yes. Where's the apartment?"

"Follow me. It's up these stairs," he said, leading the way.

"Shouldn't you go up first and warn her I'm here?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

But Julian didn't seem to have heard Lex for he eagerly rapped on the apartment door, and within seconds it was opened by Chloe... who wasn't what LexCorp's CEO had been expecting at all.

The young widow was several years his brother's senior; and, although she looked exhausted and sleep-deprived, if the dark circles under her eyes were anything to go by, a sixth sense told him she was no weakling. It wasn't that she didn't look feminine- she was petite but well-endowed...And what eyes! Lex had never seen anything greener. She was delicate and strong at the same time. Chloe wasn't Lex's type and yet, he couldn't deny she was an attractive young woman. Julian had good taste, but Lionel's first-born couldn't visualise them as a couple; the boy was too green yet to be a match for her.

"Damn!" she exclaimed, looking down at herself. "Come in, Jules," she added, scurrying back into the flat to put on something over her nightgown and brush her tousled blond hair. "Timmy is asleep for the time being- thank God. I was just finishing my article for tomorrow to e-mail it to my editor. I'll be with you in a minute. There's a pot of freshly-made decaf on the stove if you care to have a cup. Or you can rummage the cupboard for some real coffee."

"Thanks, that'd be nice," Julian said brightly.

"Pour me a mug to the brim, will you? I'd need a fortified dose of caffeine to keep me from dropping dead on my feet, but I'll have to cheat my system with a decaf," came Chloe's answer from the bathroom.

Julian looked at his eldest brother with a smile on his face, but Lex was too busy studying the room and the knick-knacks on the shelves clustered with books. The decor was different from the one downstairs; the colours were different, more vibrant and passionate. Although the room wasn't

spacious, she had made an intelligent use of its limited dimensions. Yes, the bed-sitting room was small but not claustrophobic. It was a far cry from his Metropolis penthouse and still, it looked and felt like a real home; something he hadn't experienced in a long time. The realisation made him feel nostalgic and, at the same time, scared him to death. Lex wondered where in heaven's name he was supposed to sleep for a whole week and keep his treasured privacy. He was starting to think this was a very bad idea indeed.

"Have you finished your top and lofty perusal, bro'?" Julian asked under his breath, nudging him in the ribs as Chloe came back into the multipurpose room.

Chloe noticed the tall and handsome patrician man standing in the middle of her open-plan living-room and felt it suddenly shrink. She had always praised herself on her ability to keep her cool when faced with the unexpected- a pre-requisite for any investigative reporter fond of snooping- not that she could do much of that now. However, those blue-grey eyes of his, which looked so peaceful in Julian, had a stormy and intense quality in him that unsettled her and made her feel things she hadn't in a long time.

"Do I have baby food on my face?" she quipped, trying to hide her nervousness.

"This is my cousin Joseph," Julian was saying. "You remember him, don't you? He's the cousin I told you about. He'd be eternally grateful if you could put him up until his heart mends."

Lex schooled his features not to give away Julian's words had taken him by surprise, but the youngest Luthor knew his big brother well enough to perceive the coiled energy that emanated from him and which made the hairs on Julian's nape stand on end.

"Nice to meet you, Joseph," Chloe said, stretching out an arm to shake hands with Lex. 'Snob,' she said to herself.

"Nice to meet you, Chloe," he clasped her hand in a firm grip, repressing the smug smile that threatened to appear on his face when he felt the slight tremor that revealed she wasn't immune to him either.

"Please, do sit down. I'm afraid Timmy is still asleep, so formal introductions'll have to wait. He'll be awake and definitely make himself heard in a couple of hours," she said laughing.

Lex was starting to have the distinct feeling that he'd been duped by his own flesh and blood. The little brother who'd helped in part fill the void Lillian's passing had left in his heart; the one person for whom he'd have died or killed for... had done a real number on him.

If there was something he'd learnt from his old man was how to read people and situations, and all his instincts told him there was a rat here, a big one.

"I'm afraid I haven't got any alcoholic beverages to offer you. But I can prepare you a cup of strong coffee; they say I make the best in the state of Kansas," she told Lex with a luminous smile that made him start to question his preference for brunettes.



"I'm OK, thanks," replied Lex with the ghost of a smile as his eyes continued to roam and noticed a few tell-tale details- a dummy and a rattle on the coffee-table, and a burp cloth on the armrest of the rocking chair under the window.

"How old is your son?" Lex asked her in a neutral tone.

"Six months," she answered, noticing the way he inspected the flat as if it were a bug under a microscope.

Lex started to boil but only someone who really knew him could tell what was actually going on inside him for his poker face was firmly in place. "Would you excuse us, Chloe? I need to have a word with... Julian." he told the blond reporter before standing up and looking down to meet his brother's eyes. "Shall we?" he asked 'Angel Face'.

"We'll be back in a minute," said Julian with a smile as he stepped out and closed the door behind him..

Lex was waiting for him at the bottom of the stairs with a look on his face that didn't bode anything good. "A six-month-old baby. Have you gone completely nuts? "

"You promised, Lex. "

"Well, you can forget about it. "

"You gave me your word that..."

"That was when I thought the kid was... not a baby. I might be able to look after a two-year-old but a baby... one who's still in diapers and nursing. No way! "

"Is it so hard to do something when it doesn't involve your chequebook, Lex? I know you better than that. You aren't that heartless, bro'. This is the first time I've ever asked you to do something just for me."

"If I say 'no', you'll never let me live it down, will you? " Lex clenched his teeth, and buried his fists deep in the pockets of his trousers. "OK. I'll do it, only to prove you I'm not halfway down the path to hell. But, mark my words, this is a one-time only favour. "

"I swear, I won't ask you for anything more," he said Julian beaming.

"Stop swearing, Jules, before that nose of yours starts to grow," Lex said coolly. "One last thing before I enter that apartment again. What did you tell her about me- apart from the fact that I'm your heartbroken cousin and that my name's Joseph? "

"Well... she thinks you're nursing a broken heart and that this is your first Christmas away from your lover, so you're feeling particularly lonely. I told her your apartment had been invaded by termites and that the exterminators needed a week to eliminate the threat, so you didn't have any place to stay. I told her you loved kids and that she'd be doing you a huge favour if she let you

lodge with her for a week. At least, she would be able to catch up some sleep and maybe sort things out... you know... find a better way to organise her work schedule and her role as a new mom.”

“And did she buy that? She didn’t strike me as someone that could be easily fooled. Didn’t she ask you why I couldn’t stay at the mansion, where there are plenty of rooms?” frowned the bald billionaire.

“I just told her you and dad can’t stand each other. I didn’t see the need to lie, “ Julian said sheepishly.

“No, you’ve already made up enough, “ smirked Lex.

Julian breathed relieved; Lex was going to do it. “You won’t regret this, Lex. “

“Let’s get back before she falls asleep on her feet, or starts wondering if I’m safe enough to be around her son,” said Lex, starting to climb up the stairs.

“What? Do you think she’s wondering where you’ve hidden the corpse?” asked Julian jokingly.

“Don’t give me any ideas. “

Five minutes later the youngest Luthor made a sudden and quick escape leaving Chloe and Lex on their own. An uncomfortable silence followed as Chloe stood in the middle of the room looking at him as if she were expecting him to say or do something.

“Could you show me where... ?” began Lex.

“Oh, sorry! How silly of me! I’m afraid there’s only one bedroom, “she blushed- something that Lex found quite endearing; the women he usually dealt with had long forgotten how to blush.” I mean... Jules said you’d make do with the sofa. “

Lex turned around and looked at the piece of furniture on which he and Julian had sat a little while ago and wondered if his long limbs would fit there.

“It’s a davenport, “ explained Chloe. “ I bought it second-hand at an antiques store and had the upholstery redone to match the armchair and the rest of the furniture. “

“It looks sturdy enough for someone of my built, “ he smirked; and Chloe had to look away when a series of very sensual images assaulted her mind unannounced.

*‘Damn, Julian! You forgot to tell me your cousin was devastatingly handsome and that the nuances of his voice could charm even a stone. If I didn’t know what I know... You’re mad, Sullivan! Safe topic... safe topic... Ask him about his luggage. ’*

“ Er... have you left your bags downstairs? “

“I’m afraid there was a mix-up at the airport, “ he lied, telling himself he’d have to contact Jennifer

and ask her to send him some clothes and toiletries to last him a week.

“Will you manage for the night? I have no pyjamas to lend you, “ she told him, opening her wardrobe and taking out some freshly laundered sheets and a handmade quilt that Martha Kent had given her when she moved back to the rural town.

“I’ll be fine, Chloe. I assume there’s only one bathroom. Would you rather use it first? “ he said when she came back with the linen.

“No, you go first. There’s an unopened toothbrush in the cabinet, and here’s a clean bath towel. We’ve got hot water and central heating twenty-four hours a day. The owners of The Talon had the boiler changed a couple of years ago, “ she added, kicking herself for her stupid need to make the flat look better- it was clean and cosy and, if he found fault with it, he could take his arrogant snobbish... cute butt down the stairs, swallow his pride and ask Julian to smuggle him into the mansion. After all, that old relic was immense, wasn’t it?

“Thanks. I won’t take long, “ he responded and disappeared in the bathroom. “By the way, leave the linen on the sofa. I’ll make the bed myself, “ he added, his voice muffled by the sound of water running.

“It’s OK, I’ll..” she began.

“ Listen, “ he cut her off, opening the door just a crack. “You can barely keep yourself standing. “

“But...”

“I’ll make the damn bed. Go to bed, Chloe,” he stated sternly.

“Do you always get your way, Mr Luthor? “ she asked, her green orbs flashing with Irish stubbornness.

“I do. And my name’s Joseph. Mr Luthor’s my father, “ he finished, closing the door behind him.

“How dare he close my own bathroom door in my face? “ she hissed under her breath not to wake up Timmy, who was still miraculously asleep. “Calm down, Sullivan. Remember you need this arrangement. You need a few hours of sleep if you want to keep that job. You can do this. It’s just a week until Lois comes to visit for the holidays. She can help you with the kid and, once Martha’s term’s over, she promised to give you a hand with the baby-sitting. Damn! I can’t believe what Julian’s told me... Why do the best-looking guys have to be gay? Well, it doesn’t matter. Even if he weren’t, I’d never have anything with someone with his airs. I hope he’s good with kids, Julian, or I swear to God I’ll wring your Luthor neck. “

Ten minutes later, Lex emerged from the bathroom barefoot but still wearing his trousers and an unbuttoned light-blue dress shirt. He was going to tell Chloe that the bathroom was all hers when he noticed she had lain down on her bed and fallen asleep while waiting for him to finish his ablutions. He smiled softly and, switching off the light of the bathroom, took the blanket from the foot of her

bed and covered her with it. It was then that he saw the handcrafted crib a few feet away, where the baby was sleeping soundly; she had said the boy wouldn't wake up for another two hours, but that had been over an hour ago. Well, he'd better try to get some sleep now that the apartment was still silent.

Lex had always been a light sleeper- bordering on insomniac- and the fact that he was now in an unfamiliar house made matters even worse. Less than an hour had gone by when the baby's wailing disrupted the quietness of the room, and Lex heard Chloe leave the bed to pick up the child. She cradled Timmy in her arms and unfastened a few buttons of her nightgown to start nursing him, but the boy refused to latch on her breast and kept wailing like a siren. The young mother looked at the screen she had set up in the living-room to give Lex and her some privacy and, then, tried more time to encourage the baby to suck with no success. She had feared something like this would happen. Timmy was used to being fed in the rocking chair under the window, and she hadn't been able to move the seat to her bedroom, where there was so little space available.

Lex heard the cries getting closer and adjusted his eyes to the dark to see Chloe walk to the chair he had observed during his close inspection earlier. As if by magic, the wailing stopped and was replaced by the gentle rocking of the chair and the quiet sound of the baby suckling. Overwhelmed by the memories of his own infancy the scenes stirred back to life, Lex closed his eyes and gave Chloe privacy for the most sacred bonding moment between mother and child.

Timmy made fast work of latching on and Chloe smiled warmly as he lay there looking up at her intently. Stroking the baby's cheek she stole a glance at Lex and wondered if he was faking it or if he was indeed a fast sleeper. Seeing him lying on her second-hand sofa was like watching a king sleep on a mat in a hut- the guy should have been named something more regal than Joseph.

The sun was filtering through the curtains when Lex woke up somewhat disoriented. It took him just a few seconds to remember he wasn't lying on the Egyptian cotton sheets of his penthouse and that the warmth the bedclothes provided him with didn't come from the goose-feathered duvets he preferred in winter but from a handmade patched quilt.

"Seven o'clock," he murmured, looking at the Napoleon-franc watch Lillian had given him as a gift. He usually awoke at five, even at weekends, but the baby had had a difficult night and Lex's sleep patterns were disrupted. At four o'clock, when it seemed Timmy would never stop crying, Lex had sat up on the sofa and asked Chloe to let him give it a try.

"He's teething," she said with a quivery voice that showed she was on the verge of bursting into tears. "He usually quietens after a while when he chews on his teething ring, but I don't know what's wrong tonight," she rocked her son as she walked to and fro.

"If it hurts as much as those useless wisdom teeth, I can certainly understand him," Lex smirked, reaching out to grab the bundle from Chloe's arms. "Loosen the grip on him. I promise I won't drop him."

"Are you sure...?" she eyed the billionaire with a questioning look.

“You’ll have to start trusting me, Miss Sullivan. If Timmy and I are going to be alone for a few hours a day, we’ve got to start bonding, and this time’s as good as any,” he told her with his practised poker face. He cursed Julian for having placed him in this position and he himself for giving in to his puppy eyes. He didn’t feel prepared for this, he doubted he’d ever be. Even though he had been more than just an elder brother to Julian, he still felt uncomfortable and ill-equipped in situations which involved human connection and making himself vulnerable. One-night stands were the safest way to preserve intact what was left of his heart after being abandoned by everyone that had ever meant something to him. He still had Julian- he was actually the only person who remained loyal in his affections to him, but Lex found it difficult to open up to new people and to members of the opposite sex in particular. Developing a bond with this young woman and her baby that was going to be broken in a few days was a challenging and daunting experience for a man who wasn’t used to accepting defeat, but Lex would never admit to being scared witless.

“OK, “ Chloe whispered, handing him the baby and observing how deftly he cradled Timmy in his arms. “You know how to do this. “

“You sound surprised, “ responded Lex smugly, looking into the baby’s green eyes, which were a replica of his mum’s.

“I’m sorry, but you can’t blame me. You look so... . Well... “ she mumbled, trying to find the best term to describe him.

“A reporter out of words. I thought I’d never see the day. Don’t worry; I’m used to being misjudged. The story of my life, “ he smiled when the baby’s wailing and sobbing stopped and the boy started chewing on the ring. “Well, it seems we’ll be able to sleep after all. ”

“Traitor, “ Chloe told the baby as she saw Timmy suddenly grin at the tall attractive man standing in the middle of her apartment. Why did Jules’ gay cousin have to smell so good?

Lex saw the baby flash him a smile and felt a pressure settle on his chest. He prayed Jennifer could find something in this woman’s past that he could use to extricate himself of this uncomfortable conundrum. Yes, he’d phone his assistant first thing in the morning and order an in-depth background check. He told himself his decision was primarily due to protect his youngest brother- he’d never let Jules get close to a woman he knew nothing about- but the truth was he also wanted to have something dug up to shelter his own fragility.

Jules had lied to Chloe through his teeth, but one thing was true, Lex was nursing a broken heart- he had been nursing it for almost twenty-one years. His heart had shattered the day Lillian left him and Julian to be raised by a man in whose eyes he’d never be good or worthy enough. Lex had thought Helen would help him put the pieces back together, but she had trampled on his heart almost ten years ago and since then, he had gone back to his old trustworthy routine of dating long-legged brunettes whom he’d bed once and dump before things started to get awkward. He’d never dated women with children- too many scars had been inflicted on his soul by adults during his childhood to feel comfortable with submitting any innocent boy or girl to a similar experience. He couldn’t offer any woman the kind of stability a child would need while growing up, not when he himself

was so needy and broken.

Lex wondered what was happening to him. He barely knew this woman, and she was making him feel things he'd thought he'd never feel again. It was too soon to let himself feel anything- he was no longer an adolescent driven by his hormones- and he had worked too hard to armour his heart to now let a baby break down his defences and make him want things he knew he could never have.

“Jennifer, “ said the billionaire on the phone, “I’ve got a job for you. “

### CHAPTER THREE

‘I don’t like him, I don’t like him, I don’t like him,’ Chloe chanted in her mind as she pumped milk out of her breasts to stock the fridge with the bottles Joseph would need to feed Timmy while she was away at The Ledger. It was at times like these when she wished she could live in Metropolis and had a post at The Daily Planet, which offered its employees a day care centre and the possibility of breastfeeding while at work. Her bosses at the local newspaper had been quite tolerant, but Chloe knew they wouldn’t keep her as part of their staff if she continued taking Timmy along to work. If only Gabe were alive... Her dad would have loved to look after his grandson for a few hours per day. She wasn’t supposed to be raising a child alone; it wasn’t fair but life seldom was, and she’d never been one to concede defeat in the face of difficulties.

When Julian had asked her if she could let his gay cousin Joseph lodge with her for a week, her first instinct had been to refuse. “Jules, I’d love to help you but... can’t you see I’ve got my hands full? I haven’t got the time or the strength to entertain a guest. And... have you really had a very good look at my apartment? It’s cosy, and I’m quite proud of what I’ve done with it, but I’ve only got one bedroom.”

“He won’t need much... he’ll make do with the sofa. You’ll barely notice he’s there. Besides, he loves cooking and you need someone to give you a respite, someone who could take care of the everyday things for a while. You won’t have to worry about the expenses, he’ll buy everything. Chloe, I know it’s asking you a lot but Joseph and his boyfriend have just broken up, and he’s not only devastated- his place’s been invaded by termites and he has nowhere to stay. I’d be happy to put him up at the mansion if only my dad and Joseph got on well with each other. Having them together in a room... it’s just not the safest place to find yourself in, let me tell you. It’s like walking in a minefield and I don’t want to die so young, “ he smirked and saw Chloe start to relent . “Please,” he beseeched her, “you’ll be doing me a great favour. “

Julian had become a very good friend to her soon after her arrival in Smallville. Her high school friend Lana and her now-husband Pete had welcomed her with open arms, but Chloe had missed having a male best friend since her goodbye to Clark and the leafy little hamlet. The Kents’ adoptive son was now in Metropolis pursuing his dreams and aiding those in need of a hero; she had stayed in contact with him through the occasional letter and Holiday card, but their relationship wasn’t what it used to be after she decided to leave the small town for Chicago.

