

Strangers to This World

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Summary: Lois and Clark think they've seen the strangest things our world has to offer, but when they enter the small town of Storybrooke on a lead, they find that even they can be surprised. The fabled Rumplestiltskin and a town full of storybook characters could be the biggest story of their lives — or a threat to the world outside the town line. Crossover with “Once Upon a Time.”

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Chapter 1: Inside And Out

Mr. Gold knew something was wrong. He couldn't identify precisely where the disturbance was originating, but as the one who had built the curse that brought him and most of the Enchanted Forest to this world, he was intimately familiar with its twists and turns. So, when he felt abruptly, sickeningly uneasy, he knew that once again trouble was knocking at the door. A little more digging, a bit more concentration and focus — things he'd perfected in the long centuries of his immortal life — and he was able to pinpoint the change.

Trouble at the door, indeed — something was trying to get in.

Odd enough all on its own, but somewhat more dangerous in that Storybrooke was no longer closed off from the world as it had once been. Ever since Emma — the savior he'd prophesied and prepared — had broken the curse, Storybrooke was open to the outside world, and all that was currently protecting it from being invaded by hordes of curious and skeptical people who would either scoff at magic or study it to death was the fact that the cursed town wasn't on any map or listed in any records department in Maine. So that someone was trying to get in now?

Definitely bad news.

Caging a sigh, Gold bit back his disappointment and pulled out the cell-phone he'd just recently invested in, then quickly dialed its twin. Twenty-eight years of living the same, cursed life day in and day out, time frozen all around them, and he'd never needed a phone. But back then he hadn't had anyone he wanted to talk to, and now...now he did.

“Hello?”

Just the sound of Belle's voice eased something inside of him, stirred something he'd thought long dead and gone and banished to another world in a flash of unearthly green. Just the sound of her voice, the image of her called instantly to mind — the image he'd carried with him through all those long decades of thinking her dead because of him, an image that had been both comfort and indictment — the startling reminder that she wasn't dead and she didn't hate him, was enough to make him forget that his self-appointed task was still only half-completed.

“Hey,” he said, then winced. He was a master wordsmith — whole worlds quaked in fear at his reputation of making deals and twisting meanings and fashioning loopholes that ensured his own agenda was always served — and yet Belle reduced him to the single syllable *every* time he talked to her.

“Rumple!” Belle exclaimed, and she sounded happy. Happy to hear from him. Happy to talk to him.

Despite himself, a tiny smile curved Rumplestiltskin's lips. It was easy to be Mr. Gold, his cursed identity, the man who'd never known Belle — easy until she appeared, and then he couldn't be anything other than Rumplestiltskin.

The cowardly spinner who'd taken on a dark curse to save his son yet ended up losing him because of it.

The deal-making imp who'd made a deal to save a small village in return for their princess as his caretaker.

The lonely beast who'd fallen in love with the only woman who'd ever loved him and let her go; then, when she'd come back to him, driven her away out of fear and hope and resignation.

The monster who'd thought she was dead and almost ended up driving her away again because he was so afraid she'd leave him if he told her all his dark and twisted truths.

The man she hadn't yet given up on.

“What's going on?” she asked, and he belatedly realized he'd been quiet too long.

“Belle,” he said — and smiled. He didn't think he'd ever be able to say her name and *not* smile now that he knew she was alive and free. But he was about to disappoint her — *again*, and he was so afraid she would eventually grow used to that and give up trying — and he was out of practice with real smiles, out of practice for hundreds of years, so it didn't last very long.

“Something's come up.”

“Oh.” The disappointment in her voice was audible, and Rumplestiltskin had to tighten his grip on his gold-handled cane, brace himself in order to remain steady. “So...you're not going to be able to make it to lunch, then?”

He hesitated, wanting more than anything to finally introduce her to hamburgers for the first time — wanting more than anything to take advantage of this second, third, *fourth*, chance she was giving him — but that uneasiness was gnawing away at him, a dangerous presence tapping at his shoulder. If he ignored it, who knew what would find its way inside Storybrooke?

“I can't,” he said, hoping she heard his regret. “I wish I could, Belle, but...”

“What is it?” Curiosity turned her voice silver, conjured up images of days in his Dark Castle, following her as she cleaned rooms and brought light to his life window by curtained window. “Maybe I could help.”

He didn't want to answer her. He wanted her safe, protected, free to make friends with the werewolf waitress and the grumpy dwarf and the daughter of King Midas, free to enjoy the library he'd given her and the books she so loved and the apartment she'd taken to live her own life apart from him and her controlling father. But...but she'd already left him once because he wouldn't tell her the truth, and he didn't know that he could bear to lose her a fourth time.

“Something is at the town line,” he told her quietly. “Something...from *outside*. From *this* world. I need to check on it. If people from the outside were to find out we had magic, that we were from another world...well, suffice it to say, none of us would have time for hamburgers — or to continue trying to find a way to bring Snow White and her daughter back from our land.”

“Of course!” Belle paused, and Rumplestiltskin could see her as if she were right in front of him — her front teeth nibbling at her bottom lip, a worried crease in her brow just before her silvery-blue eyes alighted with inspiration. “Well, if we can't have lunch at Granny's Diner, then I can bring lunch to you. Let me come with you.”

“No.” The denial was out immediately, terror like coals in his heart. He'd lost everything in his entire life — he couldn't bear to lose Belle, too. “I don't know what's out there.”

“All the more reason for you to have backup, then,” she said firmly. There was a smile in her voice when she said, “Please, Rumple. I miss you, and this is the third time we haven't been

able to have lunch.”

It was a terrible idea, he knew. But she *wanted* to spend time with him. She *wanted* to be with him, and he was a selfish, possessive man who was very, very bad at saying no. So he sighed and said, “All right. I’m at the shop.”

“I know.” She giggled. “That’s where you always are. I’ll be there in five minutes.”

“Be careful, sweetheart.” He winced as soon as the words left him — because they were still just tentatively trying to rebuild and rediscover their relationship and maybe it was too early for terms of endearment; because Belle hated other people making decisions for her — but she only laughed.

“I will. And...” Her voice went soft, quiet, tender. “Thank you, Rumble. For telling me. For trusting me.”

It was a bad idea to let her come, but at that moment, Rumblestiltskin didn’t care.

“I told you, Clark, country roads are notoriously dangerous.”

Clark rolled his eyes and steadied the car as Lois slammed the door behind her, tugging the strap of the brown satchel she carried everywhere with her over her shoulder. Their vehicle — rented, thank goodness, because if Lois was this put out about crashing a random car, he didn’t even want to think how furious she’d be to lose her silver Jeep — was tilted precariously on the slope leading into the forest, its dented bumper resting against a scratched and banged up sign that read “Welcome To Storybrooke” in bold white lines. It could have been a dangerous accident if he hadn’t been so quick to get Lois and himself out of the car, whisking her outside before the car came to a screeching, smoking halt, and he still felt the normal fear that always accosted him when Lois’s life was threatened.

“It wasn’t the road that was the problem,” Clark said, nudging the car just the slightest bit up the slope so that it wasn’t in any danger of rolling on top of anyone. “It was the wolf that ran across the road that caused the accident.”