Although the main reason for her relocation had been Gabe’s new job as a plant manager in Windy City, she had had her own reasons to flee Smallville and enrol in a university other than MetU- her

hopeless crush on Clark being at the forefront. Time and distance had healed her wounds and she had fallen in love and married in the span of a year. Steve had been an advanced student of journalism when they met and, like her, he loved his call with a passion. Being with him had reminded her of who she was and what her dreams had always been, working with him had stoked the fire which used to burn so bright in her when she was the editor of *The Torch*. She thanked God for putting him in her way and for everything they'd shared in so short a time. She'd been married but six months when Steve and Gabe died in a hit-and-run accident, leaving her alone and distraught with a baby on the way before she had the chance to share the news of her pregnancy with either of them.

Yes, Julian was to her what Clark had been during her adolescence- minus the awkward crush, for she saw the boy as the young brother she'd never had. She owed him, not only because he had unexpectedly filled the void Clark had left in the friends department but because he had given her a hand with Timmy from time to time and granted her unrestricted access to the Luthors' library- the richest and most complete private collection of rare books and hometown records she'd ever come across. If there was anyone she largely owed for still having her job at the *Ledger* that was Julian Luthor; the articles that had earned her the respect of the editor and her own column in the Sunday magazine that accompanied the weekend edition of the paper wouldn't have been possible without the invaluable resource of the Luthors' bookshelves.

"You need this, Chloe. Last Friday you were saying you hadn't slept three hours in a row for months and that you were starting to consider giving up the job that you love and getting work as a typist transcribing high school papers on your laptop. Come on, Chloe! Seize this opportunity. A week might not sound as much, but it'll give you time to think about yourself for a change and reevaluate your options. You don't have anything against gays, do you?" he asked, sure he hadn't misjudged her.

"You know I don't.... You said it'd be for a week?" she sighed. "I can't afford to pay him for his services as a baby-sitter, though."

"Leave everything in my hands. I'll be in your debt for letting him stay with you, and you'll be doing yourself and him a favour. He'll make your life much easier. Trust me. He's great at organising things, and he's a wizard when it comes to making budgetary decisions; I'm sure he'll be able to give you some pointers."

So she had given in and trusted him because she was both in desperate need of help and had never had reason to doubt him. In the eyes of Smallville Julian was the fly in the ointment when it came to the Luthor gene pool; everyone loved him because he reminded them of Lillian, and the late Mrs Luthor had been both liked and pitied by the small rural town. Everyone trusted her youngest child so why shouldn't Chloe? And what did she get? A gorgeous six-foot-tall patrician man who made her remember once again she wasn't just a mum but a woman with needs; a man she had to tell herself she shouldn't look at in any other light than a guest and a favour to Julian since he could never be anything else.

The man might not be Lex Luthor- Julian had sworn on his mother's grave he wasn't trying to pull

Chloe's leg and the blonde had chosen to believe him- but he looked as proud and worldly as the Luthor heir and even dressed like him; the Italian custom-made suit he was wearing when he crossed the threshold of the apartment above The Talon was worth more than twelve times Chloe's salary. He looked like a man who could make a room at Metropolis Ritz his permanent residence or buy himself a new penthouse while the exterminators finished off the termites. The only explanation Chloe could find in his choosing to fly all the way to the rural Kansas was the need to lick his wounds away from the paparazzi and the city that reminded him of his lover.

However, what really baffled Chloe was the fact that Julian's seemingly cold and detached cousin had shown a tender and caring side she hadn't expected. If she still doubted the identity of the snobbish man who had perused her flat with clinical eye and superior airs in the morning, now she was sure he couldn't be the same ruthless young tycoon who had rebelled against his father and made a fortune of his own regardless of whom he had to crush. And there was a tiny extra detail, Lex Luthor was a renowned playboy, a womaniser who had a different brunette for dessert every week- if the gossip in The Planet's society column was to be believed- Lex Luthor was the epitome of masculinity, a real cold-hearted predator; and Joseph Luthor played for the other team, right? Yes, he had to; because that fact had been the only reason she had accepted to put him up in an apartment that had no guest room, an apartment that was placed above one of the most frequented shops in the gossipy community that had known her since she was ten.

Lex was downstairs holding his mobile to his left ear- giving instructions to his assistant and enjoying a cappuccino he had made himself after figuring out how to operate the espresso machine of The Talon- when he heard the door of the apartment open and turned around to see Chloe climb down the stairs with an appalled look on her face.

"Oh, no!" she whined kneeling down in front of Timmy, whom Lex had sat on a baby blanket he had laid in the reading nook of the coffee shop. "Damn!" she exclaimed, tugging something out of the kid's clutch.

"I have to go. Let me know when you've got any news. Goodbye," Lex told Jennifer, flapping the mobile shut. "What's wrong?" he asked with a frown as he got up of his chair and approached the mother and son.

"What's wrong? What's wrong! I left you ten minutes alone with the baby and look at what he's done! Look at it!" she shouted with glassy eyes, shaking a bunch of wrinkled half-chewed half-dribbled sheets. "How am I supposed to hand in this work and get paid for it now? It took me four whole days to put it together and type it on my computer. I sacrificed several hours I could have used to catch up on some precious sleep to finish it. Tell me, was it so hard to keep an eye on him?"

"I'm sorry," said Lex apologetically. "I should have..."

"I'm sorry isn't enough," she cut him off. "An 'I'm sorry' won't pay my bills at the end of the month. This work ended up the last ream of paper I had," she went on as she tried to salvage a couple of sheets Timmy still clung to. "Come on, baby," she said in a raspy voice when the boy stubbornly refused to let them go and started whimpering.



“Give them to your mom, Timmy, “ said Lex with a calm but authoritative voice which the baby immediately obeyed focusing his wide green eyes on the billionaire and sticking a tiny fist in his almost toothless mouth. “Miss Sullivan, “ he addressed the petite blonde that was looking daggers at him. *How dare he? How dare he order her baby around and be obeyed, damn it!* “Chloe,” he sighed, “I’m used to juggling several things at the same time without losing sight of the ball. I’m damn good at multi-tasking and can handle anything that’s thrown my way.”

“It seems a baby isn’t one of the things you can handle, “ she answered back tersely.” I’m afraid this isn’t going to work. “

“Are you *firing* me? “ he frowned.

“Call it what you will, “ she said grimly.

“You *need* me, “ he responded gravely, slipping both hands deep in the pockets of his expensive black trousers.

“I’ve done pretty well so far, “ she answered tilting up her chin in defiance.

“I agree you’ve done wonders with what you have, but ... “ he rolled his eyes. “Listen. Be honest. Is it the first time he’s stuck paper in his mouth? Can you tell me in all honesty, being as busy and sleep-deprived as you are, your attention’s never strayed away for just a few seconds? I know being distracted for so short a time can mean a lot when it comes to a baby’s well-being, but it can happen to any mortal. Besides, I was right here. I would have never let anything happen to him. It was just a slip, it won’t happen again, “ he insisted, telling himself he was wasting the best way-out; the kid had served it on a silver platter and here he was begging the blonde to take him back. Pathetic. He was self-sufficient. He didn’t need anyone. He would be better off without a feisty blond and a paper-munching baby in his life. What the hell was wrong with him? He could be on his way to Barbados for a marathon of sex and oblivion with his flavour of the week and enjoying a Lionel Luthor-free Christmas.“Give me a second chance. Let me prove to you I’m trustworthy, “ he added, stepping closer.

“Are you sure you are...? “ Chloe began asking only to cut herself off.

“Am I sure I am what... ?” he echoed, seeing the baby squirm in Chloe’s arms and lean towards him.

“Nothing. Forget it. I’d come across as prejudiced. It’s just that... my past experience with those who are... well... like you...” she fidgeted.

“Like me? Could you be more specific? “ he smirked, observing her nervousness.

“It’s alright, Joseph. Julian’s told me everything and I’m fine with it. I would have never pegged you as one, but...” she answered, trying to prevent Timmy from pulling away from her and lunging dangerously towards Lex.

“What exactly has Jules told you about me? “ Lex cocked an eyebrow overwhelmed by a grim sense of foreboding.

“That you’ve just broken up with your boyfriend and needed a place to stay for a week while the exterminators finished off the termites in your apartment, “ she replied softly.

“Oh, that!” he exclaimed with the ghost of a smile, making use of his Luthor acting skills to keep a poker face. “Don’t worry. I’m used to people passing judgement on me or looking at me oddly. Put your mind at rest. You haven’t offended me. So... what do you say if we get you a new ream of paper to re-print your work?”

“Today’s Sunday, Joseph. If you haven’t noticed, this isn’t Metropolis and the stationer’s in town opens only on weekdays. I appreciate your good intention, but... “

“Let me worry about that, “ he told her with a confident smile. “So... what do you say? You’ll give me a second chance? *"So I’m gay. Oh, Jules! Wait until I lay my hands on you!"*

## CHAPTER FOUR

“You’d better ask the old bastard to buy you a new identity, baby brother, because when I get my clutches on you...” Lex hissed on his mobile as he tried to burp the baby.

“Look, Lex, I have to take a new batch of gingerbread cookies out of the oven before they are burnt to a cinder, so... could you tell me what in God’s name you’re talking about?”

“Oh, but you know damn well why I’m calling you, Jules!” he hissed. “You lied to me. You said you’d told her I was nursing a broken heart, that my lover had dumped me; but you forgot to inform me of one very tiny detail. It wasn’t enough that you had a Luthor suffer the indignity of being jilted, you had to go and add slander to the equation. Gay, Jules? You told her I’m *gay*! You told her that *I* was depressed because a *guy* had dumped me.”

“Don’t you see, Lex? It was the only way she’d agree to put you up. Do you think that any respectable young woman in this gossip town would open the doors of her house to a stranger and let him sleep under her roof without a commitment? Besides, she’s got a baby to think about. I couldn’t tell her who you were in the first place because... who hasn’t heard of your reputation as a playboy womaniser? I wanted her to feel safe, “ explained Julian, cradling the handset between his jaw and his shoulder as he removed a baking sheet from the oven.

“Oh, come one, Jules! These aren’t the Middle Ages and though your blonde friend seems to be a respectable girl, something tells me she wouldn’t let others dictate how she should live or what she should think. In any case, you could have told her I don’t do blondes,” he grumbled, telling himself that might have been true before stepping into the apartment above The Talon.

“Come on, bro’. What was I supposed to do? Tell her: ‘Hey, I’ve asked my eldest brother- who, by the way, is on his way to owning the other half of Metropolis (the one my dad doesn’t control)- to give me a hand to win over your heart! We’ve set you a trap.’ She would have said ‘no’.”

“Well, let me tell you she’s just fired me.”

“What?!” shouted Jules outraged, dropping the second baking sheet on the work top and burning a couple of fingers.

“You should give me a bonus. Or, better still, transfer me the stock Mom left you. She’s just hired me back. Well... not hire me, she’d have to pay me for my services if that were the case.”

“So you used your Luthor charm to talk her round?” smirked Jules, spreading some toothpaste on his burnt fingers to prevent any blisters. “And, now, you’re starting to regret she’s taken you back and you don’t know how to get away. What did you do to convince her?”

“The little monster, as you call him, likes me,” he responded with a tired smile as he looked down at the baby, whose talc powder-smelling rear was sitting on his bent arm.

“I told you if there’s anyone on this earth who can charm even a snake- not that Timmy is one, mind you; he’s a cute little button-“

“Cute little...?” frowned Lex as Timmy rested his face on his shoulder and dribbled his two-hundred-dollar shirt.

“...it’s you.”

“Well, you might want to know that... I think your green-eyed dream likes me, too. She’s just too stubborn and proud to admit it, but ... I believe I’m going to enjoy our verbal judo sessions a lot, “ he smirked on the phone, hoping to make his little brother jealous.

“Alexander J. Luthor, don’t you forget what you’re there for,” said Julian with his best Luthor threatening voice.

“What? Afraid of the competition, Jules? You know, now that I think about it... feigning to be gay might not be such a bad idea after all, ” he said tersely, before flipping the mobile shut . “See if you can sleep tonight, Angel Face. Nobody makes a fool of Lex Luthor and lives it down,” he added under his breath.

Half an hour later Chloe opened the door of the bathroom after a restoring bath with those salts Lois had given her as a birthday present. She had put on a red turtleneck pullover and her best jeans- the ones she loved wearing before she could no longer do up the zip- and she had even put on some mascara and a light coat of lip gloss. She hadn’t gone to so much trouble because of the handsome man that was in her living-room... After of all, he wasn’t going to appreciate how the make-up made her emerald eyes stand out or the way the jeans complimented her rounded hips or how the pullover enhanced her fuller breasts. No, she’d done it because she wanted to experience what it was like to look like a woman again- she loved motherhood and was crazy about Timmy, but she needed to feel she was more than a nurturing mum once in a while.

She wondered if she had done the right thing by leaving her baby under the care of someone like

Joseph, someone she barely knew and to whom she felt sexually attracted despite knowing he would never be interested in someone like her- a woman that is. Not that she was considering having any relationship other than friendship with a man at the moment; she had enough on her plate to worry about. Chloe told herself he couldn't be that bad- he was Jules' cousin, wasn't he? Although he was Lex Luthor's as well... Lex Luthor, the billionaire who was never seen with the same woman twice and whose personality couldn't be further from the image she had of what a "father" should look or be like. But the man in her apartment wasn't the cold business shark she had read so much about... and Timmy, for some inexplicable reason, liked him and the baby didn't like men and welcomed the touch of very few women- Lois being one of the privileged ones. Yes, the fact that her precious little baby liked Joseph certainly added to the riddle that was Jules' gay cousin.

Crossing her bedroom on the way to her open-plan living-room Chloe was surprised at how quiet the apartment was, considering Timmy was usually very active after being fed. Where could they be? When things were this quiet she always thought the worst; so she couldn't help but feel a tightening in her chest the moment her eyes alighted on the handsome bald patrician asleep on her rocking chair with her baby lying equally asleep on his chest. Chloe felt the pricking of tears behind her eyelids when she noticed the way Joseph was holding him even in sleep- as if he would never let any harm come to her little lamb. It amazed her how comfortable Timmy was around him, how fast he had bonded with this man they barely knew, how trusting he was, how safe he must feel. It made her wonder if she would ever find that very same sense of trust and security she used to enjoy before losing Steve and her dad.

It is said that children like animals can perceive what people close to them feel and fear and Chloe had been going through a lot in the last year; no wonder her baby was usually so restless and fussy. She didn't remember ever seeing Timmy this peaceful around anyone before and that made her feel envious and somewhat resentful of the man, who could manage to look unflappable and immaculate- and yes, yummy- in a slightly wrinkled two-hundred-dollar shirt with a six-month-old sleeping comfortably on his chest.

Chloe looked at her watch to check out the time. No wonder her stomach was starting to rumble, it was close to one o'clock and she had only had a couple of decafs and a Danish for breakfast. She considered picking up Timmy and tucking him in but decided against it; she'd put together a salad and toast some bread. If Joseph woke up and wanted to join her, she might throw in some of that French cheese Lois had bought at the exclusive deli they had discovered in Metropolis while shopping for maternity wear.

"Feel like eating something?" she asked him quietly from her seat at the kitchen table when she saw him stir and look at her with guarded eyes as if all of a sudden he were ashamed of having been caught asleep with a baby lying on his chest. "I'm afraid I can't offer you anything other than cheese and fruit. My Beetle's at the garage and the repairs won't get here until Monday so I haven't been able to do the groceries."

"Cheese and fruit's fine with me. I don't know what Jules has told you, but I'm one of the most adaptable people you'll ever meet."

Chloe looked at him in silence thinking he must have really loved his boyfriend to be willing to trade all the luxuries he must be used to- gourmet meals included- for a tiny flat in a Godforsaken's rural town with a stressed out new mum and a wailing child.

"Let me put him to bed," she said quietly, trying not to scrape the floor with her chair as she started to get up to take the baby from Lex's arms.

"It's all right; I've got him. We wouldn't want him to wake up now that he's finally fallen asleep. I'm sure you could use some quiet," he told her, leaving the rocking chair and walking into the bedroom to lay Timmy in the crib.

"Thanks," she told him with a small smile as he sauntered into the dining area and sat down across from her.

"You're welcome," he smirked, grabbing a peach from the fruit bowl. "By the way, Jules told me you have a job interview tomorrow morning."

"Yes, the pay is good and I'd stop worrying about whom to leave Timmy with because there's a day care centre just across the street," she explained as she took her dirty dishes to the kitchen sink. "Damn!" she exclaimed through her teeth.

"What's wrong?" he frowned.

"I forgot I had an appointment at the hairdresser's. I'll have to phone Susan and tell her I won't be able to make it."

"Why not?"

"Does the image of chewed and dribbled paper remind you of something?" she cocked an eyebrow.

"That's settled."

"What do you mean settled?"

"Go to your appointment. Everything's been taken care of,"

"But..."

"Chloe, I've been largely responsible for ruining your work. It's only fitting and proper that I clean up my own mess."

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Fifteen minutes after Chloe left the flat for her appointment Lex's inbox dinged announcing an incoming e-mail from his assistant. Having checked out the evolution of the markets where LexCorp had investments, he closed the browser and clicked on the small envelope to read the report on the young widow which he'd requested earlier in the morning.

For someone so young Chloe seemed to have an impressive record and it was clear she wasn't afraid of defying conventions and running risks. Her stint at The Torch was refreshing and he had to confess he regretted not meeting her in her teenage years- her theory about the bizarre occurrences in Smallville was something he knew for certain he'd have loved to explore in his early twenties had he stayed in Smallville to run the Fertiliser Plant like his dad had wanted.

Her brief employ at the Chicago Tribune, where she met her future husband, was really noteworthy. The lady certainly took no prisoners- posting those articles with an in-depth investigation of the illegal business of one of the city's leading mafia families took real guts. There was a lot to admire about this young woman and at the top of Lex's list was what he considered an unheard-of accomplishment for a reporter- she'd written inflammatory articles against LuthorCorp in her adolescence in Smallville and earned his father's respect and admiration; a feat Lex had always found impossible and one he'd ceased to pursue the very day he plunged his Porsche into the Elbow River and was rescued by his now best friend, Clark Kent.

The report was packed with surprises, including the news that Gabe Sullivan had worked for Lionel Luthor as the local plant manager before moving with a seventeen-year-old Chloe to Chicago. Lex wondered why she'd chosen to come back to Smallville of all places when- with all those credentials- she could have made a life for herself and her baby in a much better place.

Did Lionel have something on her? Suspicious by nature, Lex toyed with the idea of his own father having a hand in her return. What if Luthor Sr had planned everything to have his own prodigal son fall into a new trap? What if he'd offered a desperate and lonesome young mother- and a reporter to boot- a succulent monthly pay cheque to spy on his first-born and even seduce him with dreams of what Lionel knew Lex'd always dreamt of? There were two flaws in this theory though: Julian would have never betrayed his eldest brother so despicably and Chloe's bank account wouldn't be in the red; unless she was one of those people who preferred stashing their money under the mattress. No, he was being paranoid; the young woman could barely stay standing and was killing herself to make ends meet typing high school assignments during the hours she was supposed to be catching up on some sleep.

"Well, Ms. Sullivan, your financial situation's definitely appalling. You could use my business savvy," he said under his breath, looking at her latest tax statement before his mobile started to vibrate in his pocket. "Jennifer, I'm coming down," he said quietly so as not to wake up Timmy, who was still sound asleep in his crib.

"Good afternoon, sir," his personal assistant greeted him as he opened the front door of The Talon to let her in.

"You've got me everything I asked for?" he responded, eyeing the bulky folder she handed him.

"That's the file you sent me to print," she cocked an eyebrow.

"This is the high school report?" he asked trying its weight.

"Reports, sir. I didn't count them but my guess is there are thirty or forty of them there. A whole

class's I'd say- and those graphs... let me tell you our Projections Department could use someone with her talent and..."

"She'd be a waste," he cut her off. "Clothes?"

"Clothes, sir?"

"Have you brought me any clothes?" he repeated.

"Oh, yes, of course!" she exclaimed, picking up the small suitcase she'd left next to the entrance door. "You said normal clothes."

"Yes, normal. Don't look at me that way, Jennifer. Tell me you haven't bought me a pair of bleached jeans and floral shirts and you'll earn yourself a bonus."

"No floral or plaid shirts, sir. Only solid black and white shirts, two pairs of black jeans, a dark v-neck and a red one..."

"Red?"

"It's Christmas time, Mr Luthor."

"Right. I assume you didn't forget the underwear," he said smugly.

"No, sir. I've also packed a pair of pyjamas."

"Satin?"

"Cotton. You said clothes that an average male would wear, sir," she stated with a hint of panic in her voice.

"Just testing. Am I such an ogre, Jennifer?" he asked her with a smirk.

"I'm sorry, sir," she smiled nervously.

"Why apologise? You've done nothing wrong. Have you taken care of my transportation?"

"Yes, here are the keys. It's parked in the alley. None of your cars fit the bill.... I thought about bringing you the Jeep but you said you needed a sensible car given the circumstances. It's a hatchback... you'll find a baby seat in the cargo area."

"You've thought of everything. I'm pleased," he complimented her, grabbing the keys. "Any news?"

"All your appointments have been rescheduled for the first week of January as you requested. Oh! Mr Kent came yesterday afternoon. He said not to bother you but..."

“But?”

“Well... he gave me the impression of being a little under the weather. Maybe it’s the holiday season... and another anniversary of his father’s death fast approaching.”

“Yes, maybe it’s that. Thanks for telling me. That’ll be all for now. You drove the hatchback here...How are you coming back?”

“Don’t worry about me, sir. They’re waiting for me outside,” she confessed blushing.

He smiled. “I’m glad. You’d better leave now. Being around here when there are storms brewing has never been the wisest thing to do.”

“Yes, it looks like it’s going to be one hell of a snow storm,” she agreed, fastening the belt around her winter coat.

“Goodbye, Jennifer. Have a safe trip,” he said, opening the front door for her to leave.

“Thanks. Goodbye, sir,” she responded, breaking into a run to climb into the car parked in front of the cafeteria as the first snowflakes started to fall.

Lex looked up at the sky and cursed under his breath. He hated snow because it reminded him of his childhood and being cooped up while the other kids had a blast sledding, playing snowball fights and making snowmen. First, it had been his asthma to blame but, at least, in those days Lillian had been around and she’d always distracted him by dragging him along to the kitchen to bake gingerbread men. And then, when his respiratory condition had vanished after the meteor shower, his mother was too ill and fragile to bake cookies with him and his father was too busy with LuthorCorp’s deals to bother with childish games.

A white blanket had already covered the Main Street when he locked the door and Timmy made himself heard. The billionaire thought about sipping margaritas while lounging in the shade of an umbrella on the beach of the Bahamas and felt a sudden pang of guilt. It was Christmas time and he was needed by someone. He’d be damned if he repeated his father’s mistakes. He’d change a nappy, heat a bottle to feed the child and dress him in warm clothes to fetch Chloe before she caught pneumonia walking in the snow.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

Chloe was getting ready to venture outside when the wind chimes next to the front door rang and Joseph crossed the threshold with a Zepa-looking Timmy in his arms. Her heart skipped a beat when Julian’s cousin located her and their eyes met across the suddenly quiet parlour. God, he looked even yummier in street clothes! And judging by the drooling looks he was getting from Susan’s clientele, she wasn’t the only one who found him breathtakingly gorgeous. She wondered what they would say if she were to drop the bomb he played for the other team- she was naughtily tempted to do it just to have them stop leering at him.



“He’s a hunk,” mouthed Susan when Chloe approached the hairdresser to pay.

“And off-limits,” the blonde reporter added to herself.

“Isn’t he...” started one of the gossip clients.

“Lex Luthor?” finished a loud brunette, shooting the man and a baby a sidelong glance.

“He’s a cousin of Julian’s,” Susan corrected them.” Here’s your change, sweetie,” she added with a knowing smile. “Oh, my! Look who’s come to visit Aunt Susan!” she exclaimed, walking towards Lex, whose eyes flashed briefly with a twinge of panic and then cleared when the woman grazed the baby’s cheek. “He’s as cute as a button. A pity he doesn’t like to be carried so much,” she sighed when the boy started to fuss and whimper.

“I’ll take him,” Chloe interrupted her, stretching out her arms. “He’s sleepy, poor lamb,” she smiled when he yawned.

“He’s been napping since you left. He’s just drowsy after the bottle he had,” replied Lex.

“You must be Joseph,” smiled Susan warmly, stretching out a hand to give him a handshake.

“That’s right,” he said, accepting the greeting.

“So what do you think of our leafy hamlet? It must be a big change for someone as cosmopolitan as you.”

“It has its allures,” he responded, holding Chloe’s gaze.

‘He’s faking, remember? You’re just imagining things,’ Gabe’s daughter told herself. “What Joseph means is that Smallville’s where his favourite cousin lives.”

“Jules is a great kid. Now the old devil’s an entirely different story,” stated the middle-aged hairdresser. “Do you...”

“Sorry for interrupting, Susan, but we have to do a couple of errands before the streets get impassable,” Chloe butted in. “Thanks for the tip, by the way.”

“Oh, sure!” smiled the older woman, trying to hide her disappointment.

“Shall we?” the blonde reporter told Lex, adjusting the baby’s cap.

“I have the car parked at the front,” he responded, grabbing the doorknob.

“It’s been nice to meet you,” chimed in Susan as they stepped out.

“Merry Christmas,” replied Lex politely, shutting the door.

The temperature had dropped a couple of degrees since he left The Talon with Timmy and the wind was now blowing stronger.

"Thanks for the lift," Chloe told him inside the car, rubbing her hands close to the heating system.

"I'm sorry for dragging the baby with me," he responded turning on the ignition.

"It's all right. He's warm and as much as I'd like to keep him in a glass cabinet till he gets married, he should build up his defences. I didn't know you'd brought your car with you."

"Jules had it towed. I had a mechanical problem near the airfield on the way to Smallville and had to leave it on the side of the road. One of the Luthor chauffeurs gave me a lift and then sent for it," he explained. "What?" he cocked an eyebrow when he saw her shake her head.

"Nothing... it's just... this isn't the kind of vehicle I imagined you'd drive. I pride myself on my not being prejudiced and it's the only thing I've been doing since I met you."

"Well, to tell you the truth; it isn't my car. It's rented," he confessed. "I thought a middle-class American car would be more suitable for a 'baby-sitter' than my German sports car," he smirked.

"Trying to make a good impression, eh?"

"You can't blame me. Having the Luthor surname isn't the best of credentials."

"About that... I'm sorry about Susan. She's nice, but you know what it's like to be a small town's hairdresser- beauty parlours are hotbeds of gossip- and... her father-in-law... well... let's say he didn't get the best deal when LuthorCorp bought his lands to build the plant."

"No kidding," he mumbled. "Where to now?"

"Home. I just used the excuse of the errands to take us away from there. I was afraid she was going to start pestering you with questions about your family and... Jules told me you and his dad don't get on well with each other... It didn't seem fair... you know?"

"I know," he said with a tired smile, wondering when it was that someone other than Julian had cared enough to do something nice for him without expecting anything in return.

## THE APARTMENT ABOVE THE TALON

By the time they got to the flat, the visibility was severely reduced and Chloe was looking forward to a mug of cocoa to warm up- coffee was her first love but since she was breast-feeding she had to make do with her second guilty pleasure.

"I'm making a cup of hot cocoa for me. Would you care for one?" she asked Lex as he left his coat on the sofa and she opened the tap to fill the whistling kettle. "Maybe we could borrow some whipped cream from downstairs. I don't think Lana would mind."

"I'll fetch it," he replied, walking to the door.

"See if there's some chocolate cake left. After all, if we don't eat it, Pete will."

"I'll buy this time."

"Forget it. What's this?" she asked, picking up a folder from the top of her desk.

"Your work. Printed and ready to be delivered," he said matter-of-factly, seeing her leaf through the colourful binders.

"This is too much. I was only supposed to type them not to bind them. I don't know if they'll be willing to pay more than we agreed, anyway."

"Your work's worth it. How much do you usually charge, by the way?"

"Why? Do you need me to type some corporative report? Typing high school papers is an honest job, Mr Luthor."

"It wasn't my intention to offend you. I just think someone with your credentials could get something better."

"This is something temporary. There's an opening to do some secretarial work for a local attorney. He's interviewing tomorrow."

"Henry Small?" he asked curious. A job with a gutsy environmentalist, who had never been afraid to fight sharks and powerful corporations such as LuthorCorp was more in keeping with what Lex knew about her. Her present occupation was definitely beneath her potential; she deserved better. However, Lex couldn't help but question the wisdom of working for an employer such as Small when Chloe had someone's safety other than hers to consider.

"No. Andrew Connors. He has a much smaller practice but the pay's good."

Lex took mental note of the name and decided to see into the matter straightaway.

"Would you resign your post at The Ledger?"

"It'd depend on his offer."

"I'll fetch the cream," he responded after a small pause.

"Who's Andrew Connors?" Lex snapped on the mobile in the quiet of The Talon's kitchen.

"What? No 'Hello, little bro'. How was your day?' ? Lex, you're getting as grumpy as the old man."

“Don’t you dare compare me to him, Jules. There’s no time for small talk. Tell me everything you know about Dr Andrew Connors.”

“Connors... Connors...” he murmured pensively.

“Come on, Jules! How many people inhabit this small town? And how many of them are lawyers?”

“A lawyer?”

“Yes, an attorney-at-law. I’ve never heard of him so he’s definitely out of Small’s league or I wouldn’t be asking you for information.”

“Why this sudden interest in a small town attorney? I told you it’s bad news to mix business with pleasure. Have you spooked yet another gorgeous brunette lawyer of yours? How the mighty have fallen! Searching for a lawyer in Hickville.”

“Juuules...” hissed Lex in a threatening voice.

“Lex, I’ve never had problems with the law. Not even a parking ticket. You’re barking at the wrong tree, man. You’re the experienced one. Maybe I should ask Dad.”

“Don’t. I don’t want to owe him any favours.”

“You haven’t told me why you’re interested in this Connors yet.”

“Chloe’s having a job interview with him tomorrow morning.”

“Oooh!!!”

“Yes, oh! You’re the one who should be asking questions. She’s even considering giving up journalism, Julian.”

“She said that?”

“Not in so many words, but she hasn’t discounted it.”

“Well... she’s a grown-up girl, Lex. She can do whatever she wants. Besides, who are we to tell her what’s best? Wasn’t you who said she isn’t the kind to let anyone dictate what she should do or think?”

“Yes, I know what I said. But I believe she might be making a mistake. I’d hate to see someone with her potential bury herself and her boy in this Godforsaken town. She shouldn’t have to give up her dreams to be able to make ends meet.”

“Wow. I thought I’d never hear you sing the praises of a reporter.”

“You didn’t tell me she’d gone against Dad when she lived here as a teenager.”

“Oh, so that’s her appeal!”

“We aren’t talking about appeal here. You’re the one interested in romancing her. I’m just expressing my respect for someone who’s not only dared fight Lionel Luthor but also survived in one piece and even earned the bastard’s admiration.”

“Did you order a background check on her to see if she was on dad’s payroll?”

“I’m just looking out for my little brother.”

“I told you what you see is what you get with Chloe.”

“People can surprise you, Jules.”

“You’re a cynic. You like her, don’t you?”

“Connors, Jules, “ he cut him off.

“You’ll have to do your own digging, Lex, because I don’t know anything for or against the guy. By the way, you’ll be baby-sitting tomorrow night. I’m taking Chloe out. Gotta go, the dragon’s just arrived,” he chuckled, hanging up.

Lex snapped his mobile shut and wondered for the umpteenth time if his little brother wasn’t playing him. The young tycoon knew he was doing the unmentionable out of love- trying to secure the affection of the only person who hadn’t betrayed him yet by giving Jules what he craved- but Lex was already feeling too exposed. He shouldn’t care that Julian was taking her out, after all that had been the idea ever since he had accepted taking part in this crazy plan. He was supposed to be immune after Helen. Maybe he’d been wrong all the while.

## CHAPTER 6

### *THE FOLLOWING MORNING AT THE TALON*

It was ten in the morning when Chloe finished getting dressed and tidying the flat. Timmy had been fed around nine and Joseph had taken him away to give her room and some quiet minutes all to herself. Now she was descending the stairs of a half-full cafeteria ready for a light breakfast.

“Hi, Chloe!” Lana greeted her with a smile as she cleaned one of the tables which had just been vacated.

“Good morning, Lana,” responded Chloe, scanning the room in search of the billionaire and her baby.

“Are you looking for Joseph and your little man?” asked the brunette, wiping the top of the table with a damp tea towel.

“I see you’ve already met.”

“Yes, he introduced himself. He’s nice, although I must confess he made me feel a bit clumsy. You know, if I didn’t know what I do, I would swear he’s *the* Lex Luthor. I only saw the guy on TV and in the papers, but the resemblance is spooky.”

“Yes, it is, isn’t it? It took Jules a while to convince me he wasn’t pulling my leg and, I must tell you when I saw him the first time... he looked so superior and smug standing in my living-room that I thought I’d been right from the start. I was tempted to call the whole thing off over the weekend and give Jules a dressing down for lying to me so blatantly, but he seems legit and the information I found on him does too. “

“You investigated him?” gasped Lana.

“I wouldn’t be Chloe Sullivan if I hadn’t, right? So... where are they?”

“Look at my husband,” replied the brunette with a lopsided grin.

“What’s wrong with him?” frowned the blonde reporter when she located Pete Ross leaning against the counter, his jaws clenched and a hostile expression on his face instead of his habitual easy smile.

“You know what he’s like when there’s a Luthor in the vicinity. Just follow the daggers and you’ll find the booth you’re looking for,” Lana shrugged her shoulders and smiled apologetically.

Gabe’s only daughter walked towards the secluded corner and on her way there whispered to Pete, “Grow up, Ross.”

“You and my wife are both blind. All Luthors, including the small one, are nothing but bad news. Mark my words, Chlo’, that guy’s trouble with capital T.”

“Hello there,” she greeted Lex, slipping into the seat opposite him and flashing him a luminous Sullivan smile.

“Your friend’s husband doesn’t seem to like me very much,” he responded, folding up the financial section of *The Planet*.

*Understatement of the year.* “Pete bears a grudge against the Luthors because Lionel is said to have swindled the Rosses when he bought them the creamed corn factory in the late eighties.”

Lex heard the news with his customary poker face firmly in place and told himself this was one of the reasons he’d turned down his dad’s offer to stay. There was too much baggage to start afresh in a small community which was practically owned by his father and LuthorCorp. They would have never let Lex live it down. He’d stepped out of his father’s shadow and managed to build his own empire, beginning LexCorp in Montana with the capital his late mother had bequeathed him and rallying the support of the ranch’s hands. In time, he bought some of them out and started to expand and diversify the conglomerate, creating veterinarian, pharmaceutical and agrochemical branches.

“I was ten when that happened,” he told Chloe, setting down the empty cup on the saucer.

“It must be difficult to have your surname.”

“Yes, especially if your name’s Lex Luthor,” he replied, looking at the attractively well-groomed reporter and wishing she took his words literally to free him from the torturing feeling of guilt that assaulted him while being around her and the baby when he was supposed to be paving the way for Julian’s seduction. He wasn’t a quitter and yet, he was toying with the idea of sabotaging the plan because he was already getting too attached and dreaded how the big reveal would affect him if he let this drag on a whole week.

Chloe looked at him in the eye and wondered if she was being paranoid. Surely Joseph meant the member of the family that got the worst deal was his cousin Lex and not that he himself was actually Lionel’s first born. Although there were times when she wished Jules had lied to her so that she could have a valid excuse to throw this man out of her flat and return to her routine of dirty nappies, hard work and sleepless nights free of lustful thoughts. She knew what it was like to pine for the unattainable, Clark was supposed to have cured her of that, and here she was again beginning to tread the very same dangerous path thirty-six hours after meeting the culprit.

“Do you get on with him?”

“He isn’t Jules but he isn’t his father either,” he responded cryptically.

“OK, Chloe,” sighed Lana. “What will it be? A latte with a piece of chocolate pie and a dollop of whipped cream?”

“Not today, Lana. I’ll just have a decaf with two sugars, please. My stomach feels tied up in knots. You’d think it was my first job interview,” she chuckled.

“Oh, I didn’t know! Are you going to Metropolis?”

“No, it’s for an opening here in Smallville. Andrew Connors is looking for a new secretary and the pay’s way better than the one at The Ledger.”

“Uhm...” replied Lana with a small frown. “You know...” she began to reply only to be interrupted by the ringing of Chloe’s mobile.

“Sorry, I have to take this one,” said the blonde reporter apologetically, flipping the phone open. “Hi, Lo’!,” she exclaimed warmly.

“I’ll go for your order,” mouthed Lana. “Would you like a refill, Joseph?” she added in a low voice.

“I’ll come with you,” he smirked, getting up from his seat.

“Lo’, slow down. Is everything OK? You know that I’m always here for you...” “ said Chloe to her eldest cousin.

Lana reached the counter with Lex just a few steps behind her and shot a warning glance at her husband, who was still sitting on one of the bar stools with a scowl on his face.

“What?!” exclaimed Pete, pretending not to understand what his wife was worried about.

“Why don’t you get ready to take Henry Jr to kindergarten, Pete?” she smiled in a tone that the young man recognized as her ‘Don’t mess with me, Ross, or you’ll have to find somewhere else to sleep tonight.’

Lex met Pete’s look with a smug lopsided grin as Chloe’s old school mate took a last sip of his lukewarm coffee before complying with Lana’s wishes.