Lois narrowed her eyes and trudged through the grassy brush to join him on the asphalt. “Well, there aren’t any wolves on Metropolis’s roads, which is where we’d be — safe and sound and on the way to a scoop that just might win us another Pulitzer, or a Kerth at the very least — but no, instead you had to *beg* Perry to send us to this backwards stretch of country no one even remembers exists. And why is that, exactly?”

“Come on, Lois,” Clark said with a mischievous grin, daring to rest a hand on the small of her back only because he knew she wasn’t really as irritated as habit made her sound. “The Metropolis Star sent a reporter to chase down that lead in Metropolis, and you always say anything the Star goes after can’t be real news. Besides, strange smoke — *colored* smoke — being sighted in coastal Maine is pretty unusual. There’s got to be a story here.”

“Yes, a story on the dangers of wolves not being quite as endangered as they want us to think they are!” Lois snapped, but an instant later she was rolling her eyes and smirking at him.

“You don’t fool me — you just wanted a couple days away from Perry and deadlines and Jimmy always interrupting us.”

“All right, maybe,” he admitted. He leaned back against the sign and tugged on Lois’s hand until she sat with him. “It’s just... Spencer Spencer’s island didn’t really work out that well, and...”

“And we’re still getting to know each other again,” Lois finished for him, voice turning quiet, her hand reaching up to trace the symbol of an S over his chest. A barrier between him and everyone else both when it was revealed and when it was covered by Clark Kent’s demure suits and colorful ties. “I know. Maybe you’re right — but did it have to be the backwoods of nowhere?”

“Hey, remember when you thought Smallville didn’t have anything worth mentioning either?” he reminded her with a glint

in his dark eyes.

“Watch it, Kent, there might still not be anything worth mentioning,” Lois warned him, but she ruined the threat with a mischievous grin. Taking a deep breath, she surveyed the countryside surrounding them. “So, do you think we’re going to have to brave the untamed wild, or do you suppose Superman might be able to fly us somewhere civilized?”

“We can’t just leave the car here.” Clark looked behind them at the empty road. “This Storybrooke should have a mechanic — we can ask whoever’s coming.”

“Whoever’s com — oh.” Lois cut herself off abruptly, and Clark inwardly winced. It had only been a couple weeks since she’d figured out that he was Superman — only a couple weeks since she’d turned down his wedding proposal — and though she was no longer angry at him — though he was no longer afraid she wanted him out of her life completely — they were still a bit hesitant around each other, still a bit wary of saying something the other would take the wrong way. But she only asked, “How far away are they?”

He swallowed a sigh of relief. “Not far, just a minute or two. These woods really seem to muffle my hearing. I almost didn’t hear them coming at all.”

“The forest is worse for your hearing than a city?” Lois arched a skeptical brow, but then smirked triumphantly. “I told you, cities beat out country any day.”

Clark smiled and let the comment rest, but inwardly, he was a bit puzzled. Forests *were* quieter than cities; it should have been easy to hear the car driving toward them, and yet he hadn’t even realized it was on the road until just a moment before. Experimentally, he lessened his fine-tuned control and let himself hear everything around him.

Lois’s heartbeat, her breathing, the rustling of her clothing as she stood and paced, the settling of the hot engine parts under the hood of the car, the restful slithering sound of leaves stirred by the wind, the caress of wind moving through textured forest — all of it was clearly audible.

From this side of the sign.

From the other side...it was dull, distant, muffled. As if some kind of barrier were between this side of the “Welcome To Storybrooke” sign and the other side. There was, Clark had noticed, a bright orange line spray-painted across the road, as if to clearly mark the delineation between Storybrooke and outside. But a spray-painted line didn’t affect his hearing — nothing did except the vacuum of space and kryptonite.

Clark reached up and fiddled with his glasses, but before he could pull them down and see if his telescopic vision still reached past the line, he caught sight of a black Cadillac coming around the bend.

“I hope they stop,” Lois muttered.

“I’m sure they will,” he said.

“Not everyone in small towns are as helpful or nice as your parents,” Lois said, but she fell silent when the approaching car pulled to the opposite side of the road and stopped about fifty feet back from the orange line.

Both the front doors opened and two radically different people emerged — the driver was a small, slight man who probably didn’t even come up to Clark’s chin, the ends of his light brown hair dipped in silver, his dark eyes intent and assessing as he studied Clark and Lois. He leaned on a gold-handled cane and walked with a slight limp when he began to move toward them.

His companion, on the other hand, was young and beautiful, dark hair spilling in tamed curls down her back, her eyes blue and sparkling with open curiosity, her hands smoothing her tan skirt. She didn’t limp at all, despite the high heels she wore, but she moved to walk by the older man’s side and matched his pace without apparent thought or effort.

"Hello!" Clark called to them with a friendly smile. "We're glad to see you."

"Indeed," the man said with an Americanized Scottish accent. His eyes flicked to the car, assessed Lois, then latched onto Clark. He came to a halt ten feet away, still solidly on the opposite side of that incongruous orange line. "A bit of car trouble?"

"An accident," Lois asserted firmly. "You people should really put up a sign warning drivers there could be wolves crossing the road!"

"Ah." A slight twitch at the right side of the man's mouth was all the reaction he made, and yet Clark got the distinct feeling that he was relieved. "Well, we don't get many visitors."

Lois shot Clark a sideways glance that said more than any "I told you so" could, and moved forward. "Well, I'm Lois Lane, and this is Clark Kent. We're repo —"

"Looking for a mechanic," Clark interrupted hastily, careful to keep smiling. He reached out and slipped an arm around Lois, hoping she'd play along with him. "We'd love to be on our way as soon as possible, but we're not going anywhere in this car anytime soon."

The man studied him, and no matter how strange it seemed, a chill ran down Clark's spine. He couldn't explain the uneasiness he felt under the man's gaze, but it was the same kind of chill he'd gotten in Luthor's presence and he wasn't about to ignore it.

"We do have a mechanic," the man said after a long moment. "Let me call the tow company for you. I'll also have to make a call to the sheriff to report the accident."

Clark smiled for all he was worth and used a lifetime of experience at blending in to appear as genuine and guileless as possible. Lois was tense beside him, but she was a great undercover reporter and, at least for the moment, she seemed to be following his lead. "I understand," Clark said. "Should we wait here for them?"

"We can surely drive them back to town," the woman interjected, looking up at her companion. "Can't we? That way we could take them straight to the sheriff."

"Wonderful idea," the man said, and for just the slightest instant, he softened. Clark blinked, and it was gone, the stranger just as tense and restrained as before, but Clark was certain he hadn't imagined it.

"Great!" Lois exclaimed, a bit too cheerily, and then she was moving forward, stepping over the orange line and joining the two strangers. Clark would have hesitated on his own, to cross that strange barrier-that-wasn't, but Lois was over there now and there was no way he was letting her go to Storybrooke alone. So he held his breath, and stepped over the line.

Nothing happened. There was no feeling of vertigo, no ripping sensation, no ominous silence. Just a step, from one place to the next. But when he looked up, the man was staring down at the line, at Clark and Lois's feet, and there was something very like bitterness etched across his features. The young woman slipped her hand into his, and the expression was gone as if it had never been.

"Let me just make those calls," the man muttered. He strode back to the car and retrieved a phone, his steps so quick and graceful it was almost possible to forget his limp.