“You should excuse Pete’s bad manners, Joseph. He is a good man, but he’s stubborn at times.”

“I bet he is. You don’t need to apologise, Lana, “ he replied, observing how she prepped the espresso machine.”Would you mind if I asked you a question?”

“Certainly not. Shoot,” she said, removing the filter holder.

“I couldn’t help but notice your reaction when Chloe mentioned Andrew Connors. Do you know him?”

“Well, I haven’t seen him in ages.”

“But what you know about him you don’t like. Or am I wrong? ”

“No, you aren’t wrong. “

“What can you tell me about him? Jules cares a lot for Chloe and I want what’s best for her, although I’m just getting to know her...”

“You’re already growing fond of her,” smiled the brunette, adjusting the steam.

The young tycoon wondered exactly what Chloe had told her about him; the conspiratorial smile seemed to suggest she was considering him as a prospective date for her friend so maybe she hadn’t been told that very tiny detail Jules had come up with in order to protect Chloe’s reputation. The boy was so chivalrous that sometimes Lex wondered if their mother had ever broken her marital vows but, then, he himself had also been known for behaving protectively towards the female sex at times- a fact which some of the unscrupulous women in his life had expertly exploited.

“Can I give you a hand with that?” he offered when he saw her fight with the control knob.

“Thanks,” she said relieved when he walked around the counter and adjusted the knob.

“You’re welcome. Now, what is it that you know about Connors?”

“He harassed me when I was still at high school. I don’t know what would have happened if a friend of mine hadn’t turned up when he did; he saved me but Andy took out a million-dollar lawsuit in damages and the Kents almost lost their farm and... well... everything.”



Clark. Always the hero. So this was the Lana he waxed lyrical about when he met him for the first time.

"You said 'almost'. Did your father help them?"

"No, we discovered he was faking his injury and had him drop the lawsuit. I believe in second chances but I've heard some buzz that I wasn't the only female he's ever targeted," she confessed setting the mugs on the tray.

"I'll take those," said Lex, grabbing the cups. "And thanks for the information."

"If you don't mind my asking, what exactly do you intend to do with it?"

"What makes you think I'll do anything about it?"

"You wouldn't have asked in the first place."

"I'm not a thug. I won't have him maimed or anything like it," he replied in a tone which clearly suggested he believed that was exactly what Connors deserved.

"Well, whatever your plans, let me know if I can help you in any way," she offered with a conspiratorial wink. "I know Chloe needs this job, but she'll be better-off at The Ledger. I'm sure that with her qualifications there'll be someone who will really appreciate her *professional* talents."

"Thanks for the tip, Lana. I'll keep you posted," he replied, leaving the counter with the two mugs.

"I'd love to," responded Chloe with a luminous smile as Lex set down the decaf in front of her and then sat down with his own refill. "That is if Joseph doesn't mind staying with Timmy tonight," she added meeting Lex's questioning look. "A juicy steak sounds nice."

He took a sip of his black coffee and observed the way her emerald eyes shone with enthusiasm. He should be working on the merger of LexCorp Pharmaceuticals and Tanaka Laboratories; he'd thought about preparing the strategy and dealing with the paperwork that night. His cold business persona told him to prioritise- he'd never put personal affairs first. 'Yes, and look how appallingly you've done outside business so far.' She deserved a night out with this girlfriend of hers. Timmy got on with him splendidly and he'd be asleep by eight, leaving Lex with enough time to prepare for the conference call with the Japanese.

"No problem," he mouthed.

"He said 'yes', so where shall we meet? OK, I'll be there by seven. Bye," she replied on the mobile before hanging up and putting it away in her bag. "Thanks for accepting to babysit Timmy tonight. I haven't had a night out since I don't know when. I really appreciate what you're doing for us, Joseph."

"That's what I'm here for, right?" he told her with a small smile.

"Oh! See what time it is!" exclaimed Chloe looking at her wristwatch. "I have to leave if I want to be on time for the interview. Wish me luck," she added, standing up and pressing a kiss on the baby's forehead. "Bye, sweetie."

Lex felt like a bastard not warning her she was walking into the Lion's Den. She'd probably tell him to mind his own business, anyway.

"Chloe..." he called out when she was a few metres away from the booth.

"Yes?" she turned around.

"I..." started Lex only to be interrupted by a newly-arrived.

"Chloe?" asked a surprised voice she hadn't heard in years.

"Clark?" she gasped, swinging around. "Clark!" she repeated, embracing him as if their drifting apart had never happened.

"I'm glad to see you too, Chlo'," he laughed, looking over the petite blonde's shoulder to meet a serious-looking Lex. "What...?" he began only to be cut short by a discreet shake of the billionaire's head. "... would you say if we got together with the gang tonight?" he finished, releasing Chloe and shooting a puzzled sideways glance at the older man he had saved from drowning and who had become one of his best friends.

"I've already got plans for tonight, but can I get a rain cheque?"

"Sure. I'm staying for the holidays," he told her with the megawatt smile that used to weaken her in the knees.

"Gotta go. Job interview," she said apologetically. "See you around, Clark. Bye, Joseph," she added, rushing to the front door of The Talon.

Clark looked at her receding form until she crossed the street and then he turned around to meet Lex's eyes.

"Joseph?"

"You must be Clark Kent. Nice to meet you," responded Lionel's first born, stretching out an arm to shake the farm boy's hand.

Clark accepted the handshake studying his friend with a puzzled frown.

"Smile, Clark. I'll explain everything to you later. Come to the apartment above the cafeteria once The Talon closes for the day," continued the billionaire under his breath in an attempt to preserve his cover-up in front of Lana and the coffee house patrons.

"Nice to meet you, *Joseph*," mumbled Clark, wondering what his playboy billionaire friend was up

to now.

## CHAPTER 7

### CHLOE'S APARTMENT- AROUND NOON

Seeing Clark Kent cross the threshold had been a big surprise and one that had almost given Lex the way out he was looking forward to; *almost*, because he'd again inexplicably decided to keep up the ruse.

He lay back in the armchair with his eyes closed trying to justify what he had just set in motion and knowing full well that if something went wrong, the bomb might explode in his face. Having scruples was alien to most Luthors; still, wasn't it one of the reasons he had decided to turn down Lionel's offer to stay in Smallville? The desperate hope he could be someone his mother might have been proud of rather than a carbon copy of the heartless bastard their father was? Yes, he'd manipulated the situation but it was for the greater good. He just hoped Chloe wasn't the type given to tears- he could handle anything except a crying woman. Damn Julian for putting him in this situation!

It was at moments such as these that he wished Lillian were alive; she would have taught him how to let himself feel, how to be human and not think of it as a sinful weakness. Crap! He hated the Holiday Season and the sentimental cravings it created in him when he couldn't bury his anguish in meaningless but liberating sex away from his father and the burden of knowing he'd never measure up to his expectations. Lex might have told the world he did no longer care about what his flesh and blood thought of him; however, the little hurt boy in him still wished to get the love he'd been denied by his father. Julian loved him, of that he was sure, and yet the young tycoon sometimes dreamt of the last Christmas he spent with his parents in Montana before Lillian found out she was pregnant again. For a moment he'd thought they could be a happy family; for a moment he believed in Christmas and Santa Claus.

Lex's musings came to an abrupt end when the sound of gurgling reached his ears and he opened his eyes to see Timmy staring at him from the bouncing cradle- a toothless smile on his face. Damn it! Was that a tug he felt in his heart? He should be running away and prevent a major tragedy. He was falling in love with this little family, already thinking of ways he could secure Chloe and this small boy's future. He couldn't do that to Jules, could he? Lex was jaded and already had two failed marriages on his shoulders while the golden boy was a toddler when it came to relationships with the opposite sex. Jules deserved the best and his eldest brother couldn't think of anyone worthier of the youngest Luthor than Chloe Sullivan.

Lex wiped the dribble off Timmy's face and wished things were different. Envy was an unhealthy feeling and that was exactly what he was feeling towards Julian right now.

"Tell me your morning's been better than mine," sighed Chloe, breezing in and startling the usually unflappable billionaire. "And before you ask, no, I didn't get the job."

"I'm really sorry, Chloe; I know how much you wanted to land that position," he replied, relieved that she'd taken rejection with such equanimity.

"You know, I don't know what happened there. One minute I thought the job was mine and the next a legal aid entered the room and told Connors there was something urgent for him to see to, and everything went down the drain," she gesticulated, slumping on the sofa.

"Had he said the position was yours?"

"He didn't have to use the words for me to know he'd made up his mind. Call me paranoid but... I'm starting to think maybe someone I pissed off in the past overheard us this morning and decided to exact his revenge now by asking Connors not to hire me."

"Chloe, things always happen for a reason."

"You mean this was part of God's big design?"

"Call it what you will, but I'm sure there's a bigger purpose in all this."

"Yeah, like what? Job offers don't grow in trees in this rural town, Joseph," she shook her head.

"Why limit your ambitions to Smallville? With your résumé I'm sure several prestigious editors around the country would die to have you as part of their staff."

"I left a very well-paid job at a first-rate newspaper in Chicago to live here. It was *my* choice."

"I know what it is like to feel the need to start afresh. I'm not questioning the choices you made then..."

"But you're questioning the ones I'm making now," she said tightly. "You don't know anything about me or why I do the things I do..."

"You're right. It was presumptuous of me to catechise you, especially when I myself hate to be subjected to the preaching of those who believe they always know better," he conceded. "Truce?" he added stretching out a hand.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to blow off like that..." she excused herself, grabbing his hand and feeling once again that sparkle of electricity.

"You were more than justified," he told her with a small smile. "Of course, you could marry a billionaire and would never have to work again."

"A billionaire? Would you imagine *me* married to a billionaire? I'm as politically incorrect as they come. I wouldn't be able to keep my mouth shut if I were to meet some hypocritical ass or someone I know for sure is deep in corruption. Escorting me to soirées and charity balls would end up being a nightmare for a billionaire intent on using social meetings to close business deals," she chuckled.

“Well, you wouldn’t be a boring and vapid companion, that’s for sure. More than half the billionaires I know have to lavish their bought wives or demimondes with expensive jewellery or shopping trips to Paris and London to make sure they keep their mouths shut at parties... and not precisely because they fear their ladies’ words would be too insightful. It’s rarely that you come across someone authentic and intelligent hanging on a rich man’s arm. “

Chloe felt the colour rise to her cheeks. She had lost the habit of getting compliments from members of the opposite sex, especially when they weren’t meant to get in her pants or to use her as a personal search engine. And Chloe assumed the reason behind the evident compliment was definitely not the latter- he could hire a dozen expensive P.I.’s with a snap of his fingers. As regards having *indecent* intentions involving her, it could be ruled out... unless Julian were wrong and his cousin weren’t averse to an occasional fling with the fairer sex.

Joseph Luthor was a really complex man, of that she was sure; and there were moments, such as when he came to pick her up at the hairdresser’s, when she got the feeling that his flirting with her wasn’t pretence, that he actually found her desirable.

She should stop speculating or building castles in the air. She should take his words for what they were, an honest compliment she could have got from a friend. It would be a lot safer.

“Well, in any case, just as jobs, billionaires don’t grow in trees around here, especially of the kind that would put up with a snoopy reporter and a wailing six-month-old.”

“I know of one who wouldn’t mind,”

“You do?” she cocked an eyebrow.

“Julian.”

“Julian? As in Julian Luthor, your cousin?”

“He’s mad about you.”

“You mean he’s *occasionally* mad *at* me because I don’t always give in to his puppy-eyed routine,” she laughed.

“And yet you caved in and let him convince you to put up a stranger for a week. You know, when he told me... “

“You must have wondered what you were walking into. He’s really something, isn’t he? He knows exactly what buttons to push to get what he wants; and he has an amazing knack for knowing what it is that you need even before you know it yourself.”

“He’s a Luthor. We’re born that way,” he replied in a voice which to Chloe’s ears sounded an octave lower.

What was wrong with her? Her hormones seemed to be in overdrive. She felt warm all over again

and was too young to be experiencing the flushes characteristic of menopause. Living in close quarters with Julian's ultra suave and effortlessly sexy cousin was wrecking havoc on her. It was a good thing she was going out with Lois that night; a few hours away from her tiny apartment and Joseph's intoxicating presence might help clear her head.

*ON THE WAY TO LOGAN'S STEAKHOUSE- NEAR GRANDVILLE- EVENING*

Having her Beetle in the garage for repairs was a real pain and Chloe hated depending on others. Even though she knew Joseph would have been more than accommodating and driven her to Grandville, sharing a space smaller than her tiny apartment wasn't what her hormones needed at the moment. Things would have been a lot simpler if Lois had picked her up at The Talon and then driven to their appointed destination. However, the youngest cousin had taken pity on the General's daughter and ended up asking the Youngest Luthor for a lift. Joseph had looked a little peeved... well, he'd actually glared at Julian when his small cousin didn't pay too much heed to his recommendations about driving after a heavy snowstorm.

"Will you stop checking that watch, Chloe?" sighed Julian completely focused on the road. "You've left him all the instructions written on paper, went over the list with him in front of me before we set off. He knows when Timmy's next bottle is due and will change the monster's diaper if he needs it. I told you, you can trust Joseph. He knows what he's doing. He might be a bit rusty but..."

"What do you mean *rusty*?"

"Think about the wonderful girls' night ahead and stop worrying."

"Rusty, Julian?"

"OK. Here we are," he said pulling up in front of the restaurant.

"Julian," she said in a menacing voice.

"Looking after a baby is like riding a bicycle. The fact that he hasn't been around a talc-powdered butt in a long time doesn't mean he won't know what to do with it."

Julian cursed himself. Bad analogy, Luthor. Now she'll think she's left Timmy with a pervert and Lex WILL definitely kill you. "Look. That came out all wrong," he chuckled nervously. "Joseph would never lay a finger on Timmy."

"That thought never entered my mind," shuddered the blonde reporter. "In fact... there's something I meant to ask you..."

"Hey, cuz!" shouted Lois, banging on the window of the passenger's door. "What took you so long?"

"Oh, God!" said Chloe under her breath on seeing her clearly intoxicated cousin.

*THE APARTMENT ABOVE THE TALON*

Almost three hours had gone by since Chloe and Julian left Smallville for her night out with Lois, but Lex felt as if he'd spent the whole evening dealing with one conference call after another, a board meeting and a tête-à-tête with Lionel Luthor on top of that. In other words, he was drained and ready to collapse.

He looked at Timmy, who was now lying asleep in his crib with a thumb in his mouth instead of the dummy Lex had yet to find amidst the chaos, and wondered if Julian hadn't been right when he'd referred to Chloe's baby as a little monster. It had taken the couple to climb into the car for Timmy to start whimpering and five minutes for the soft cries to become a wailing siren.

Lex had tried everything to calm him down, from pulling out his favourite toys to improvising a puppet show and then telling him a couple of his favourite mythological tales from Ancient Greece—not that the baby would understand much, but Lex had no bedtime stories in his repertoire. The little guy eventually seemed to be lulled by the nuances of the billionaire's voice until the mention of Menelaus, Agamemnon and Helen of Troy reminded Lex of Julian and his courting of Chloe, and the vibe in the room must have changed because all of a sudden Timmy decided he didn't like mashed carrots and sweet potatoes after all.

Who could have known a baby would see beyond his poker face and realise that behind the mask lay a man capable of deep passions? This was a secret worth-keeping; if the board members of LexCorp or his business opponents were to find out what secret weapon they could use to know if the billionaire was hiding something behind his cold façade, Lionel's first-born would be in serious trouble.

"Don't you dare laugh, Clark," he told his best friend, using the cold threatening voice that made his minions recoil.

"I wasn't," he replied clearly fighting the urge to do so. There was something incongruous about seeing the always unflappable and immaculate billionaire without a jacket and tie and with the sleeves of his white dress shirt rolled up as he finished mopping the floor and wiping the baby purée off every surface.

"Good. I'd seriously consider black-listing you if you were. So..." he replied gravely, making a ball with the kitchen towel and throwing it on the work top to grab the carafe of the coffee maker and pour two mugs of the fresh drink. "Let's talk about what's got you 'under the weather' as my assistant so aptly put it."

"I don't know what you're talking about," he mumbled, sipping the hot coffee.

"Come on, Clark. You've never known how to lie. I thought you had plans for the holidays. Let me tell you it was quite a surprise to see you walk through the door of the coffee shop this morning."

"It can't have been as big a surprise as finding you there; *I* am the one who's grown up in Smallville after all and, correct me if I'm wrong, but you've always said only the Devil would drag you here."

“Well... let’s call him the Devil’s apprentice. But we’re digressing...”

“I don’t think so, Lex. You still have to tell me what you’re doing asking people to call you Joseph, living with my friend Chloe and her baby and... playing housewife.”

“First of all my middle name *is* Joseph. Second, I’m not *living* with Miss Sullivan; she’s just putting me up for a few days. And third, if Chloe’s such a close friend of yours, why is it you’ve never mentioned her? The only girl’s name that used to pass through your lips before meeting that Lois you told me about was Lana Lang’s. What happened with you and Chloe?”

“Nothing happened. She just moved out when we finished high school and we kind of... drifted apart,” Clark shrugged his shoulders.

Lex wondered how someone could ever *dismiss* a young woman such as Chloe so easily, especially after being blessed with her friendship.

“She’s an amazing young woman.”

“She isn’t like the creatures you’re used to, Lex.”

“I know that. She’s the kind of girl a man would be proud to have in his life as an equal, a wife and the mother of his children. At least my brother knows something good when he sees it...”

“Lucas?” frowned Clark.

“God, no! Julian. I wouldn’t help that rake come near Chloe and her baby even if he gave me the LuthorCorp shares he inherited.”

“If you think that way about him, what’s he doing working for LexCorp?”

“If there’s something I learnt from my Dad is to keep my enemies closer.”

“Enemies?”

“The jury’s still out, Clark. Lucas turned out of the blue to play the prodigal ‘brother’. I’m not sure if my father didn’t get to him first. They could very well be playing me.”

“Lex,” Clark shook his head.

“Clark, why pretend? We’re hardly the Partridge Family. Julian’s everything I have and trust- and you, of course, you’re a great friend. You know I’d leap through hoops of fire for my baby brother. I’m trying to give him some alone time with Chloe. He’s the only reason I’m here for the Holiday Season. I’m definitely not domestic material.”

“Well... I’m not so sure about that. You aren’t doing that bad. *I* wouldn’t have known where to start,”



“You know me; I can never say no to a challenge. And don’t sell yourself short; given the chance I’m sure you’d be a natural, Clark. Now, enough of me and my manipulative sibling; I’m still in one piece so what’s with you and that face of ‘they’ve killed my best friend’? Weren’t you supposed to take your Mom and your girlfriend to the cabin I arranged for you in Aspen?”

“I’m sorry... I know you’ve put yourself to so much trouble...”

“Nonsense. What are friends for if not to help each other? What happened? Did your editor send her on an assignment to some distant corner of the world to keep you apart in retribution for her rebelliousness? You know, you still have to introduce her to me; she sounds like a handful. I’m really curious to meet the woman capable of making you put the illustrious Lana Lang behind you once and for all.”

“Well, I don’t see that happening any time soon.”

“Don’t tell me you got cold feet.”

“It’s just that... I don’t know if it’d be fair to tell her. I don’t know if I could run the risk of losing her or seeing her get hurt because of me.”

“The fact that you are afraid means she’s more than a passing fancy or an infatuation. You’ll lose her the way you lost Lana or you might have lost our friendship if you keep secrets from her. I might not be the most appropriate to talk about this, considering how hard it’s always been for me to open up and how many times I’ve got burnt in my life, but... I want to believe there’s someone out there for every one of us; someone who can accept us for whom we are.”

Lex wondered who the man sitting in Chloe’s living-room was. This stranger holding a half-empty Snoopy mug and wearing a two-hundred-dollar designer shirt with purée stains couldn’t be the same cynical billionaire who ran away from commitment and any form of attachment that might put his heart on the line. And he’d been in Smallville less than a week...

“Maybe Mom was right. Maybe I was waiting for the right person to come along. I’m sure you’ll find her too, Lex.”

The trick was to recognise her, and so far his record in the romance field had been anything but stellar.

## CHAPTER 8

*ROUTE 8- FIVE KILOMETRES AWAY FROM SMALLVILLE- 11 p.m.*

“Next time you’d better listen to the voice of experience, Jules,” he said, changing gear and looking into the rear-view mirror to make sure everything was doing fine in the back seat. He would have considered leaving the boy on the side of the road to spend the night as pay-off if Chloe and Lois hadn’t been with him.

Chloe, who had her left arm around her eldest cousin's shoulders, adjusted the warm quilt Joseph'd grabbed from the linen cupboard in case the car's heating weren't enough to fight the cold of the night. It had been a wise decision; as sensible as leaving Timmy with the Rosses instead of dragging him along.

"I'm used to driving in the snow. It could have happened even to you, Joe," Jules shot him a sideways glance.

"I'd appreciate it if you didn't shorten my name, Julian."

"My brother doesn't mind when I call him Alex."

"That's because Alex doesn't sound like a name taken from a two-dime western paperback," he glared at his youngest sibling. "How are you doing in the back?" he asked Chloe when he heard a moan coming out of Lois' mouth.

"Hoping the motion won't bring certain unpleasant things up again," snickered Chloe.

"How much did she drink?"

"My guess is she'd had a couple before taking a cab to the restaurant and the tab was... bulky, considering it didn't include any food. I know it'd have been wiser to stay at home tonight as you'd suggested, but you see now why I wanted to come. She needed someone talk to... and... Lois is the sister I've never had. I don't know what I would have done without her last year."

"There's no need to explain. I know the things one's willing to do out of love. Are you sure you'll be comfortable sharing a bed with your cousin?"

"We've already discussed it. The only inn in town is closed for the Holiday Season."

"I could sleep over at the mansion," he added with a poker-face.

"That's sweet of you, but I wouldn't feel well knowing you were sacrificing your comfort for us."

Lex wondered if he'd ever get used to this; to someone actually caring for what he felt and making concessions or changes in their daily routine just for him and his well-being.

Julian observed his brother's profile. God only knew what was going through his mind. He hated when he did that, when he closed up and assumed that air of aloof control.

"OK, we'll drop you off first since the coast is clear, Jules," said Lex, turning on the indicator. The last thing he needed was to come across his dad now. It was a good thing their old man had taken the chopper to go to the opera in Metropolis and that he wouldn't return until the wee small hours. "Then I'll leave you two at the apartment and pick the baby from the Rosses, Chloe."

"Yeah, it sounds like a plan," she sighed, wrinkling her nose. Lois needed a shower and a change of clothes after throwing up.

*THE APARTMENT ABOVE THE TALON*

It was 1 a.m. when Lex climbed up the stairs and knocked discreetly on the front door of the apartment not to wake the baby up or walk on either Chloe or her cousin in any state of undress. He had enough on his plate to have to deal either with his libido or a potential bout of jealousy from Clark in the bargain.

Closing the door quietly, he left on a chair the clothes he'd just taken off in the manager's private toilet of The Talon and proceeded to get the davenport ready. Usually he didn't turn in so early in the morning, and he still had a lot to get ready for the Tanaka merger, but the events of the evening had drained him.

Sleep came slowly though, Lois' sobbing and Chloe's murmured soothing words kept him awake and made him infinitely more uncomfortable than walking on either of them naked would ever have. He was in his element when it came to matters of sensuality and seduction, and yet this was too real. This week was turning out to be like nothing he'd planned or expected of his holidays and it scared him.

Would a woman ever cry over him the way Lois was over Clark? Would someone ever feel that kind of love for him?

"Julian," he thought. "Julian. Jules is in love with Chloe and that's the one thing you need to focus on. Make sure he gets his chance. Survive the week and stop dreaming of the impossible."

At six thirty, when Chloe finished breast-feeding Timmy, Lex decided to make himself scarce.

"I'm going out. I've got to make a couple of phone calls. Is there anything you need?" he asked Chloe quietly.

"Coffee. She'll deplete my reserves when she gets up," she smiled sheepishly. "I'm sorry about yesterday."

"No need. Will she be all right?" he asked, shooting a glance at Lois who was still asleep in the king-sized bed.

"I feel like wringing Clark's neck for putting her through this. Some men can be so dense when it comes to seeing what's in front of their eyes..." she sighed. "I bet she'll be mortified when she wakes up."

"She'll have a hell of a hangover, that's for sure. I'll give you both some breathing space. I'll be back in two hours."

"Thanks," she smiled as he stepped out. "Ah! Could you get me a copy of The Daily Planet?"

"Sure," he smirked.

*THE TALON- 9 a.m.*

“Hey,” Lex greeted the blonde reporter, slipping in the seat across from her.

“Hi,” she smiled as Timmy stretch out an arm and grabbed the key ring with the flashy BMW logo Joseph had set down on the table next to his espresso.

“Maybe I should get him a rattle,” smirked the billionaire as the baby started to play with the keys enthusiastically.

“I see you’ve changed your wheels.”

“Well, the local car wash is closed for the holidays and I really didn’t relish driving all the way to Grandville in it to have the interior cleaned.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I’ve got experience with hangovers, Chloe. I’d give your cousin a run for her money. There’s no need to make excuses. It might happen to the best of us. Is she still in bed?” he asked looking up at the flat.

“No. Clark came an hour ago, looking more miserable than she did. She got dressed, they had breakfast- well... he did... she had a chamomile and some crackers- and then they left. I suppose he’s driven her some place like Chandler’s Field.”

“Chandler’s Field?”

“There’s a tall windmill there. It’s a great place to think or to share with someone. You know, look at Metropolis’ skyline at a distance with someone special. On clear days you can see forever. “

“Have you ever been there?”

“In the field? Yes. At the top of the windmill? No,” she blushed.

Chloe shuffled in her seat and pretended she was busy adjusting Timmy on her lap when in reality she was trying to hide the flip-flops her stomach was doing after raising her eyes and meeting Joseph’s. She’d seen something in his blue-grey orbs, something indescribable in their depths which had shaken her to the core. She’d seen so much hurt and longing there, seen something she didn’t feel entitled to pry into. And yet, she wished she could do something about it, make it better somehow.

“I’ve brought you a copy of The Planet,” he said warmly, putting an end to the strange interlude.

“Oh, thanks! “ she exclaimed, opening the paper and leafing through it in search of the employment section.

“Would you mind lending me the financial section?”

“Mm?” she asked distractedly.

“The financial section. Could I have it?”

“Oh! Sure. Here you are.”

Lex browsed the headlines and decided he’d give his team a rise.

He sipped at his espresso and darted a discreet glance at Chloe over the brim of the mug. Her face was full of excitement.

“Good news?”

The answer was wordless as she pushed the newspaper across the small table for him to see the one-page ad.

“I told you things always happen for a reason, Chloe.”

*THE DAILY PLANET UNDERGROUND GARAGE- METROPOLIS- EARLY AFTERNOON*

“Is it allowed to park here?” asked Chloe when Joseph took the key from the ignition and unlocked the doors.

“I made a call while you were getting changed. An old boarding school mate is on the board. He told me I could use his parking space since he isn’t in town and finding a slot near the newspaper at this time is very hard.”

Chloe doubted that was the real reason behind his preferring to park in the underground garage instead of the street. She was inclined to believe Joseph wanted to avoid being seen, especially if his lover was still in Metro.

She understood him. She knew what it was like to be nursing a broken heart and feel like wanting to crawl under a rock.

“Are you sure you don’t mind being here?” she asked for the umpteenth time, unstrapping Timmy from the baby seat in the back while Lex opened the boot.

“If I did, I wouldn’t have offered to drive you, Chloe. Stop worrying.”

“OK,” she sighed as he summoned the lift.

“Relax. You’ll do great,” he reassured her, resting a hand on her back to propel her forward when the lift dinged open.

“Timmy!” she remonstrated with the little one when he started to pull her hair.

“Give him to me. I don’t have any golden tresses to worry about.”

“Very funny,” she rolled her eyes, trying to untangle her hair with the aid of a comb. “Do you think this outfit will do?” she asked, biting her lower lip and looking at herself in the mirror.

“You look slick and professional.”

“That means dull. Well, in any case they should hire me for my impressive résumé and not for my catwalk looks; not that I’d ever look like a fashion model.”

“No, you wouldn’t,” he said quietly, looking at her reflection and realising his words might be misconstrued. “You don’t need to starve to death or to pump yourself with Botox and silicones to get a man’s attention. You’re a very attractive young woman. And above all, there’s substance in the package.”

“That’s sweet. Thank you,” she smiled. “I wasn’t fishing for compliments though.”

“I know. Believe me, Chloe, I know the type who’d do that.”

“You must think me foolish. Most of the times I believe I’m all mature, that I’ve outgrown all my high school insecurities. Being a geek and an outspoken big city girl in rural Kansas can be a karma, especially when you have to grow up in the shadow of a Prom Queen. Listen to me, I sound like a cry baby.”

“There’s nothing to feel ashamed about. It’s your hormones and your subconscious fighting to remind you you’re not just a mother but a woman. We all have our own insecurities, Chloe. Don’t let appearances deceive you.”

“You’re a nice man, Mr Luthor,” she said warmly, squeezing his arm gently as the lift dinged open.

“Joseph,” he corrected her.

“Joseph,” she smiled, getting out of the lift.

Lex stepped out with Timmy in his arms and frowned at the congested corridor. There were at least twenty candidates waiting their turn to be interviewed.

“Come on, let’s take that flight of stairs. I know a way around,” he told her, placing a hand on her lower back.

“That wouldn’t be a subterfuge to cut in the line, would it?”

It already was more than cutting in the line, but if he played his cards right she’d never need to know it.

“There’s no seat available in that corridor and Timmy’s feeding time is approaching. I thought you’d appreciate a chair to give him his bottle,” he stated, his poker-face firmly in place.

“Well, put that way it’s reasonable,” she replied, starting to climb up the stairs. “Hand me the

stroller.”

“I’m fine.”

“You aren’t my personal moving van, Joseph. It’s folded and we’re almost there,” she insisted, pulling the carrier.

“I said I can...”

“Why do you always have to be so... grrr...?” she shook.

“So?” he cocked an eyebrow.

“I’m not a fragile daisy who’d collapse if she lifted nine pounds.”

“I know you aren’t a damsel in distress, and I’m hardly material for a knight in shining armour either. “

“Well... I beg to differ on that one,” she quirked her lips in a small smile. “You’ve been a life-saver these past days.”

“Why don’t you take a seat in one of these armchairs while I give the secretary your personal details?” suggested Lex, unfolding the stroller in the reception area.

The secretary, a willowy brunette who Chloe thought looked at Joseph a little too saucily, checked out the appointments and informed him Ms Sullivan was next.

Half an hour later, just when Timmy had finished his bottle and Chloe had laid him down in the stroller, the door of the private office opened and another bespectacled and very attractive brunette appeared to see the previous candidate off.

“Good morning, you must be Ms Sullivan,” the assistant greeted Chloe. “I’m sorry to have kept you waiting,” she apologised warmly.

“It’s all right. It gave us time for Timmy’s bottle,” smiled Chloe, noticing Joseph’s coiled energy beside her.

“Would you mind fetching us some coffee, Jennifer?” asked the young man at the office door.

“Of course not, sir. How do you take it, Ms Sullivan?”

“I’m sorry. I’m a coffee junkie, but I’m breastfeeding.”

“How about a mug of hot chocolate?” offered the assistant.

“That would be lovely,” she thanked the well-mannered brunette, shooting a discreet sidelong glance at Julian’s cousin, who had turned gelid all of a sudden.

“What a charming boy!” exclaimed the impeccably dressed man Chloe assumed was in charge of conducting the interviews.

No sooner had he approached the stroller than Timmy howled at the top of his lungs.

“I’m afraid he doesn’t like strangers,” Chloe told him, picking the baby up.

“I can see that,” replied the young man smugly on seeing the child make a leap into Lex’s arms. “Shall we start?” he smirked, showing Chloe the way.

“I’ve put the extra diapers in the zipped compartment,” she told Joseph in a lower voice.

“Don’t worry, Chloe. I’ve got everything under control,” he answered, looking at the other man with smouldering hostility.

“I’ll give her back to you in half an hour,” the younger man cut in, and Chloe rolled her eyes. Men and their need to show who was more macho.

“What’s he doing here?” Lex asked Jennifer in a threateningly cold voice.

“I assumed you didn’t want any of your vice-presidents on board and... most of the personnel is already on leave.”

“You could have hired an actor to play that role too. I gave you free rein with the budget, Jennifer.”

“You told me you wanted things to look as legit as possible, sir.”

“When I said legit I didn’t mean *him*.”

“I’m sorry, Mr Luthor.”

“You pray he doesn’t ruin things or I’ll be signing your last cheque,” he finished, dismissing her.

God! He hated when his staff did things without consulting him first.

If his father saw him now, he’d no doubt give him one of his speeches on how to keep his employees on a tight leash. A real Luthor would never tolerate insubordination in his ranks.

Lex clenched his fists. There was only one person to blame for his unLuthorlike behaviour of late and his name was Joseph.

## CHAPTER 9

### *SMALLVILLE- THE APARTMENT ABOVE THE TALON*

The following morning and afternoon Lex tried to catch up on his work load and finished his labour



day with the conference call to Japan which he'd put off twice. It'd been an exhausting day, but he'd managed to agree on the terms for the merger and a date to have all the legal papers ready. Hopefully, the deal would be signed and sealed in time to uncork the champagne on New Year's Eve.

It was six o'clock in the evening when he unlocked the door of the flat to find a very domestic Chloe still in her pyjamas and sitting in front of a brand-new purple laptop.

"Good morning," he cocked an eyebrow, shutting the door firmly behind him.

"Hi!" she greeted him excitedly.

"Good news?" he asked, passing her the decaffeinated drink.

"A FedEx messenger came an hour ago. At first I thought he had the wrong name, but the package came with a card. Here," she told him, giving him a lavender envelope.

"It seems congratulations are in order," he said, reading the card and putting it back in the envelope. "And you got a welcome present too."

"Yes. Isn't it wonderful? Mine was already on two legs."

"Yes, it certainly is."

"You don't seem too pleased. I thought you'd be happy for me," she frowned.

"And I am."

"But?"

"There's no but, Chloe. I'm sorry if I didn't sound enthusiastic at first, I've just come from holding an exhausting three-hour conference call in Japanese to close a deal, and I've developed a mild headache, that's all. I think they couldn't have chosen a better junior editor."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence."

"I'm not given to bestowing unwarranted compliments. You've got an impressive résumé which speaks for itself. I imagine you'll have to start looking for a place to live in Metropolis once the holiday season is over. I'll be more than happy to introduce you to a couple of trustworthy realtors or to stand guarantor for you."

"That's very generous of you, but I'm not moving to the city. They've offered me to work flextime for the first six months. That will allow me to arrange my schedule depending on Timmy's needs and I won't need to worry about baby-sitting because there's a daycare centre on the premises."

"And what will happen if they need you to replace the senior editor on occasion? Living in Metropolis would..."

"I've got my own reasons to stay here," he cut him off visibly upset.

"I'm sorry. It wasn't my intention to come across as nosy. I simply want the best for you and Timmy. "

"I appreciate your good intentions, Joseph, and you've done more for us than you can ever imagine, but there are things I'm just not ready to share... Believe me when I tell you I know moving to the city would be great in the grand scheme of things, especially when the time comes for Timmy to go to school because I want him to get the best education I can afford. However, there's a strong and very valid reason for our staying in Smallville..."

"You're entitled to your privacy. I'd be a hypocrite to ask something of you which I myself have always had to fight to protect."

"Thanks for understanding," she smiled softly. "Who could that be?" she frowned when there was a loud, insistent knock on the door.

"Santa Claus again? Maybe he forgot to add a broadband subscription to go with the laptop," he replied with an ironic tilt in his voice. He should have thought of the laptop first or at least prompted Julian in the right direction, he mused, opening the front door.

"Ho ho ho," came Julian's voice from behind an evergreen Christmas tree. "Merry Christmas, everyone," he shoved his way inside the open-plan apartment.

"Julian!" exclaimed Chloe in delight, coming forward to give him a hand. "I'm sorry I haven't got changed yet."

"No problem. We can have a night in if you prefer. I've got a few boxes in the back of the car, Joe. Would you mind fetching them?"

Lex clenched his teeth and glared at his baby brother. He still had to make the Devil's apprentice pay for passing him as gay. And now the boy expected him to haul boxes for him? Over his dead body.

"Oh, Jules, you shouldn't have!" she told the youngest Luthor as he put the tree upright.

"It was a spur-of-the-moment decision. You know that Dad isn't into baubles and tinsel and that the Holiday Season is just an inconvenient hiatus in his devious plans of world domination," he chuckled. "I remembered all those boxes of ornaments which have been gathering dust since I was born and... thought Timmy would love the lights. It's his first Christmas; it should be a special one."

Lex opened the back door of the Mercedes and grabbed the red cardboard boxes from the seat. Even though he hadn't seen them in twenty years he remembered every ornament as if it'd been yesterday that he helped Lillian decorate the tree for the last time.

He piled the boxes up in his arms and slammed the door shut, trying to do the same with the painful

memories that Julian had brought back in the living-room of Chloe's apartment. He was sure it hadn't been Jules' intention to rub salt into his still raw wound. No, Lex had interpreted the boy's wish to give Timmy what he had been denied in his childhood, the bittersweet memories of Christmas with their mother which Lex still treasured. Yes, Lionel's first born understood what had driven his baby brother and, in spite of his resolution not to climb down the stairs to play his lackey, the small room had suddenly become suffocating and emotions too overwhelming. He'd simply had to escape.