"My name is Belle," the woman said with a pretty smile. She spread out her skirt, almost as if she were about to give a curtsy, before she blushed and held out her hand for them to shake. "And he's Ru — Mr. Gold."

Lois responded, but Clark wasn't paying attention. He normally tried to avoid eavesdropping on other people as much as possible, but he couldn't shake the feeling that something was very wrong with this place, that something was off about this Mr. Gold, and so he fixed a smile on his face and focused his attention on the hushed murmur of Gold's voice.

"— going to have to bring them into town. Can't very well

leave them to wander in alone, now can I?"

"All right, fine, I'll meet you at the Sheriff's station, but keep them away from the stables," said a male voice, breathless and rushed and pressured, undimmed by the strange muffled effect Clark had been experiencing from the other side of the sign, clear even though it was only a tiny voice issuing from a cell-phone. "I'll have to leave Regina here with her resurrected fiancé."

"Clark? Clark!" Lois tapped Clark's chest with the back of her hand, yanking his attention away from whatever Gold's reply was.

"What?" he asked blankly.

Belle smiled at him. "I was just wondering if you wanted to sit up front?"

"Uh, no, that's all right. I'll sit in the back with Lois."

"So," Belle pursed her lips as she led them to the car, her eyes fixed on Clark so that he didn't dare let his attention wander to Gold's phone call again, "are you two just passing through then?"

"Yeah, just passing through," Clark affirmed, perhaps a bit too hastily, but he didn't want to risk Lois saying anything to draw suspicion down on them.

"There are lots of interesting places along the coast," Lois smoothly interjected, covering for him as easily as if she'd been doing it for far longer than a few weeks. This time, she wasn't covering for Superman, but it still made Clark feel elated and awed and wonderstruck all at once that she would pick up so easily where he left off. "We didn't get a ton of time off work, so we thought we'd just hit a few over the weekend."

"Well, there's nothing much interesting here," Belle told them with a half-nod, biting her lip as soon as the words were out of her mouth.

"Then we'll be on our way as soon as our car's fixed," Lois said, smiling, and if Clark hadn't known her so well, he would have believed her.

Belle nodded, then looked behind her as Mr. Gold stepped to her side. "Everything figured out?" she asked him, quietly.

"All sorted out," he replied with the shadow of a smile ghosting across his features. He met Lois's eyes, and Clark had to resist the urge to grab her in his arms and leap into the air, carry her far away from the sinister gleam in Gold's eyes, the evasiveness in Belle's posture, the strange barrier-that-wasn't. "You all ready to go?"

"Yep." Lois exchanged glances with Clark, a hint of confusion evident in the slant of her eyes as she studied him, before she slid into the car. Clark closed the door behind her and crossed to the other side to take his seat beside her. Belle and Gold waited a moment before getting in the car, and Clark took the opportunity to lean into Lois and whisper in her ear.

"Something's *very* wrong here," he breathed. "They're hiding something big."

Lois shot him a look that reminded him she'd been chasing down Kerth-winning prizes when he'd still been writing about knob-tailed geckos for the Borneo Gazette. Ruefully, Clark realized that he would have been better served listening to whatever words Gold and Belle exchanged before they got into the car than trying to warn Lois of something she'd known anyway.

"Thanks for doing this," Lois said, polite and casual, nothing at all to hide. For the hundredth time, Clark thought that she was the one for whom a secret identity would be almost second-nature. "You're sure you don't mind cutting your own trip short to take us to town?"

Gold's eyes slid to Clark's in the rear-view mirror, something shadowed and intent lurking there in murky depths. "I wouldn't dream of letting you make it back on your own."

Polite and courteous, every word pronounced with just the right amount of gracious civility, but it was a civility dipped in

the mildest traces of poison. There was a threat hidden in the assurance, and what made it worse was that Clark was pretty sure Mr. Gold didn't care if they noticed the danger. Maybe he even wanted them to.

Clark swallowed and looked out the window as Mr. Gold reversed the car and turned them around to head into Storybrooke — and he noticed that Gold backed up until there was no chance of the car passing the orange spray-painted line even by accident — and he tried very hard to convince himself that he had to have misheard what the voice over the phone had said.

After all, he'd already handled more than his fair share of resurrected fiancés. The last thing he needed after dealing with Lex Luthor returned from the grave and irritating DEA agents trying to date Lois and greedy thieves kidnapping his parents was to get mixed up in something else that would stop him from finding out exactly where he stood with Lois now that she knew he was both her superhero and her best friend.

And to think, he thought dryly — all he'd wanted were a few quiet days alone with Lois.

Chapter 2: Known And Unknown

Ruby — or Red, but she didn't want to be Red, not anymore — felt harried and exhausted, but it was nothing like as bad as what David was feeling, she knew, so she tried not to show it. Instead, she kept her stance erect and her head up, and she nodded steadily as David rattled off commands, striding quickly into the Sheriff's station.

"Make sure everyone knows these strangers aren't to know anything about our world and magic and — well, you know, *anything*. Oh, and keep Leroy away from Granny's altogether, all right? You never know what he'll say and he might just decide to come right out and confront them directly. I don't know how soon I can get them out of here, but the sooner Billy and Tillman can get their car fixed, the safer we'll be. Tillman!" David stopped mid-step, rubbing a hand over his face. "Right, better make sure Hansel and Gretel don't hang around their dad too much — Hansel's liable to spill the beans faster than —"

"Don't worry," Ruby interjected with a calming smile. "I'll see to it. Nicolas and Ava are in school right now, so there's no danger of them blurring out the truth about who they are to the strangers for a while." She put her hands on David's shoulders and gave him a short shake, wishing Snow were there. David was always so much steadier, more grounded, when he had her to focus on. "It's going to be all right. We'll get them out of here as soon as possible and no one will be the wiser. Okay?"

David let out a long breath, his shoulders slumping under her touch. "Okay." He offered a rueful smile when she dropped her hands. "I'm sorry. I'm just... Snow was always the one who was good at this."

"Not the only one," Ruby assured him. She chuckled and added, "In fact, sometimes she can be even more impatient than you."

"Yeah." Wistfulness, large and enveloping, moved through him, softening his voice, leaving Ruby feeling helpless again. She couldn't get Snow or Emma back any faster than he could, couldn't help the dwarfs mine for the fairy dust that might get Jefferson's hat working long enough to open a portal for them to rescue her friends from their old world — couldn't do anything except try to help her Prince as much as she could. Granny told her there were things that couldn't be fixed, hurts that couldn't be mended no matter how much one wished otherwise, and Red knew that above all, which was one of her major reasons for wanting to start over new as Ruby. But still, she wished there were something she could do to take away the shadows from under David's eyes.

Before she could come up with anything, though, she heard Gold's car pull up outside the station. It was disconcerting,

having her preternaturally sharp senses returned to her since the breaking of the curse, but at the moment, she was glad for it.

"They're here," she warned David.

He nodded, took a deep breath, ghosted his hand over the badge he'd started wearing clipped to his belt, and then turned to face the door.

"Don't worry," Ruby repeated, because it was easier to comfort him than to face the fear nibbling away at the edges of her own awareness. "They'll be out of here before we know it, and we can go back to finding Snow and Emma."