Chloe and Julian were laughing and struggling to keep the tree in an upright position in the corner she'd chosen to set it up when Lex entered the apartment carrying the ornaments, and his scowl became suddenly more pronounced.

"Hey, did you see that? He giggled!" exclaimed the youngest Luthor, looking at Timmy in the playpen. "How about giving me a hug, big boy?" he added, holding out his arms.

"He doesn't seem to like you very much, Jules," said Lex smugly as Timmy started to howl.

"Come here, sweetie," cooed Chloe, picking the baby up.

"So... what was this great news you were about to share?" asked Julian, leaning against her desk and grabbing the small lavender envelope she had left next to her mug.

"I got the job at The Planet," she smiled.

"You did?" he replied, slipping the card out of the envelope. "And it seems you've made a great impression on your new boss too."

"Give me that," she snatched the card away. "Don't you know about a thing called privacy, Jules?"

"It was lying around," he shrugged. "A laptop with all the bells and whistles and a job at The Planet," he added, shooting his eldest brother a meaningful glance. "My tree and antique ornaments look like nothing in comparison."

"Nonsense! *Your* gift's from the heart, and that matters more to me than the most expensive present in the world."

Lex felt like howling.

"It is nice, isn't it? I've cut it down myself," he told her proudly and Lex rolled his eyes. "Now I'm glad I bought Chinese food to bring over. There's lots to celebrate. Why don't you give me a hand with the bags, Joseph?"

"I'll get a bottle of wine," said Chloe as Julian opened the door and nudged his brother out. "What's wrong with you?" he asked Lex once they were in the street.

"Nothing."

“Don’t give me that, bro. I know you. What is it? For a moment there I thought you were about to pull my head off. Was it the tree? You know, nothing’s stopping you. Why not tell her the truth? That you can buy a newspaper with the change that you carry in your pockets?”

“You know I can’t tell her the truth. Your harebrained plan would go to hell; she would throw her new job in my face, kick me out and roast us both on an open fire.”

“Is that the real reason? Or is it that you’re falling for her, Lex? Am I going to have to compete with my brother to get her?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. He’s not my type. You should be more worried about Lucas. “

“I wouldn’t worry so much about him.”

“You should learn never to show him your back, Jules. He’s a lot more like Dad than you think.”

“Is he the reason you’re so surly?”

“I’m not surly. Answer that phone, Jules. That ringtone is a serious threat to my sensitive auditory system,” he retorted.

“I’m afraid I haven’t got any sake. Do you take red or white wine with the Kung Pao Chicken?” asked Chloe when Lex came in with the bags of takeaway.

“Red if you have it,” said Lex, setting the bags down on the work top.

“Hey, guys! I’m sorry but I have to leave,” apologised Julian breathless.

“You aren’t staying for dinner?” asked Chloe with the disposable napkins in her hands.

“I’m afraid not. Something that requires my attention has turned up.”

“Nothing serious I hope,” she told him with a questioning tilt in her voice.

“No, no. Nothing to worry about, but still something important to me.”

“That’s a shame. That you can’t stay I mean,” she said disappointed.

“Enjoy the Chinese. I’ll take you out soon to celebrate, Chloe. I promise.”

“I’d love that, Jules.”

“Set a dumpling aside for me, will you? Maybe we can put the tree up tomorrow and see Timmy’s reaction to it. Well... I’d better leave now,” he smiled, waving goodnight to both males in the room as she grabbed the keys.

Chloe saw him off, locked the entrance of the coffee shop and climbed up the stairs once again.

Joseph seemed to be in deep contemplation in front of the window. He'd been really quiet ever since Jules' arrival. She couldn't pinpoint what might be going on with him, but she was somewhat worried that the whole Holiday Spirit had put him in a melancholy mood since he would be away from Metropolis.

"Is everything OK?" she asked quietly after observing his back for a long moment.

"Yes, of course," he reassured her, turning around and slipping his hands into his pockets.

"It's a nice tree, isn't it?" she asked, walking towards it.

Yes, it was nice; but he could do better than that. What he'd do was petty and underhanded and yet he couldn't help himself.

"I'm afraid Jules got carried away by his enthusiasm. *Thaumetopoea pityocampa*," he said with a poker face, walking around the tree.

"Pardon? Latin has never been my forte."

"Better known as the pine processionary caterpillar. It can remain in the chrysalis stage for several years if environmental conditions are unfavourable. As a result, moths from several generations can emerge simultaneously when favourable conditions occur, causing severe outbreaks. Contact with dead larvae, cocoons, nests and debris from an infested pine can also cause dermatitis, eye problems and even temporary blindness. I spotted a cocoon and got rid of it. You should wash your hands carefully."

"Ugh! Do you think we should go to the ER to make sure everything's OK?"

"It wouldn't hurt. Do you have any spare latex gloves I could use?"

"Yes, there's a pair in the right drawer, next to the stove."

"OK. I'll carry the tree downstairs with a note for the garbage collectors to handle it with care. Why don't you get ready in the meantime?"

It was nine o'clock when the three of them got back with a clean bill of health and the biggest and most gorgeous Christmas tree Chloe had ever set eyes on. They'd been lucky; there were just a few pines left on the Christmas tree lot they'd driven to after spending an hour at the ER.

Chloe heated the takeaway in the microwave and Joseph uncorked the wine, poured himself a glass and opened a sparkling water for her.

"Do you think Jules would mind if we decorated the tree tonight?" she asked him as he finished lighting the fire in the hearth. "I'm curious to see what's in these boxes," she added, opening the one at the top. "Oh, look at these! They're exquisite. Oh, and these figurines for the manger! They're so adorable."

“They’re handmade. My... Lillian moulded them and Lex helped her paint them,” he told her, blowing the fireplace match and swallowing the big lump in his throat.

“That’s sweet,” she smiled, arranging the pieces on the table.”What’s this?” she frowned.

Immediately recognising what she had found in the box, Lex stood up and placing a hand on Chloe’s he murmured, “Please, don’t open it.”

“It’s addressed to Santa Claus and it’s still sealed. It looks as if it’d been written by a child. ”

“Why don’t you give it to me? I’ll make sure it gets back to its rightful owner,” the need to protect himself stronger than the wisdom of coming up with a viable explanation of why he might know what was inside when he’d never lived at the mansion.

“It isn’t Julian’s, is it?” she asked softly.”He said he’s never had a Christmas tree, so this must have been in the basement for at least twenty years.”

“Yes, I guess so,” he took the yellowish envelope and stashed it away in the inner pocket of his overcoat under Chloe’s attentive look.

“I used to write to Santa too. It was the highlight of the holiday season. My father would accompany me to the stationery store and help me pick the perfect paper to send my letter to the fat guy in the North Pole. Then we’d go to Cooper’s for a cup of hot chocolate and discuss how I’d frame my request. It was my own special moment with Dad. Then came my eighth Christmas and everything changed.

I’d been planning on asking for a typewriter- Mr Hedges, my English teacher, had encouraged me to pursue my writing- and I was looking forward to Christmas... It’d be my first adult request. It’d been a hard year for Dad... and me... one morning my Mom had simply left, so when December came I decided I would trade my typewriter for something else. I told my father I was a grown-up now and that I wanted to write the letter myself. It was the first time Santa didn’t give me what I asked for, and I stopped believing in him. I had to wait twelve years to get my wish granted and believe again,” she finished, her voice cracking at the end.

Lex looked at the young woman in front of him and wished he could muster the courage to make himself that vulnerable by sharing what was inside the envelope he’d asked her not to slit open. He didn’t want anyone’s pity, but for the first time in a very long time he felt that maybe there was someone who could understand him.

“I stopped believing in Santa Claus when I was twelve,” he confessed, feeling he owed her as much for telling him something so private.

“Maybe we can help you believe again. Let’s start by decorating the tree,” she smiled, wiping away a couple of stray tears.

They worked in companionable silence for an hour until Timmy made himself heard.

Lex placed the star on top of the tree and then put the plug in the socket to see the overall effect. Chloe was already nursing the baby when he turned around. The image touched him more deeply than it'd ever had.

Chloe felt her stomach do flip flops again when she did up her shirt and surprised Joseph looking at her and Timmy with a wistful and torn expression on his face which he quickly masked.

"It's beautiful," she said after a while, observing him out of the corner of her eye as he sat in his corner of the sofa with a pensive air. "Do you think seeing the tree has made him look like this?" she murmured, stroking Timmy's soft cheek after noticing the smile on the baby, who was now asleep.

"He's happy because his mother loves him so much," he replied warmly.

"I wish I had my digital camera to take a few pictures," she said self-consciously. "I have to remember to ask Lois to give it back. Time goes by so quickly and he's growing so fast. There won't be another Christmas like this one. He'll be able to walk next December."

"He's a lucky fellow to have such an incredible Mom."

"Are you flirting with me, Mr Luthor?" she chuckled.

"Stranger things have happened," he smirked.

"I'll put Timmy to bed and heat some milk to fix us a cup of chocolate."

"Have you always had these chocolate cravings?" he asked her in a voice which sounded suddenly silky to her ears.

"Only since I can't have other things," she quipped, getting up from the sofa.

Things were getting weirder and weirder, thought Chloe as she prepared the mugs in the kitchen.

Warm after drinking the hot beverage and lulled by the quietness in the room only interrupted by the occasional crackling of the fire in the hearth, Chloe dozed off.

"Comfortable?" asked a textured masculine voice.

Disoriented, Chloe turned her face to the left and the minute her eyes alighted on the huge evergreen tree everything came back. She'd fallen asleep... on Joseph's lap.

"I'm sorry," she excused herself, wondering when she'd blushed this much in her twenty-seven years.

"No damage done."

"What's that?" she asked, catching a glimpse of something he'd hastened to put away in a folder

filled with paperwork.

“Nothing. Just a bunch of notes and doodles,” he replied, taking the file. “Chloe!” he exclaimed coldly, when she tugged at a sheet of paper that was peeking.

“Doodles, eh?” she cocked an eyebrow. “This is gorgeous, Joseph,” she added breathless, turning on a side lamp to look at the pencilled Christmas scene of her living room. “Did you draw this while I was asleep?”

“It’s nothing. Just the work of an amateur with average talent,” he answered, trying to snatch the drawing back.

“You’re too modest. Is there more in that folder?” she asked curious, kneeling on the sofa and trying to have a peek at the papers as he rearranged the contents which were skewed after her grabbing his latest sketch. “When did you make this one? Come on, Joseph! Don’t pull like that or you’ll tear it!”

“Haven’t you ever heard of a little thing called privacy, Ms Sullivan?” he glared.

Chloe admired the drawing of her nursing Timmy in the rocking chair mesmerized.

“Did you draw this by heart? I’ve never seen you with a pencil, so you must have,” she said with clear emotion in her voice. “It’s... beautiful. Did you study Art when you finished high school?”

“My father would have never allowed it,” he replied tightly, putting the folder in his suitcase and locking it.

“Why?”

“Because it wouldn’t have fit in his plans.”

“But... has he ever seen what you can do?” she frowned.

“You’re the second person who’s ever seen my amateurish attempts at being an artist. Not even Julian has had that privilege. My mother was the other one... she was the one who encouraged me to explore my artistic vein,” he smiled sadly. “My father’s an art lover. He’s got exquisite taste and a great eye for beauty; but admiring the artistry of other people’s children is quite different from having his first-born play at being a modern Da Vinci.”

“And what did he expect of his first-born?” she asked hesitantly.

“That he’d be the perfect son and heir; someone who would follow in his footsteps, a son he could be proud of.”

Chloe felt the pricking of tears behind her eyelids. He looked vulnerable and wounded and in great need of a hug.

Lex raised his eyes and met her expressive emerald orbs; saw sympathy in their depths and hated



himself for wishing she could feel something else.

Chloe saw the moment he veiled his eyes and put his protective armour back on. She wondered what he would do if she were to give in to her urge to kiss him. Joseph was a proud man; he'd probably misconstrue it all and interpret it as pity.

"Can I keep it?" she asked softly.

"It's just a sketch," he said back in control.

"I'd love to have it," she insisted.

"If it means that much to you...."

"It does," she told him in a quivering voice.

"OK."

"It's late. I'd better go to bed now. I promised to draft an article to print after Christmas and I have to start working on it on my spare moments."

"I'll stay up for a little while if you don't mind. I'll unplug the tree and turn the lights off not to bother you."

"It's no bother. We enjoy your company very much, Joseph. I want you to know that."

Suddenly inarticulate Lex could only acknowledge her warm words with a nod. He couldn't remember anyone ever telling him he was enjoyed for his company alone.

"Goodnight."

"Goodnight, Chloe."

He sat brooding until the embers extinguished themselves thinking where he was and what he was doing.

She lay quietly in bed going over the events of the evening and reached a decision. She'd call Lois after breakfast and ask her for the number of that friendly columnist who worked for the financial section of The Planet. If there was buzz of a big deal between a Luthor and a Japanese firm, her new colleague had to know.

## CHAPTER 10

*THE TALON- 10 a.m.*

“Another refill?” asked Lana with a smile. “You’ll make my day.”

“Bring me an Irish coffee this time, Lana.”

“Sleepless night? I lived a couple of years with a certain reporter who used to burn the candle at both ends. She drank rivers of coffee,” she laughed, shooting a meaningful glance at the top of the stairs.

“She seems to have traded coffee for chocolate now. I can’t blame her; I hate decaf myself. I’m sorry; cancel that order. I’ve got something to see to,” he told Clark’s former girlfriend when his smartphone vibrated.

“*You’ve got mail,*” read the screen.

He hoped the content of the message was what he expected. He’d spent the whole night awake, trying to find a solution to clean any traces that might lead back to him in the purchase of the newspaper. Chloe was a smart woman and he’d made a few slips thanks to the boxes Julian had dusted; it wouldn’t take her too long to figure out who he was. In fact, Lex had a hunch she just needed confirmation of what she already suspected, if her shared memory of her letters to Santa was any indication.

FROM: [BW@wayneenterprises.net](mailto:BW@wayneenterprises.net)

TO: [LL1989@lexcorp.net](mailto:LL1989@lexcorp.net)

SUBJECT: RE: *Business proposition*

*I was really surprised by your 5 a.m. offer to sell me that Tibetan Phurba I’ve been longing to add to my weaponry collection in exchange for transferring me your recently bought stock of The Daily Planet for free. I was under the impression no offer I could come up with would convince you to part with that Tibetan artefact.*

*My legal team has been working overtime and finished going over the technicalities and everything appears to be in order. It isn’t that I don’t trust you but business is business, my friend.*

*Tell your men it’s a deal. I’d be a fool to turn down the opportunity to get a renowned newspaper and a rare antique Phurba for a pittance.*

*Wish I had a brother like you, Lex.*

*A pleasure doing business with you again.*

*Bruce*

“Luthor,” he snapped on the mobile, shutting the door of his car to conduct his telephone business away from curious ears.

“Did I wake you up?”

“I don’t go gambling at Chinese joints every other night of the week, Jules. You’ve mistaken me for Lucas, who rarely shows his face until midday. I’ve been up several hours.”

“Got up on the wrong side of the bed, Lex?”

“No, I just have a lot on my mind. What do you want, Jules?”

“I want time alone with Chloe. That’s why you’re here and not in the Bahamas suntanning and making love with a blood-sucking brunette.”

“I wouldn’t call what I’d be doing ‘making love’, but that’s beside the point. Let’s cut to the chase, Jules,” he said dryly.

“As I was saying, I want to take Chloe out tonight and tomorrow. I’m going to take her to the Metropolis Red Cross Ball.”

“You got tickets? I’m impressed.”

The Red Cross Ball was the most popular social function held in Metropolis around Christmas time and it was nearly impossible to get access to it.

“Dad gave me his so I can take Chloe this year,” smiled the youngest sibling. “Are you still there, Lex?”

“Yes, I’m still here,” replied he after a short pause, wondering what the Old Man might have up his sleeve. “Did he give them up voluntarily? Or did he ask for something in exchange?”

“Why are you always that suspicious when it comes to Dad?”

“Years of experience as his son. So you’re taking her to a ball in true Cinderella fashion.”

“Do you have to be such a cynic? I think I’d better talk to Chloe in person. Could you put her on?”

“I’m afraid I’m waiting for a call. “

“Oh, well, that’s no problem. I’ll call her to her cell.”

“Don’t. She’s busy at the moment,” he said curtly.

“Is something going on that I should know about?” Julian asked. “You and Chloe aren’t . . .”

“No, of course not!” Lex said quickly. “Who do you take me... *us*... for? ”

“OK. Just checking. Competing with Lex Luthor in the field of seduction can rob even the most confident guy of sleep.”

“Well, there’s nothing to fear this once.”

“OK, I believe you because close brother never lie to each other.”

“Jules... stop blabbering. “

“I talk like a parrot when I’m nervous,” he sighed. “Could you babysit the kid if I took Chloe out tonight and tomorrow?”

“What time should she be ready tonight?”

“Seven.”

“All right.”

“Thanks, Lex. I owe you.”

“Big time. I have neither forgiven nor forgotten that *little* detail you added to my résumé.”

“All is fair in love and war, bro.”

“I’ve got an incoming call, Jules.”

“OK, tell Chloe to be ready by seven. Casual will do.”

“I’ll pass it on. Goodbye,” he cut the call off and picked up the one he had on hold. “Where have you been?”

“I’m sorry, sir. We’ve been working non-stop to finalise the transfer of stock to Wayne Enterprises,” answered Jennifer.

“Please, tell me Mr Dunleavy wasn’t part of the negotiations,” he rubbed his neck; the last thing he needed was Lucas getting wind of the hush-hush deal.

“No, sir, he was at LexCorp Electronics showing the way around to the engineers from Tanaka.”

“Good. I need you to get me two tickets to the Metropolis Red Cross Ball for Christmas Eve. They must be sold-out, but I’m sure you’ll find the way to make it happen. Money’s no problem. I’ll also need my tux from my penthouse, and you will need something appropriate to wear to the ball.”

“Me, sir?”

“Yes, you’ll be my escort. I’ll leave the designer up to you. Call me when it’s done,” he finished the call, flipping the mobile shut.

Asking his assistant to accompany him had been a spur-of-the-moment decision. She was already privy to the harebrained plot Jules had dragged him into, and he didn’t feel like confiding in any of

the women in his phone book.

There was the problem of who'd be babysitting Timmy now that Lex was going to the ball. Well, he'd come up with something. He was a brilliant mind after all.

"Joseph!" Chloe said enthusiastically the moment he stepped back into The Talon. "Come and meet Mr Dunleavy."

"*Lucas*," smiled the young man smugly.

"*Lucas* was the one in charge of the interviews at The Planet," explained Chloe.

"You're far from Metropolis. What's brought you to this leafy little hamlet?" Lex asked him coldly.