David smiled at her, and for one instant, he didn't look burdened and bereft. "Thanks, Ruby."

"No problem."

Ruby turned, her wolf-like hearing registering the tapping of Mr. Gold's cane echoing in the hallway, followed by Belle's steps, so closely matched to Gold's that they almost seemed one. And two unfamiliar sets of footsteps, one light and sharp and quick, purposeful, the other...heavy. Far heavier than Ruby remembered hearing ever before. Heavy and sedate, calm, as if nothing could stand in their way.

Letting out a breath, Ruby tried to shake off the strange feeling. Footsteps were just that — the sound of feet moving. She'd never been able to glean deadly secrets from them before, and she doubted that was going to change now.

"Here we are," Mr. Gold said, stepping from the hall into the office. "Mr. Kent, Ms. Lane, this is" — an amused sneer twisted thin lips in a man's face that Ruby couldn't help but stare at, startled yet again by the lack of scales and reptilian pupils and maniacal glee — "*Sheriff* David Nolan."

Almost not even noticing the smile Belle sent her way, Ruby stared with narrowed eyes at these two strangers, a man and a woman standing next to each other as easily as Snow and Charming did or Ella and Thomas or any of the other True Love couples. The woman was small and slender, her movements humming with energy and determination, and she carried with her the scent of lavender and ink. The man was tall, broad, with a smile that reeked of innocence and friendliness, thick glasses obscuring his features and dulling the gleam of dark eyes. But his scent...it was unlike anything Ruby had ever encountered before. It was...otherworldly — not otherworldly like the Enchanted Forest, but...different. It smelled of sky and wind and rain, a little hint of lavender and ink rubbed off from the woman he hovered next to so protectively, and something more indefinable, something just outside of reach.

A shiver, deep and wracking, forced its way down her spine. Something elemental, almost primal, moved through her, demanded that she cringe and cower away from the alienness of the scent. It wasn't often that the wolf instincts commanded her while she was still human, and the force of it shook her to her core. Ruby wrapped her arms around herself, tried very, very hard to fade into the background, hoped the paleness of her skin would be explained by the brightness of her crimson lipstick.

"Clark Kent," the man said, smiling congenially, reaching out to shake hands with David — and Ruby had to bite her tongue until it bled to keep herself from yanking Snow's Prince away from the stranger. "This is Lois Lane."

"Glad to meet you," David said. He was a terrible liar, and the strain of the words showed through, but aside from an exchanged glance, this Lois and Clark didn't betray any uneasiness. "I sent Billy out to tow your car into Tillman's garage. We'll do our best to get you on your way as quickly as possible. In the meantime, there's a bed and breakfast I can direct you to. There's a diner attached, too; you can get a bite to eat."

"On that note," Mr. Gold interjected, shifting his weight in preparation of leaving. Ruby had never been able to categorize his scent either, but his was a familiar unfamiliarity, the scent of magic and power and lightning, a scent with the weight of

centuries and dark curses behind it. It was an interesting blend, with Belle's roses and paper and sunshine weaving through that humming, itching magic as if, despite how contrasting they were, they'd been made to mix together. Interesting, but still familiar. Not like this new, overpowering scent the strangers brought with them.

"Right." David gave an intense stare to Mr. Gold — Rumplestiltskin, Ruby knew, but she couldn't think of that name without her stomach clenching in cold terror; it was easier, better, simpler to think of him as only the powerful pawnbroker who owned all of Storybrooke and vied with the mayor for power. "Thanks for dropping them off."

"I hope we didn't keep you too long from your trip," Lois said. Her smile was bright, but it was false, too, eyes dark and sharp and suspicious.

"We were just headed to a picnic," Belle stated, her own smile smaller but more real than anyone else's. "But lunch can wait."

Mr. Gold's expression was inscrutable. "Enjoy your stay, Mr. Kent. Ms. Lane."

Belle smiled at Ruby again, blue eyes warm and open and far too innocent to belong to a woman who chose voluntarily to remain at the dreaded Rumplestiltskin's side. Ruby tried to smile back, tried to summon up something to give her friend, but there was nothing inside except cold, dark terror. Clark Kent's scent was edgier, jagged, more pronounced the longer they stayed in this room, the smell of it filling up the confined space until Ruby felt a howl building up inside her throat.

"Ruby," David turned to her as soon as Gold and Belle were out of sight, and he was going to ask her to take the two strangers to her and Granny's bed and breakfast, she knew he was, but she *couldn't*. She had to get out, get away, far away, before the alien scent overpowered her and the howl inside got out and she was revealed as a freak, a threat, a killer. Just like before. Just like when she'd been hunted and terrorized and hated and feared — and that had been in a world where magic was known and accepted and used. This...this was a world where magic was feared and hated and dissected, and how much worse would it be to be outed here?

"I'll go talk to Leroy," she blurted before David could ask her. Before she disappointed him by telling him no. "And Tillman — find out how long it'll be before the car's fixed."

"All right," he said slowly, frowning at her. They'd known each other for years, thrown together because of Snow — they'd met searching for her then, too, and the irony wasn't lost on her — and he knew her too well to be fooled by her own arms hugging her stomach to hold herself together and bright lipstick and a blurted task. But he was a good friend, too, so he only smiled at her and said, "Call me when you know."

"Okay," she said. She managed a halfway friendly nod to the strangers, avoiding their eyes, and then she slipped behind them and out into the hallway, and she was running for the door. When it opened, when she emerged into air all but untouched by that strange, new, cloying scent, she found herself gasping, huge heaving breaths that had her almost hyperventilating. She bent over double, hands on her knees, and squeezed her eyes shut.

The scents were so strong, the primal instincts, the feeling of the wolf. So close. So near the surface. They'd almost overpowered her. Almost controlled her. Almost caused her to betray her secret to outsiders.

Wolf's time.

Ruby swallowed back a whimper and took off at a rapid clip toward Tillman's garage. She was busy and David was depending on her to make sure Storybrooke was protected, but despite the importance of those tasks, she couldn't escape her fear.

The curse was broken. Magic was back. Time was moving again, the moon drifting inexorably through its cycles into Wolf's

time.

She was going to turn into a wolf.
And she couldn't control it.

It was so strong, so raw, so untamed here, and it had been so very long since last she'd felt her bones and being change and transmogrify into that of a beast. If she'd lost the secret to controlling herself in wolf's form — if she lost herself to the beast's instincts...someone could die.

Twenty-eight years of living another person's life, trapped in time, and it hadn't made the memories of Peter hurt any less. She'd loved him, had thought she'd spend her life with him — and she'd killed him. Ate him. Devoured him.

What if it happened again?

Ruby ran, but she knew she'd never be able to run far enough. No matter how fast she was, no matter what world she lived in, the ghost of Peter, and all the others she'd killed even before she'd discovered she was the wolf — they would all still haunt her.

Forever.

Lois didn't like this town. She thought she probably should have — it was obviously a hotbed of secrets just waiting to be exposed and pretenders just begging to be unmasked, and all of it on a town-wide level that would sell three or four printings at the very least. But despite all that, despite her instincts telling her that every single person she'd met since Clark had whisked her out of their careening car was keeping something hidden, she couldn't muster up the excitement this kind of massive cover-up deserved.