Lucas was an outrageous flirt and a reckless gambler and- above all- Lex didn't trust him; he was too much of a Luthor.

"I'm on my way to Wichita. I remembered Ms Sullivan lived here and thought I'd check on her and let her know she'll meet with the *new* management after New Year's Day. The Big Boss was impressed with the new acquisition for the paper's staff," said Lucas in a tone which sounded too silky to Lex's ears.

Lucas looked up at his half-brother with sparkling eyes, obviously enjoying the whole masquerade. And the bastard had found out about the trade with Bruce. Damn him!

Lex fixed his father's bastard with an arctic glare when he saw him get closer to Chloe and then raise her hand to kiss it. Only Lucas' lips never got to touch her skin because Lex pulled back a chair and accidentally pushed one of the waitresses. The sound of broken china and the clatter of silverware frightened Timmy, who started to cry.

"There's a storm brewing. I think you'd better leave if you want to arrive in Wichita in one piece. It's never safe to be near Smallville when the skies start to get dark," Lex told his half-brother with his trademark poker face in place after excusing himself with Lana's employee and offering to pay for the broken tableware.

The moment Lucas was out of the door Chloe spat at him, "You were awfully rude to him. Why?"

"He was draped all over you."

"What?!"

"Put on some warm clothes. I'll meet you both outside," he told her, standing up and grabbing the keys of his rented BMW.

"Mr Luthor, we aren't done yet," she replied coldly, her hands on her hips.

"I'm not doing this here, Ms Sullivan. Yesterday afternoon you said you still had to do your

Christmas shopping. If you don't want to fight over the last items on the shelves, I suggest you take up my offer."

Chloe clenched her teeth and bit the retort which was fighting to get out of her mouth. She didn't want to make a scene in front of the crowded coffeehouse.

The journey to Grandville was made in complete silence. Lex was fuming under the surface, inwardly cursing Lionel Luthor for saddling him with a baby brother and a half-brother who'd been born only to drive him mad. Meanwhile, Chloe sat in the passenger seat, darting annoyed glances at the self-appointed chauffeur which gradually turned more speculative than angry.

"Was Lucas your lover?" she asked all of a sudden, looking out of the window.

"My what?" asked Lex, tightening the hold on the steering wheel as he negotiated a curve.

"What was Lucas to you? You seem to know him well."

"Not as well as you think," he replied under his breath, looking in the rear view mirror at Timmy, who was playing with the new rattle he'd bought for him.

"Being gay is nothing to be ashamed of, you know," she added, observing his reaction out of the corner of her eye.

In the few days since he came into her life, Chloe had learnt Joseph Luthor was pretty good at hiding what he was thinking most of the time, but she could feel the coiled tension emanating from him.

The fact that Tanaka Inc. was about to merge with the electronics division of Lex Luthor's corporation didn't prove that Joseph wasn't who Julian and he said he was. Maybe Lex trusted his lookalike cousin and gave him a position at LexCorp to take part in the most delicate negotiations... After all, her original background check hadn't revealed anything fishy; and yet, she knew the Luthors and what they were capable of. The whole personal history could have been fabricated and planted for her to find. She hated being this suspicious when Joseph had turned out to be so much more than the stuffy man Jules had brought to her apartment not so long ago.

"We'll leave the car here and walk a block. I don't see any free slots near the shopping mall," he told her, analysing the most efficient and fast way to kill his little brother without getting caught. "I'll pop the trunk open to get Timmy's stroller."

"When did you know you weren't into women?"

"I don't dislike women. Maybe if I found the right girl..."

"She could change you?" she completed his thought with a lopsided grin.

"Are you offering yourself for the enterprise?" he cocked an eyebrow as she strapped Timmy to the seat.

“Is that a challenge, Mr Luthor?”

“We’d better start moving or the shops will get too crowded and we’ll still be here when the bells announce the New Year’s arrived.”

“You’re a walking contradiction. One moment you’re all sweet and attentive and the next you’re ordering people around. Where you like this with your lover?”

“I don’t have very fond memories of my last lover. You see, my last lover tried to murder me.”

“Murder you?! That’s pretty drastic. Why? ”

“Couldn’t bear the thought of living without me,” he answered, then thought, and my money. As entertaining as this must be for you, I’d like to finish our shopping before noon. I have to be back in Smallville by four for another conference call.”

Chloe’s first stop was at a baby store; Timmy was outgrowing his clothes a little every week and his wardrobe was slimming down constantly.

Lex joined her and Timmy a few minutes later after getting distracted by a store next door which sold everything a history geek fond of three-dimensional recreations could dream of.

As soon as he saw the quality and design of the baby clothes, he admitted Chloe had taste and a very good eye.

“So what do you like?” he asked, as he manoeuvred Timmy between the stands of clothing.

Chloe loved the little sets she’d seen but the items were beyond her budget.

“I’d like to browse in other stores before deciding on something. Let’s go.”

Lex ignored her. “I like this one,” he said, holding up a cute little parka jacket in blue with a fur-lined hood that she’d been admiring when he entered the shop. “What’s his size?”

“Five to eight months,” Chloe said quickly. “We should keep moving if we want to finish before lunchtime...”

“If money’s the issue here, forget about it. The parka’ll be my Christmas present for Timmy. You choose whatever else you think he’ll need. I’ll pay.”

“I can’t let you do that.”

“Why not? I want to do it and I can. Let me do this for you.”

“I don’t like taking advantage of people, Joseph.”

“You haven’t asked me for anything, I’ve offered. So I don’t see it as taking advantage. And I know

what kind of a person you are, Chloe. I've got a lot of experience under my belt to be able to judge people really fast, believe me."

"If I let you do this, you'll get your way and pay for all my Christmas shopping."

"And what if I did? You opened the doors of your house to me, a complete stranger, and granted me the privilege of sharing your life and Timmy's if only for a little while. This is the only thing I've got to give, Chloe."

It made her heart ache to hear this self-assured and in appearance strong man say those words, that he clearly thought so little of himself when she knew he was capable of feeling and being so much more than just an affluent, spoilt young man who could buy the world with his signature.

"That's not true. There's a lot more to who you are than the money in your bank account. Why *did* you really agree to stay with Timmy and me in my tiny apartment above The Talon?"

"To give Jules a chance with you," Lex said simply.

"I didn't think you'd tell me the truth. Timmy needs a change of diaper," she replied, her voice laced with disappointment as she wheeled the baby towards the ladies' toilet.

When he was alone, Lex looked around the mall. She'd just given him the chance to confess and he hadn't taken it. But he hadn't lied to her; he was there only because of Jules, wasn't he? Two weeks ago he would never have believed that he would be spending his Christmas holidays like this. Usually he spent Christmas at some extravagantly expensive beach resort, and his customary gift to the woman he was with was a pair of diamond earrings she could keep as a goodbye present. Her gift to him was something in bed.

While Chloe was away with Timmy, Lex walked a few stores down and saw in a window the perfect dress for her to wear to the ball. It was a long lavender dress with a mid-thigh slit up one side and a rounded neck, low enough to show her natural endowments to advantage but without being in bad taste. And Lex wanted her to have it, to look her best for Julian and have the Cinderella night she deserved so much.

He didn't hesitate in entering the store, and immediately three attractive saleswomen ran to help him. He told them he had about five minutes, and he wanted the outfit in the window with hose and shoes; he'd leave the choice of jewellery to Julian.

"Underwear?"

Lex nodded curtly. "She's about your size," he said, looking at the petite woman in front of him. Minutes later he'd put his gold credit card away and the clothes were in the bag.

"Sorry we took so long. I see you've been doing some shopping."

"I bought you something to wear tomorrow night."



“You haven’t heard a word I...”

“Don’t be stubborn, Chloe. If you aren’t going to let me buy Timmy that parka, at least, let me make sure you’ll have an unforgettable evening with Jules.”

“Chlo’!” exclaimed a very attractive young brunette running towards her.

“Lucy?” gasped the blonde reporter.

Lex stood to one side as he watched the two women hug each other and talk over the top of one another, their words tumbling out in a cascade.

“How long has it been...?”

“When did you get here? Does Lois know...?”

“Didn’t you get my postcards?”

“This is Timmy- your second cousin,” Chloe said at last, putting the dummy in the baby’s mouth and stepping back for Lucy to see her son only to find the attention of Lois’ sister was focused elsewhere.

“Aren’t you going to introduce us?” she breathed huskily, never taking her eyes off Lex.

This was a game that he knew and played very well so he decided to follow the young woman’s lead. Hell, he was a healthy straight male! And if Chloe didn’t notice it but Lucy did, he would take the temporary relief of doing without any pretence.

Chloe felt an overwhelming sense of possessiveness seize her and a bout of some other feeling she daren’t identify come rushing to the surface. She just wanted Lucy, who she hadn’t seen in seven years, to leave and never come back.

“Joseph, would you mind taking Timmy for a stroll in the gardens. It’s kind of stuffy here with so many shoppers,” she interrupted their flirty banter.

“Sure,” Lex said, his eyes still on Lucy, as though she were the woman of his dreams. “You two go on. Timmy and I will take these packages to the car. I’ll meet you at the fountain in forty minutes. That’ll give me time to do my Christmas shopping. It’s been nice to meet you, Lucy.”

“I’m sure we’ll see each other again,” she replied seductively as he wheeled the baby away. “I want to know everything there is to know about him,” she said eagerly, sitting down at the nearest empty table of a little café they found across the fountain.

“So what brings you to Smallville over Christmas and why didn’t Lois tell me you were going to be here?”

“This is Grandville not Smallville. And I wanted to spend Christmas with my family. Is that a

crime?”

“No, it isn’t a crime, but you’ve been away seven years and sending two postcards in that span of time can hardly be considered keeping in touch with your loved ones.”

“OK. Guilty as charged. I’ll try to do better in the future. Now you want to tell me what’s going on? Are you having an affair with him? Or do you just look at him like he’s a work of art?”

“Do you have to come on to every man you meet?” snapped Chloe, grabbing a menu. “Well, this time it won’t work because... Joseph’s gay.”

“Gay?”

“He’s going through a rough patch right now and is staying the Holiday Season with me and Timmy. Julian asked me to put him up, and I didn’t have the heart to say no when he told me Joseph’s partner had dumped him. Nobody should be alone for Christmas.”

“He doesn’t seem gay.”

“That’s prejudice, Lucy. I think his former lover came to The Talon this morning,” she told her and then described Joseph’s encounter with Lucas. “There was definitely something going on between them.”

“It could be any number of things. Maybe he was an old business competitor.”

“I don’t know... He’s such a complex man... He has a hard outer covering like an armour he puts on not to get hurt, but I think that inside he’s really quite soft. I’ve seen that part he tries to hide from the world- several times actually... He adores Timmy just as much as my son adores him. But he just...” she cut herself off, trying to find the way to describe a man whose nature was so difficult to put in words.

For a long moment, Lucy leant back in her chair and stared at her cousin. “Are you falling in love with him?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“You’re a healthy young woman and he’s a very attractive man. Is it that ridiculous?”

Chloe wished with all herself her cousin was wrong. It didn’t matter if Joseph didn’t turn out to be who he said he was. Either way she knew she’d get hurt.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

*THE APARTMENT ABOVE THE TALON- 7.15 p.m.*

A quarter of an hour after Chloe left with Julian on their first official date, the bell of The Talon rang.

“Well,” Martha Kent said when Lex opened the front door. “So look who’s here. When Clark told me you were in town and you hadn’t come to visit the farm, I couldn’t believe it. May I come in? It’s really cold out here.”

“Senator Kent...” he said, once they were inside the coffee shop.

“Please, don’t stand on ceremony, Lex. Call me Martha.”

“You’re not going to tell her, are you?” he asked, sounding like a little boy begging her not to tell his mother.

“I want what’s best for Chloe. She’s like a daughter to me; and I’ve grown to love you like a son in the years you’ve known Clark. I know your good intentions have been misinterpreted more than once, so I’m going to give you the benefit of the doubt. “

“I appreciate that.”

“OK. I’m listening. What’s going on? What are you doing in Smallville of all places, sharing a tiny apartment with a young mother and a six-month-old instead of lying on the beach sipping margaritas?”

“That’s the very same thing I asked Clark about his Holiday plans? You, he and... his significant other should have been on your way to Aspen.”

There you have it, Clark. You just couldn’t keep your mouth shut, could you?

“Aspen?”

“I’m sorry to have spoilt half the surprise, Martha. I’ve always wondered how Clark has been able to keep his secret for so long when ...”

“He can’t keep others’,” she smiled. “So are you going to tell me what’s going on here? Why are you masquerading as a gay nanny when I happen to know you’re the epitome of masculinity and that you’re anything but averse to the opposite sex?”

“You more than anyone I’ve ever met knows what it is like to be willing to do anything for someone you love. There hasn’t been much of that in my life, and I’ve always tried to make it up to Jules for what my father has never given us. Jules is more to me than just my brother, so when he came to me asking my help to win over the heart of the young woman he was in love with, I couldn’t say no.”

“Have you thought about what Chloe’s going to say when she’s told that you’ve played her for a fool?”

“Every minute of every single day.”

“So why don’t you put an end to it?”

“It’s complicated... Things have got more complicated than I’ve ever expected,” he confessed, looking down at Timmy and putting the dummy back in the baby’s mouth when he started to whimper.

“Oh, honey!” said Martha softly as one of the reasons for Lex’s reticence to fess up dawned on her.

“It wasn’t supposed to happen but it did...” he said tightly.

“Lex,” she detained him by placing a hand on his arm when he started to get up from the sofa, “things aren’t always what they seem.”

*GRANDVILLE- 9 p.m.*

The small Italian restaurant Jules chose for their night out, after she told him she didn’t want to be that far from Smallville and Timmy, was cosy; and the service was first-class.

Chloe made use of her somewhat broken Italian to order her food and Julian was his usual charming and witty self. However, as dinner progressed she found it harder and harder to concentrate on the conversation; and the food, which had looked delicious when served, lost its flavour when she remembered what she’d discovered in the afternoon.

“Chloe, is everything OK?”

She wondered how she could answer that question honestly without sounding like the silly infatuated seventeen- year-old girl she once was. It was harder still when it was she herself who had allowed this to happen when deep down she’d known...

“Chloe, would you rather go home?” Julian asked, leaning across the table to her.

“I’m fine. I’m having a wonderful time.”

“It doesn’t appear that way. Have I done anything wrong?”

“No, it isn’t you. It’s me. I’m sorry, Jules; I’ve turned out to be a lousy dinner companion tonight. I thought getting out was what I needed, but I guess I was wrong. Are you sure you won’t mind going back earlier?”

“I thought we might go dancing after dinner, but I suppose we’ll have to leave that for tomorrow’s ball,” he smiled softly. “Why don’t you collect our coats while I pay the check?”

*THE APARTMENT ABOVE THE TALON- 10 p.m*

Lex was sitting in the dark in front of the lit fireplace when he heard Julian’s car pull up.

Time had dragged on after Martha left and Lex had immersed himself in one of his usual brooding moods, trying to process everything that Clark's mother had shared with him.

He curved his urge to peek out of the window and see if Julian kissed Chloe goodnight, not wanting to add jealous Peeping Tom to the list of indignities he had willingly submitted to out of love for his brother.

"Had a good night?" he asked her from the armchair as soon as she closed the door quietly behind her.

"There was no need to wait me up," she replied in a cold tone of voice, which instantly put Lex on alert.

"I usually go to bed around 2 a.m. and it was Timmy's time for a bottle not so long ago..." he said while she unwound the scarf from around her neck and undid the buttons of her coat.

"You lied to me," she cut him off and he felt the world stop spinning. "Lucas isn't your lover."

"I never said he was."

"But you didn't deny it."

"Who told you? Julian?"

"No, I found it out on my own. When I saw how upset you were yesterday I got curious, so I did some digging. It was difficult to find what I was looking for- it was buried very deep- and that made me even more determined. I was about to give up when I hit the jackpot. Lucas' adoption was handled by Metropolis United Charities... a LuthorCorp charity. Lucas *is* a Luthor, isn't he?"

"Yes."

"I surmised that much."

"And I'm not gay," he added, looking at her in the eye.

"I know. I've known it for a long time."

"Why didn't you say anything? Why did you let me stay?"

"I don't know... I craved the company of someone closer to my age, someone I could talk to, I suppose. It was so easy to talk with you. I found myself telling you things I've never told anyone else- not even Clark or... Julian. Pretending I believe you were gay was safe I guess. "

"Chloe, I'm sorry. Although it was originally Julian's idea, I went along with it. Are you mad at me?"

"I don't know what I feel right now," she answered, hanging her coat and scarf on the clothes stand.

Lex had expected an explosion when the truth came out so he found the situation completely unsettling and that prompted him to try and confess everything.

“There’s more, Chloe,” he told her in a calm voice, slipping his hands into his pockets.

“I don’t want to hear it. I can’t hear it. Not now,” she said tiredly, taking off her heels.

“I need to say it,” he insisted.

“I don’t want to listen to it, Mr Luthor. Today’s a very hard day for me; it always is. I don’t think I’ll be able to handle more and live through the day sane. I’m going to bed. I’m really tired. Timmy and I have to be somewhere early in the morning. When we come back I want you gone,” she finished the conversation, locking herself up in the bathroom and running the shower to cover up her sobs.

### *BELLE REVE- CHRISTMAS EVE’S MORNING*

Lex’s rented BMW crossed Belle Reve’s gates around 9 a.m, five minutes after Chloe’s repaired red Beetle left Smallville’s sanatorium.

She had said December 24 was always a hard day for her and Lex couldn’t help his nature. His innate need to find answers to everything prodded him to follow Chloe. Tailing her in his car would have been like like a red rag to a bull, so he’d placed a tracking device on her car before she got up. Although she had told him she wanted him gone when they returned from wherever they’d be going, Lex decided to leave the apartment even before they did to save them both the awkwardness and placed the GPS Jennifer had sent him via courier.

The smell of antiseptic hit his nostrils as soon as he was admitted and he fought the urge to throw up. The place brought back painful memories of Lillian’s last days; memories he wished he could root out.

He saw the woman he now knew was Moira Sullivan standing in front of a window with her back to the door.

“What’s wrong with her, Dr Caselli?”

“She’s catatonic. Today’s twelve years since she was committed to Belle Reve.”

“What’s caused it?”

“I’ve been in charge of her case for the last four years and the only thing I can tell you is that I’ve never seen anything like it before.”

“Have you run tests?”

“The usual with this kind of patient. If Belle Reve were a Metropolis sanatorium... “

“Well, from now on Moira Sullivan’s your only patient. You’ll get unlimited funds and the best scientists to assist you to figure out her case and find a cure.”

*THE KENTS’ FARM- 5 p.m.*

“First, I got a gift voucher for an afternoon in a spa, where not only did they give me a heavenly massage but they coifed me and did me the manicure and pedicure. And then this,” smiled Chloe, sitting in the Kents’ sofa surrounded by bags and opened boxes.