She just...she didn't like the place.

The couple who'd driven her and Clark into town were simultaneously helpful and threatening. The sheriff who'd taken them to this diner and set them up with the gray-haired proprietor to get rooms for the night had been simultaneously earnest and deceptive. The little boy who'd run up to the sheriff and hugged him, then stared at Lois and Clark as if they were aliens — and one of them was, wasn't he? — before the sheriff ushered him 'back home,' had been simultaneously innocent and secretive. In fact, everyone in this town was practically bending over backward to help them, but Lois could see the fear in their eyes. Not fear of the secrets their sheriff and female deputy — or whatever she'd been — and 'Granny' were concealing.

Fear of Lois and Clark.

Lois was used to being dismissed by arrogant businessmen who didn't think an article could hurt them. She was used to being respected by her colleagues. She was used to being avoided by spineless people in the newsroom. But she wasn't, by any means, used to being feared. Not like this. Not like she was a monster who could destroy their lives if she only blinked wrong.

In fact, the only person who'd ever feared her, outside the residents of Storybrooke, was her partner. Even now he was watching her out of the corner of his eyes, breathing calmly, keeping his voice even and measured, careful and wary in his movements. Afraid he was going to lose her. Afraid she wouldn't love him, wouldn't stay with him, now that she knew the truth.

He was also, coincidentally, the only one who'd perfected the art of being simultaneously honest and deceptive.

And maybe that was why she didn't like Storybrooke. She'd wanted a few days to forget the colossal secret that had been staring her right in the face for the past two years without her once even suspecting it. Instead, she got a whole town that did nothing *but* remind her of Clark managing to delude her into thinking he was two different men. Just her luck.

"Everyone in this entire diner is watching us," she hissed, leaning forward across the table between them. The coffee was better than she'd have expected from a hick diner, but she set it down with a clatter anyway, frustrated and impatient and

confused about her own lack of excitement.

"Everyone in this *town* is watching us," Clark corrected her with a half-shake of his head. He lifted a hand from his own mug of coffee and rubbed at his ear. A few weeks ago, Lois wouldn't have thought anything of the gesture, but now it sharply reminded her that her mild-mannered partner, sitting across from her and drinking coffee with her as he'd done a million times before, could hear a pin drop from several miles away. "You wouldn't *believe* the things I've been hearing," he told her. They were speaking quietly, but Lois couldn't shake the feeling that every move they made was being noted down by the staring people around them.

"It's like being a fish in a bowl," she muttered, and then winced at the reminder because she was suddenly sure she'd forgotten — *again* — to ask her landlord to feed her fish. That was finally enough to tip the scales, and she stood, not caring that they'd already ordered their dinner. "Come on," she said, feeling trapped. "Let's get out of here."

Lois couldn't help jumping a bit when the glaring old woman who'd given them keys to their rooms for the night materialized in front of her, coffee pot in hand, eyes sharp and suspicious. "Something wrong?"

"No," Clark said quickly. He flashed the smile that screamed boyish charm and guileless innocence, the smile that had fooled her and all of Metropolis for years.

'Granny' didn't even blink. More proof that this town was crazy, Lois thought with annoyance.

"Could we just get the bill?" Clark asked, seemingly oblivious.

Lois folded her arms across her chest, hugging the strap of her satchel against herself — she wouldn't put it past anyone in this creepy town to steal the purse from her for some absurd, nefarious reason — and glanced out the glass door. She'd meant it only as a quick look, a way of avoiding the surreptitious stares of everyone inside, but she did an almost comical double-take at what she saw.

A man walking determinedly down the street, jaw clenched, eyes straight ahead.

A man with only one arm.

A one-armed man with a bloody bandage over his stump, a ripped shirt, and a hospital cooler over his good shoulder. He looked as if he'd just been attacked, mauled and beaten by a bear — and yet not a single person reacted to the sight of him.

Blinking rapidly and trying to decide if pinching herself would help, Lois looked away, shook her head, and resisted turning to look again. She might have been blind enough to miss that her partner was the world-famous superhero she'd all but idolized, but she knew what she'd seen and looking again wouldn't change anything.

"Clark," she said, and reached out a hand to grasp hold of his forearm. Just in case. Just because. Not much scared her, but she was beginning to think this town might just be enough.

"Sorry," Clark whispered, automatically turning at her touch to slant his body between her and the rest of the diner despite the fact that he hadn't seen the beaten, bloody man outside. It was such a Clark move, something he'd been doing since they'd first been partnered together two years before, that Lois could almost forget he'd lied to her every day she'd known him.

"Sorry for what?" she asked, careful to sound normal. She might be holding onto him as tightly as she could without forcing her knuckles through her skin, but that didn't mean she wanted the strangers surrounding them to know she was extremely disconcerted.

Clark shrugged, his free hand casually coming to rest on the small of her back. A comforting gesture. A protective gesture. "Well, it'll still be a few minutes. They insisted on boxing up our orders to go."

"We're staying in rooms next door — can't they just deliver?"

She must have spoken more loudly than she'd thought because the old woman with a death glare offered her a plastic smile and said, "We don't deliver. Won't take more than a minute, though."

"Great," Lois retorted through her teeth, and promptly turned her back on old 'Granny.' The movement left her facing the door again, but at least the one-armed man was long gone. She refused to admit even to herself that she'd been half-afraid he'd be standing at the door staring straight at her, like some kind of monster in an old black-and-white horror movie.

"See anything strange?" Lois asked under her breath, knowing Clark would be able to hear her. Just because it sometimes surprised her to remember what Clark hid under his suits didn't mean she couldn't spot the advantages inherent in being partnered with Superman.

Clark winced and rubbed at his ear, then glanced at her and shook his head. "Heard several interesting things," he murmured, his breath feathering against her neck, "but I haven't seen anything worth mentioning yet."

"Huh." Lois wanted to say more — she wanted to say *plenty*, starting with the man dripping blood down Main Street — but Granny was watching them and so was everyone else in the place, and seeing as how they were undercover — seeing as how everyone in this town seemed in on the secret — out in the open didn't seem like the smartest place to compare notes.

"Here you are."

Clark turned to accept the bag from Granny — and Lois almost screamed. Which was ridiculous, because she tried to refrain from *ever* screaming like some kind of damsel in distress, but... maybe this was the occasion to start.

Outside, walking back the way he'd come, was the one-armed man. His shirt was still torn and stained rust-red, he still wore bloody bandages — but he'd exchanged the hospital cooler for an arm.

A regular, unmarked, unscarred arm connected to his shoulder.

Two arms, swinging at his sides, one covered in a sleeve, the other hanging bare.

And nobody, not a single, solitary person out of all the people passing him on the street, gave him even a second glance.

"Lois? Are you all right?" Vaguely, Lois became aware of Clark's smooth, comforting — *real* — voice weaving through her shock. Distantly, she was able to turn her head to him, tighten her grip on his arm, and register the worry in his smoky-brown eyes.

"Yeah," she said shakily. "Yeah, fine, let's... just get out of here."

Clark's hand on her back propelled her back past tables of people to the door leading from the diner to the connected bed and breakfast, up the dimly lit stairs to the second floor, and finally through a door unlocked by an old-fashioned, engraved key and into her room. Later, she'd note the clean bedding, the homey touches on the desk, the tasteful pictures hanging from the walls, the clean, airy curtains over the window that framed a view of uncivilized forest. Later. At the moment, she was only conscious of the door closing between her and Storybrooke, the feel of Clark holding her close and guiding her to sit on the edge of the bed. He knelt before her, rubbing her hands between his, his brow furrowed and upset as he said her name.

"This is ridiculous!" Lois exclaimed, abruptly clear-headed and filled with nervous energy. She jumped to her feet, incidentally pulling her hands free of Clark's, and began to pace. "I would think I'm losing my mind except for the fact that I've been through that before and don't particularly want to repeat the experience. Did you see that, Clark? Tell me you saw that!"

"Saw what?" he asked, watching her as carefully, as softly, as

he always did.

Taking a deep breath, Lois tried to calm herself. She'd never get him to believe her if she didn't start acting rationally. "You're not going to believe this, but there was a man. And one minute, he didn't have an arm — seriously, a bloody stump instead of an arm and he was walking down Main Street like it was completely normal, and that's weird enough all on its own — but then, a couple minutes later, he *had* an arm. Good as new. And I know you're not going to believe me, but I swear that —"

"I believe you."

Lois gaped at Clark, sure she must have misheard his calm statement. "You believe me," she repeated skeptically. "Okay, mind if I ask why? Because I was hearing myself and I don't even believe me!"

"I believe you," Clark said, rising to his feet and casting a wary look to the closed door, "because I don't think anything in this town is normal. I told you I've been... *hearing* ...some strange things? Well, after hearing some of them, I'm about ready to believe anything."

"What do you mean?" Lois demanded, tilting her head. "What kind of things?"

"Well, for starters, there was a group of men talking about their job — mining."

"Mining," Lois interrupted with an impatient shake of her head. "That's not —"

"For fairy dust," Clark said, and he kept his voice quiet, but the words were enough to silence Lois. "Fairy dust to give to the fairies so they can open a portal."

"Fairy dust," Lois echoed faintly, sinking down into the chair at the desk. "As in Neverland-man-with-a-hook-pixies-fairy-dust?"

"Well, actually, they were fairies in Neverland, but yeah."

Lois scowled at the correction. "Fairies? I was sure it said pixies in the movi — no, you know what. I don't care. We have more important things to worry about, like a town with men who regrow arms and mine for fairy dust!"

"That's not all," Clark said. He took a deep breath, sent another look to the door, and edged closer to Lois, his voice little more than a whisper. "I couldn't find even a single *normal* conversation within earshot — some people were talking about Midas not having his curse anymore, there was a couple wondering if their baby would start aging now, and an awful lot of people are worried about the town line, a woman named Regina — and us. But they were all talking about trusting 'Charming.'"

"Charming." Lois hated repeating everything he said, but there didn't seem to be much else to say.

"Who is, from what I can gather, the sheriff we met." Clark shook his head. "So...what do we think? Mass hallucinations? Something in the water? Some kind of cult?"

"Massive role-playing on a scale I don't even want to think about?" Lois stood to pace, rolling her eyes because it was easier doing that than giving into the shivers that wanted to rage across her body. She *really* didn't like this town. "That doesn't explain the Miracle-Gro for arms, though."

"Keep your voice down," Clark said with yet *another* glance to the door. Belatedly, she wondered if he was looking *past* it rather than *at* it. "I know we were talking awfully quietly in the diner, but Granny definitely heard us. She's obviously not as hard of hearing as her name would imply."

"You think she can hear us all the way from the *diner*?" Lois asked incredulously.

"You think most people can grow an arm back?" he retorted, and Lois let out a scoffing breath for want of a better retort.

"Fine!" she snapped — quietly. "So where should we start? I doubt questioning people is going to get us anywhere, except maybe locked away."

"They don't seem to want to hurt us," Clark said, but he sounded doubtful, and if the ever-optimistic Clark Kent was doubtful, Lois sure wouldn't have laid any bets on their safety.

"Great!" she snorted. "I feel so reassured. They're all hiding something from us, they're scared to death we're going to discover whatever their secret is, and they own the town we're currently stuck in. No problem at all."

"If we need to, I can get you out," Clark said, cautiously, tentatively, and Lois couldn't help but soften at this glimpse of his insecurity. "This town may be scary, but Superman isn't hampered by town lines."

Lois offered him a smile, pleased when the line of his shoulders eased. "Good," she said. "So we have an escape route — but that's not going to get us a front-page article. Any ideas on how to figure out the secret?"

"There was one thing," Clark frowned and looked away. "Mr. Gold —"

"Oh, yeah, Mr. Sunshine himself," Lois interjected.

"When he was on the phone with the sheriff, the sheriff told him to keep us away from the stables. Something about a resurrected fiancé of this Regina they're all so scared of."

"The stables." Lois nodded sharply, welcomed the rush of purpose flooding through her now that she had a goal. "Sounds like a place to start."

"Lois..."

She turned from the door she'd been reaching for, frowning to see Clark standing in the middle of the room, uncertainty painted across his open face. "What is it?" she asked.

"Lois, they're...whatever's going on here, it's a secret they're all keeping. Maybe it's...maybe it's someone like *me*. Maybe they're all protecting just one person."

"With fairy dust?" she asked sarcastically, but regretted it when he winced. "Look, Clark" — abandoning the door, she stepped to his side and laid her hands on his chest — "they're not you, all right? Your secret was that you save thousands of lives in your spare time, but most people? Most people who keep secrets keep them because they're bad. Secrets are affairs and money under the table and charitable companies like LexCorp really being the front of a vast criminal organization. People lie for reasons — and those reasons hurt. You're the exception, Clark, not the rule."

Clark gave her a half-smile but his heart wasn't in it. Guilt shadowed him, and Lois hated it. She thought she had adjusted reasonably well to finding out that he had an alter ego, but she hated the guilt, the careful caution he used to talk to her, the wary fear in his eyes every time he snuck sidelong glances of her. She missed the easy relationship they'd had before, the way they could finish each other's sentences and hug each other and mention past adventures without having to worry about what they were bringing up for the other.

"Lois," he said, and her eyes fluttered shut at the feeling of his thumb lightly tracing her cheekbone. "I didn't lie to hurt you."

Her eyes snapped open, cold, hard reality crashing back down on her. "I know," she said, forcing the words out. "You did it to protect me."

"Yes," he agreed. "And also...because I was scared. Scared you'd hate me."

"But I don't," she told him. "I get it, I understand, and we've been through all this before, so why do we have to go through it again?"

He let his hand fall away from her, the loss of touch almost staggering Lois. "I know. I just...I wish..." He took a breath, forced a smile, and met her gaze. "Never mind. You're right. So, stables?"

"Yeah. But," she glanced to the window, midnight blue darkening its panes, "we'd better wait till tomorrow. It's dark outside already and I don't want to stumble around in the dark in

some creepy town I don't know."

"Give you the scary back allies of Metropolis any day?"

Clark teased, the strain behind the effort showing and endearing him to Lois all the more. Whatever was bothering him was once more locked up tight, and even before she'd known the secret that haunted and ruled his life, she'd known that Clark could hide behind walls better than anyone.

"Absolutely," she said with a small smile. "How about dinner instead?"