“You’ll look beautiful tonight, sweetie.”

“It’s too much, Martha,” said Chloe, touching the green dress reminiscent of the Roaring Twenties.

“Nonsense. You deserve to have your day and... my senator’s salary more than allows the expense. Go, try it on,” Martha encouraged her.

“Thanks, Mrs K.,” replied an emotional Chloe, hugging Clark’s mother.

“Off you go, sweetie. Or Julian will arrive to find you still in your sweats.”

“Are you sure you don’t mind looking after Timmy?”

“Not at all. It’ll be nice to have some company when Christmas arrives. Clark and Lois will be at the ball too. They’re covering the news for The Planet- a last minute decision of Perry’s- so we’ll be leaving for Aspen in the morning.”

*METROPOLIS RED CROSS BALL- 7 p.m.*

Lex was twirling the dance floor with Jennifer when he saw her arrive on Julian’s arm. It didn’t matter that she was wearing a sequined mask no doubt his baby brother had presented her with when he picked her up, the green dress which had been in the bag she refused to accept at the shopping mall singled her out. It had been a wise move to ask Martha to make it pass as a gift from hers.

“She looks dazzling,” said Jennifer, looking towards the entrance of the hall.

“You don’t look half bad yourself,” he smiled, returning his attention to his dance partner.

“Can you breathe in that?”

“Trust me, I’d prefer to be wearing a discreet black mask rather than an iron mask of armour, but I wouldn’t have been able to keep my identity a mystery this long in a room packed with people I know.”

“I believe the next dance is mine,” said a smug voice behind Lex.

“Lucas, the eternal bad penny,” sighed the eldest brother.

“I’m afraid he’s right, sir. I promised him the next dance,” Jennifer shrugged her shoulders.

“You know you could do better, Jennifer. I hope you’re going serious this time, Lucas, or I’ll have your head on a platter,” said Lex in a menacing voice.

“How long have you known?” she asked surprised.

“Not much escapes my radar and LexCorp closed-circuit cameras,” he smirked, stepping aside.” I think I need a drink.”

“Will you put up with the indignity of seeping vintage champagne through a straw?” chuckled his half-brother.

“Shut up and dance, Lucas, before I take pity on Jennifer and wring your neck.”

Lex spotted Clark and Lois near the punch and the hors d’oeuvres and decided not to risk having his presence revealed yet. It was a good thing he’d taken the precaution of lining the mask with a thin layer of lead.

An hour after Chloe’s arrival, Lex’s mouth was parched and he was getting desperate for a drink. He’d have to go to the men’s toilet and lock the door to remove the mask, freshen up and have some water. It was at that moment, when he was about to step out of the hall, that he saw Julian leave, follow a brunette into the cloakroom and close the door.

Chloe was standing on her own, the smile she had pasted on her face while dancing with Julian now gone, and Lex felt an inordinate rage seize him.

“Hey! This is a private moment. Would you mind closing the door?” asked Julian, kneeling on one knee, a sparkling diamond engagement ring in his hand.

“I don’t think so,” spat Lex, punching his baby brother.

“Jules!” screamed the young woman Lex recognised as Chloe’s youngest cousin, Lucy.

“When Mrs Kent told me, I couldn’t believe it. I thought no, my little brother couldn’t be that devious. How could you, Jules? Not only did you set your eldest brother up, you also used Chloe, led her on and now betray her like this.”

“It isn’t like that, Lex.”

“Then how is it? Please, enlighten me,” he seethed, removing the iron mask.

“I just thought... what better Christmas present than to see the two people I love most in the world be happy... together? I found the person with whom to spend the rest of my life and I wanted you and Chloe to be as blissful as I was. I knew both of you would have said no, if we had arranged a



blind date, so Lucy, Jennifer and Lucas came up with this plan. And I thought it was perfect...”

“You four were part of this? You played us both for fools. I knew... I knew from the beginning I was walking into a trap of some sort but I just didn’t have the heart to say no.”

“Chloe...” gasped Julian still half-sprawled on the floor with Lucy’s arms holding him from behind.  
“Lex, go after her.”

“What for? She doesn’t want to see me. She kicked me out yesterday night. We did nothing but confirm what she must have already known when she refused to listen to my confession. My original plan when I bought her that dress was to come to the ball and witness what I thought would be the happiest day of your life and hers... Especially when you told me you’d propose to the woman you loved on Christmas Eve. At first, when Martha told me the woman you were in love with wasn’t Chloe but Lucy Lane, I didn’t want to believe her and when I started to look at the whole picture and realised I had been conned I decided to come here and see the truth with my own eyes.”

“Lex!” cried Julian, scrambling to his feet and running after his eldest brother.”Lex!” he insisted, grabbing him by the sleeve of his tuxedo.

“I hope you and your fiancée have a Merry Christmas. I got a jet to catch,” he replied coldly, his face completely shuttered.

He should have known better than to let himself believe in Christmas and Santa Claus again. After all, this wasn’t the first time the Fat Guy had refused to grant Lex Luthor his wish, and Lionel’s first-born couldn’t remember ever wanting something that strongly since the day he wrote that letter to Santa as a twelve-year-old.

## **CHAPTER 11**

### *METROPOLIS PLAZA- THE KANSAS HUMANITARIAN AWARD DINNER PARTY*

It was Christmas Eve, exactly a year after the Red Cross Ball, and here she was again at the Metropolis Plaza on the arm of one of America’s most eligible bachelors.

Bruce Wayne became a fixture in Timmy’s life and hers ever since she moved to the Big Apricot permanently. They had a great professional relationship as managing director and junior editor of The Planet and a very close friendship which most people misconstrued as more, a state of affairs that the Wayne heir had tried to make come true on more than one occasion,

“Everything OK?” asked Bruce, giving her a glass of champagne from a passing tray.

“Yes, thanks,” she smiled at him, scanning the room over the brim of her glass.

There he stood in the middle of a small crowd, dashing in his impeccable tailored tuxedo, effortlessly commanding the attention of those around him with his powerful presence and his

inborn charm. And Chloe's heart skipped a beat when she felt those intensely magnetic blue-grey eyes of his lock with hers across the room.

"We should greet the guest honour now that he's noticed our presence. Are you up to it, Chloe?"

Lex was the reason she had accepted to be seen with Bruce at a large-scale event attended by the top of the town. She'd been mustering the courage to make the first move, even gone as far as the entrance of LexCorp Tower on a couple of occasions before her resolve wavered; so when Bruce presented her with the chance to meet Lionel Luthor's estranged son in a room full of people with Gotham's favourite billionaire as friendly back-up, she decided the time had come for them to meet face-to-face again.

"Wayne."

"Luthor. What does it feel like to be the recipient of this year's award?"

"Still wondering if LexCorp's board members haven't bribed the governor to have their CEO awarded and see their shares increase their market value," he smirked. "I believe we haven't been formally introduced," he added, focusing his attention on Bruce's partner. "Would you do the honours, Wayne?"

"Sure. Ms Sullivan, Mr Lex Luthor. Mr Luthor, Ms Chloe Sullivan."

"How do you do," they greeted each other.

"I've been following your work at The Planet with interest, Ms Sullivan."

"Chloe has been an invaluable addition to the paper's staff. We're all very proud of her work," Bruce praised her. "Oh, there's the elusive Mr Herzog! Would you mind, Chloe?"

"Go. I'll see if I can get an exclusive interview with the guest of honour," smiled the blonde reporter, trying to control the butterflies in her stomach.

"So, Ms Sullivan..."

"*Chloe.*"

"*Chloe.* I must confess this was an unexpected surprise. This is the sort of event that Clark and Lois usually cover."

"Does that mean you won't grant me an interview?"

"I didn't say that. I just assumed that given our past history you'd rather have given the assignment to somebody else."

"It's Christmas, Mr Luthor. Time to forgive and forget."

“Call me Lex, Chloe,” he told her after a brief pregnant silence. “It’ll be a pleasure to grant you that interview. Just say when and I’ll make sure it happens.”

“Excuse me, Mr Luthor, your presence is requested by the chairman,” one of the people assisting the organisation of the event butted in.

“It’s been nice to meet you, Chloe.”

“I’m back,” said Bruce. “How did it go?” he asked, looking at Lex’s receding back.

“It was a first step. “

After the initial awkwardness was left behind and the night progressed, Chloe started to relax and enjoy the company. Bruce was a clever conversationalist and the guests they shared the table with weren’t the usual snobbish elite she’d always found boring and insufferable.

The gourmet three-course meal was followed by a toast in honour of the recipient of the Kansas Humanitarian Award and a couple of speeches leading to Lex’s acceptance of the plaque. Then the band started to play and the guests moved to the dance floor declaring the ball officially launched.

To Chloe’s surprise, Lex remained on the fringes making casual chit-chat with some of the city’s leading business and political figures. His date was nowhere to be seen. Apparently, the rumours that his days as a playboy womaniser were over were nothing but the truth; he had attended the event unescorted.

“Damn!” cursed Bruce under his breath when he felt his smart phone vibrate.

“You have to leave,” she smiled tiredly. “It’s OK. Duty calls. I’ll take a taxi back home.”

“How come the one woman I can’t have is the one who understands me?”

“Don’t give up, Bruce. I’m sure the right one will come along. Anyway, I’ve had enough dancing. This new pair of shoes is killing me,” she told him, walking towards their table.

“Are you sure you don’t mind? I can ask Alfred to come for you.”

“Let Alfred have his Christmas with his niece for once. I’ll be fine, Bruce. Go,” she squeezed his arm gently.

“Merry Christmas, Chloe,” he greeted her goodbye with a kiss on her cheek.

Around half past eleven she grabbed her clutch and the cloakroom ticket to collect her coat. Getting a taxi in Metropolis this close to the beginning of Christmas would be hard if she didn’t rush.

“May I give you a lift home?” came a voice behind her.

“You’re leaving already?” she asked surprised on seeing him hand in his ticket.

"I've had enough empty ass-kissing to last me a year. In any case, I don't feel I've done that much to deserve the honour I was granted tonight."

"Some people would beg to differ. I know of the work you've been doing at Belle Reve through your foundation," she told him, seeing him visibly tense up.

Once his Mercedes was brought to the lateral entrance and they were both sitting inside the car, Chloe gave him a few directions and, after five minutes of uncomfortable silence, tried to pick up the conversation where they'd left it in the foyer.

"Lex, there are no words to express what it means to me to have my mother back. I wouldn't be able to spend my first Christmas with my Mom since I was eight if it weren't for you."

"You weren't supposed to find it out," he said gruffly.

"But I did. And it's the most beautiful thing someone's ever done for me. Please, Lex, don't say anything," she stopped him when she realised he was going to play it down. "There's been too much left unsaid between us and I simply couldn't keep this to myself anymore."

"Chloe..."

"We left things in an awkward place last Christmas Eve," she continued speaking, afraid of losing the momentum.

"It's a miracle you're talking to me after the way I behaved last winter."

"It hurt, but I was as much to blame as you and Julian and everyone involved for letting things get to that point. It's water under the bridge now. There's no use bearing a grudge against a boy for wanting the brother he idolises to be happy."

"Nobody has the right to play with people's feelings the way he did, Chloe," he said gravely, pulling up in front of Chloe's block of flats.

"It's hard to stay angry with Julian for long," she replied quietly, noticing how difficult it still was for him to talk about his baby brother after a year of estrangement. "Would you like to come up, Lex?" she offered, placing a hand on his arm.

"I'm sure your loved ones are waiting for you, Chloe."

"We're fifteen minutes away from midnight. Nobody should spend Christmas alone. And before you're stubborn and turn down my invitation; you aren't a charity case."

#### *CHLOE'S FLAT- TEN MINUTES AWAY FROM CHRISTMAS*

The ride to the tenth floor was shared with one of Chloe's favourite neighbours, an eighty-year-old

lady who used to be a heartbreaker in her youth and who was always trying to play matchmaker with the reporter.

“Your neighbour’s really something, isn’t she?” said Lex as she unlocked the door of her flat and invited him to come in.

“You’ve made a new captive,” she chuckled.

“What will Bruce think of it?” he cocked an eyebrow.

“He’ll survive. His head is big enough as it is. I’m sure he can do without a seasoned flirty admirer. Why don’t you make yourself comfortable? I’ll take off these damn shoes. There’s a bottle of cold champagne in the freezer. You’ll find the glasses in the cabinet above the counter.”

“Chloe? Is that you?”

“Yes, Mom. I’ve brought a guest. Would you mind keeping him company while I change my shoes?” she asked her mother, making a stop at Timmy’s room to kiss him goodnight and then disappearing into the master bedroom

Lex worked on the bottle of champagne and wondered when he’d wake up and find out this night had been nothing but a cruel dream. He told himself he should know better than to fall into the same trap all over again.

“You’re looking at that cork as if it held the answers to all the mysteries in the universe,” said a voice from the door, bringing him out of his reveries. “I’m Moira, Chloe’s mother.”

“Pleased to meet you, Mrs Sullivan,” he greeted her, stretching out an arm to shake hands with her. “I’m..”

“Lex Luthor, Julian’s eldest brother,” she cut him off with a smile that reminded him of Chloe’s. “It’s nice to meet you at last. I have to admit I was curious; everything Jules has said about you makes you sound like a kind of demigod.”

“I’m afraid my feet are made of clay like any mortal’s, Mrs Sullivan.”

“Call me, Moira. Ah, here’s Chlo’. So... how about uncorking that bubbly for a toast?”

Half an hour later Gabe’s widow excused herself to tune in her favourite Christmas rerun of *It’s a Wonderful Life*.

Lex was standing in front of the fireplace when Chloe walked back into the room carrying a tray with two frothy mugs of freshly brewed coffee; his relaxed posture once again replaced by that coiled energy she remembered so well from his moments around Lucas. It didn’t take long for her to realise what had changed his mood; the embossed wedding invitation was still lying on the mantelpiece.

“It’d mean the world to him to have you there. Lex,” she told him quietly, resting a hand on the tense muscles of his back and feeling him recoil, “you can’t go on like this. You can pretend all you want, but that stoic mask won’t work on me. You’re hurting just as much as Jules is. If I could forgive him, so can you. I was mad at both of you for a while, but everything you both did was prompted by love. You might have gone about it the wrong way- the manipulative Luthor way- but what really matters is that the intention on both sides was good. I wish Timmy someday would have a brother or a sister who loved him the way you and Jules love each other.”

“You don’t mind that he hurt you? You don’t mind he’s marrying your own cousin?”

“The damage wasn’t permanent. Of course, I didn’t relish the idea of being manipulated or made a fool of, but I had to give him props for his resourcefulness and his prodigious imagination. And why would I care he’s marrying Lucy? I think he’s just what she needs to keep her on the straight and narrow. If anything, Lois and I will be winning a sister and a cousin back. We were starting to get pretty desperate to see Luce settle down.”

“It’s the first time I hear a relative of a Luthor bride excited about the impending nuptials.”

“Well, it’s high time something changed. Why should the children have to pay for the sins of the father?”

“Mommy,” mumbled Timmy drowsily from the door of his bedroom.

“Oh, look who’s woken up!” exclaimed Chloe. “What’s wrong? Are you thirsty?” she asked the toddler, kneeling in front of him.

“Mm,” he nodded, shooting a curious glance at Lex.

“That’s Lex, Uncle Jules’ eldest brother. You don’t remember him, but when you were little he looked after you while Mommy was at work,” she explained, looking at her guest and surprising a fleeting look of something indefinable in his eyes.

“He walks,” said he in a voice which sounded strange to his own ears.

“Yes, he’s a big boy now,” she said proudly, squeezing her baby gently and kissing his chubby cheek.” Now let’s get you that water and off to bed or Santa will not come tonight,” she patted his butt urging him to climb back to his bed.”Lex,“ she added warmly, “would you stay with him while I go for his sippy cup?”

Frozen in his place the young billionaire felt the lump in his throat grow larger, overwhelmed by the domesticity of it all. Being asked to watch over a toddler and help tuck him in was suddenly more frightening than changing diapers and feeding an infant with a bottle. Although still as innocent as a baby, a toddler made him more insecure and vulnerable for whatever he did or say would be imitated and echoed. Leaving an indelible mark on a new life was daunting, and Lex couldn’t remember ever feeling as ill-equipped and fearful of his own lousy experience as Lionel’s son when faced with an untainted tender soul such as Chloe’s child.

“Lex, would you?” she repeated softly. “He’s grown teeth since you met him last, but I promise you he doesn’t bite,” she chuckled, seeing a little smile tilt his lips. “Good, I’ll be right back.”

Crossing the threshold of the cosy bedroom wall-papered in delicate pastels with a border featuring a cute teddy bear, his attention was suddenly drawn to the only framed picture decorating the walls.

“Mommy and Timmy,” explained the boy, pointing at the drawing which had called the adult’s attention.

“You’ve kept it,” said Lex when Chloe sat down on the bed and held the sippy cup for Timmy to drink.

“Jules had it framed when Timmy turned a year. The author has real talent. I hope he still finds the time to pick up paper and pencil amidst his busy schedule.”

“He hasn’t had an appropriate subject around to trigger his muse lately.”

“Well, we’ll have to change that,” she said with a mischievous smile. “Now, go to sleep sweetie,” she kissed Timmy’s head and turned off the light.

Leaving the door slightly ajar they walked back to the dining room where their coffee was now getting cold.

“Chloe,” murmured he, barely disguised agony lacing his voice the moment she stopped at the archway and looked up above their heads where a branch of mistletoe was hanging.

“It’s tradition.”

“Chloe...”

“Are you going to deny me my Christmas wish, Lex?”

“I can’t do this unless it’s for real. I won’t be a consolation prize.”

“You’ve got a thick skull, Luthor. I thought I’d made it abundantly clear I love Jules like the little brother I’ve never had. It wasn’t he who broke my heart last Christmas.”

“It wasn’t?” he swallowed thickly.

“God, Lex, for someone as bright as you are, you sure are stubborn. So am I going to get that kiss or are you going to make me beg?” she snaked her arms around his neck.

“Are you sure you’re ready for the whole Lex Luthor treatment?” he asked smugly, cupping her face and bringing their lips just a breath away.

“If you don’t hurry up, I’ll page Bruce and let him have a go at it.”

“The hell you will,” he hissed, giving her a passionately open-mouthed kiss which left them both flushed and breathless.”So?” he cocked an eyebrow.

“Not bad, Luthor. There’s more mistletoe scattered around the apartment, I say we should practise some more before we phone Jules, don’t you agree?”

“Sounds like a plan,” he smirked, lowering his mouth to hers again.

“Merry Christmas, Lex,” she whispered next to his lips.

And it was under that mistletoe kissing Chloe Sullivan that the heart of the twelve-year-old he once was got mended again.

**THE END**