Their food had long since grown cold, but that was no problem for Clark, who simply zapped them with his heat-vision until steam once more rose to warm her hands. They'd booked two rooms, but they hadn't needed to, because when Lois snuggled into Clark's side on the bed as they watched some mindless program on TV, neither one of them could bring themselves to move. There was still some ragged tension left between them, but Lois didn't want to address it, not when doing so meant admitting that she wasn't angry at Clark for lying.

Better to stay silent than to admit to him that she was really angry with *herself*.

Better to say nothing than to face up to just how stupid she felt after both Lex *and* Clark AKA Superman had fooled her so easily and completely.

Better, because if anyone was better at hiding behind walls than Clark...it was her.

Chapter 3: Confined And Freed

"So, they're from the outside, but they don't *know* that anything's different here. Do you know what that means?"

Charming grinned down at Henry and resisted the urge to ruffle his hair. The kid had given him allowances so far because he was just happy no one thought he was crazy anymore and Charming was the only family he had now — even if a Grandpa wasn't as good as his mother, Emma — but sooner or later, Henry would surely tire of the physical affection. Besides, much as Charming wanted to spoil the kid and treat him like the grandson he was, Henry often came up with important points. So, restraining his grin, he asked, "No, what does it mean?"

"It means that *anyone* can come into town now!" Henry exclaimed, earnest and excited, his hands waving in time with his words as he half-jogged to keep up with Charming. "We're not safe from the outside world anymore! And if they find out there's magic here — if they find out that *you're* Prince Charming..." Henry frowned suddenly, slowing to a stop in the middle of the sidewalk. "This isn't good, Gramps."

Charming set his hand on Henry's shoulder, bent a bit to give him a level stare. "Then we won't let them find out."

"Good! They'd think we're lazy, and...that's not a good feeling." That look he got sometimes, the one Charming — or rather, his Storybrooke identity, David Nolan — remembered seeing him wear quite often under the curse, when he alone of everyone in town had known they were truly from the Enchanted Forest, reshaped his features, and Charming wanted nothing more than to wipe it away forever, make him smile instead. He hadn't had the chance to be a father, not really, not unless holding his newborn daughter in one arm while he fought through dozens of the Evil Queen's soldiers to get to the enchanted wardrobe that had sent her here — to grow up alone and unprotected — counted as qualified experience. And yet, with Snow and Emma gone, with Regina only barely trustworthy...he was all that was left. Henry needed him.

"It's okay, Henry," Charming promised him solemnly. "We'll get their car fixed, get them out of town, and get Emma and Mary Margaret back. We just have to have faith."

"Right." Henry nodded and gave him a hint of his small, lopsided smile. It made something warm and soften inside Charming, something he'd felt quite often during Snow's

pregnancy but never at all during the months of the curse he'd been awake for. "You've been following them, right?"

"All day," he said with a rueful grimace as they once more began walking. He'd thought Henry could spend the afternoons after school at the stables with the horse Charming had bought for him, but after what had happened the day before...well, suffice it to say the stables weren't the safest place. Neither was Mary Margaret's apartment with Regina watching over him, but Charming didn't have much of a choice. Ruby was nowhere to be found, her Granny was busy with the diner, and the dwarfs were working down in the mines — where Charming really should be, seeing as how he'd promised them his help. So, in the end, Charming had called Regina.

"What have they been doing?" Henry pressed, craning his neck to look up at Charming, eyes wide and innocent.

"Exploring the town — an awful lot of it," Charming answered. He nudged Henry's shoulder to get him to turn into the apartment building and up the stairs toward the apartment they'd taken over since the curse had been broken by Emma's maternal kiss of true love to Henry's brow. "I'm pretty sure they know I'm following them, though, so I doubt they'd poke their noses anywhere too suspicious."

Henry's brow furrowed while Charming pulled the keys out of his pocket. "But what are they doing *now*? You're not watching them anymore."

"Well, I'm hoping they *think* I'm still watching them. But if not, I've got people calling to give me updates if they see them headed anywhere dangerous. None of us are too thrilled about the idea of outsiders messing up what little we've reclaimed of our lives."

"Of course not."

The keys dropped to the floor with a clatter when Charming's hand flew to the gun holstered under his arm. The sight of Regina, standing on the white floor in the middle of Snow's living room, didn't exactly make him want to take his hand off the weapon. But Regina had been trying to redeem herself, trying to make herself worthy of her son, trying to show Henry that she could change for the better. Charming couldn't help but see the evil Queen who'd locked him up, taunted him, made Snow take the sleeping curse, and tried to kill him a dozen times when they'd fought to take the kingdom back from her. But David Nolan...well, David Nolan saw the mayor who'd saved him from a cold road, watched over his decades' long coma, supported him during that terrible business with Kathryn and Mary Margaret, invited him over for lasagna.

An enemy or a friend. Both of them powerful and dangerous, but the woman standing in front of him, giving a tentative smile to her adopted son, was even more dangerous than the other versions of herself. More dangerous because she had magic again, because she didn't have to hide that she was a powerful witch, because she would do anything — *anything* — to keep Henry by her side. Right now, that meant good deeds and seeing Dr. Hopper to curb her addiction to magic and helping Charming try to find Snow and Emma, but there was no telling when that would change.

"Mom." Henry managed a short smile, then hesitated for a very long, awkward moment before walking forward and giving her a hug. Regina closed her arms around him almost reverently, carefully, closing her eyes and smiling. Henry pulled back and looked up at her. "I heard what happened with Daniel...I'm sorry."

Regina flinched but forced a fragile smile. "Thank you, Henry. I...I had to use magic to...to give him an end. I know you don't like me using magic, but —"

"It's okay," Henry assured her. "I know you were just trying to help."

"Well." Charming shifted, drawing Henry's attention and

looking away himself; Regina looked far too fragile, too broken, at the moment, as if she might shatter into a million pieces. “I’ve got to get back to making sure our visitors don’t disturb what tranquility Storybrooke has to offer. You’ll be fine here?”

“Of course,” Regina said, almost managing not to roll her eyes. Obviously, she’d regained her composure, Charming thought dryly.

“We’ll be fine,” Henry reassured him. “I can make us some hot chocolate.”

“That’s all right,” Regina said. “But you go ahead and have some.”

Charming looked away, his throat tight. Mary Margaret — *Snow White*, his wife, his True Love, the woman who’d been snatched away from him only hours after he’d gotten her back — had liked to serve hot chocolate, always with a stick of cinnamon in it, usually with a plate of cookies alongside. He’d get them back, of course he would, he knew he would, but...but sometimes it was hard to remember that past the pain of her *not being here*.

“Be careful, David,” Regina said, snapping his attention back to her. She stepped closer to him and lowered her voice; behind her, Henry rummaged in the kitchen in his search for the hot cocoa mix. “Magic’s back, and Gold’s been squirreling away magical items for probably the entire twenty-eight years of the curse. If these strangers find any of those items, if they stumble down to the mines and find any of the leftover detritus of our old world, it could be catastrophic.”

“I know,” Charming said with a sigh. “I’m working on it. Tillman said it’d take him at least two days to fix up their vehicle, though, so until then, we’re stuck with them.”

“Don’t be so sure.” At Charming’s frown, Regina arched a dark brow. “What? You think Gold’s just going to sit back and let them ruin whatever schemes he has simmering? If they get close to anything, I can guarantee you that he’ll act — and he’s never been that averse to spilling blood to accomplish his goals.”

Letting out a mirthless chuckle, Charming manufactured a grin. “Great. Things just never let up around here, do they?”

Regina’s answering smile was just as mirthless as his.

With a last wave to Henry and a warning look to the woman who’d once been his arch-enemy, Charming strode back outside and set off in the direction of Gold’s pawnshop. The imp was almost always there, especially since Belle had moved out of his house and into the apartment over the library.

He’d barely gotten half a block, though, when his phone rang with news that the two visitors had been seen heading into the stables. Charming hung up, and for an instant, he wanted to just back up until his spine hit a literal wall to match the metaphorical one, wanted to slide to the ground and set his head on his knees and just sleep. Or cry. Or both. But while he was wishing, he might as well wish for Snow back in his arms. For Emma back safe and sound and maybe even with a smile for him instead of more recriminations about his and Snow’s decision to send her to this world to protect her from Regina’s curse.

But wishes didn’t come true, not anymore, not until the dwarfs found the diamonds that the fairies could use to replenish their own magic and power their wands.

So, determinedly, shoving his exhaustion and his grief down deep inside him, Charming jumped into his squad car and drove to the stables as quickly as he safely could. He arrived just in time to see the two strangers exit the far shed and move, purposely and quickly, into the stables where, just the day before, Charming had yanked Henry away from Frankenstein’s newest monster.

“David Nolan,” he reminded his reflection in the rear view mirror, and then he opened the door and swung outside. A normal person, an ordinary sheriff. How *did* one of those act? Not suspiciously, or at least, he didn’t think so. Not overly suspicious,

anyway. Actually, the only ‘normal’ sheriff he remembered was Emma, and he had a feeling that most of what had happened while she was sheriff in Storybrooke hadn’t exactly been normal fare by this world’s standards. So, he’d just have to fake it.

When he entered the stables, squinting a bit to adjust to the sudden darkness after the sun’s glare, he found himself facing both Lois and Clark. They were standing next to each other, looking straight at him. Clark was wearing the same polite smile he’d worn the day before at their introductions, but Lois was narrow-eyed and tight-lipped.

Abruptly, Charming realized that he was all alone, in dark stables, no witnesses anywhere nearby, and facing two strangers who could be here for any reason at all. The weight of his sidearm was comforting, but it didn’t seem enough. Guns just weren’t as solid, as useful, as swords. With a sword, he had beaten dragons and armies, witches and sirens — but a gun? All a gun could do was shoot tiny bullets that went harmlessly through the *really* dangerous things, like the wraith that had taken Snow and Emma from him.

“Interested in stables?” he asked inanely, to hide his sudden uneasiness. He didn’t smile, because any smile he tried would just look fake, but he did his best to look neutral. Above all, he did his best not to look past Lois’s shoulder to the stall where Daniel had lifted Henry’s small body in bloody hands, where Regina had beaten ineffectually against Charming’s shoulder to keep him from shooting her long-dead love, where he’d had to leave her alone — so he could greet these strangers, ironically — to face and eventually destroy the man she’d wanted to marry so very many long, unhappy years before.

“Just sightseeing,” Clark said, still with that same polite smile. It didn’t look fake, and he looked harmless with his hands in his pockets and his shoulders slumped, but this looked like a normal town too, from the outside, so Charming really didn’t trust appearances too much.

“Not much to do in small towns,” Lois said, a hint of sarcasm layering her words. “So we’re just exploring a bit.”

“Ah. You know, we have quite a few hiking trails, scenic woods, even a bit of a beach past the harbor.”

“Really?” Clark raised his eyebrows, so innocent and genuine that Charming felt the hackles on the back of his neck rise. He wasn’t a prince by birth and had been a king for less than a year, but he’d been a shepherd before that, and he’d learned to trust his instincts. It was when things looked calmest that the wolves attacked.

“Well, we’ll have to try those places tomorrow,” Lois said. Her smile was more suspicious than Clark’s, but it calmed Charming a bit. It was normal to be suspicious in these circumstances — he was a sheriff who’d been following them all day and had cornered them in a dark stable, after all — and her skepticism, her wariness, was what he had expected. No one, on the other hand, was really as naïve as Clark was pretending to be.

They were hiding something. Or at least, Clark was.

“You know,” Charming said, acting on impulse, “I realize that Storybrooke isn’t the...quintessential Maine coast-side town. We’re pretty far off the beaten track and we don’t get many visitors. So...folks around here, well, we get to where we’re afraid of anyone new. Anyone we don’t know. I’m sorry, if we’re coming across as...I don’t know — “

“Creepy,” Lois filled in for him.

Charming managed a smile, even swallowed a chuckle.

“Yeah. We’re really not bad people. We’re just...close-knit.”

“I understand,” Clark said, and for the first time, Charming thought he might believe the genuineness of his voice. “I’m from a small town myself, and we can be protective of our own against outsiders.”

“Good.” Charming nodded, took a deep breath of the hay-strewn air, dust-motes dancing in a ray of sunshine just to his

right. He turned to the door and held it open for them, silently grateful when they walked out without qualm. “You want a ride back to town?” he offered.

“No —” Clark started, but Lois interrupted him.

“We’d love one. Thanks. Oh, and by the way, mind if I ask you a question? Yesterday, I thought I saw a man without an arm. As if he’d just lost it. You know anyone like that?”

Gold! Charming barely bit his tongue in time to stop from grimacing and letting out a disgusted breath. Fortunately, Geppetto had called to tell him he’d heard from Archie that Gold had healed Whale’s arm, reattaching the limb Daniel had torn off in his zombie-like rage. Unfortunately, Charming didn’t have any kind of explanation for why a man who hadn’t had an arm the day before had one today — not an explanation that people from this world would understand anyway. But if Lois and Clark saw Whale again, they’d certainly notice that he’d healed quickly. And miraculously.

“Dr. Whale had...an accident.” He spoke slowly, choosing each word carefully. Gold would have been better at this; he was able to spin words and truths so adeptly that he never once lied and never once conveyed the absolute truth. “It was pretty bloody, but he’s...he’s better now.”

“Dr. Whale,” Lois repeated with a slight nod. “Huh. Okay, then.”

Charming breathed a sigh of relief as he waited for the other two to get into the car. Lois took the front passenger seat while Clark sat in the back, a position that Charming would have traded if he could. Lois spent the entire trip asking seemingly innocuous questions that had him sweating and fumbling his words, while behind him, he could feel Clark’s unblinking gaze on him. And Clark’s eyes — they gave off the same kind of feel that the siren’s had. She had stared at him, watched him, spun her silver-cobwebbed words, and read his very soul. She had offered him his deepest desires — Snow, in his arms, kissing him, telling him she loved him — and all the time, she had watched him with eyes that saw so deep, so true. Saw right inside him.

This Clark Kent had the same kind of eyes.

Charming was beyond relieved when he reached the diner and pulled the car to a stop.

“Thanks for the ride,” Lois chirped. She’d seemed to grow more and more cheerful the more questions she asked, which didn’t help alleviate Charming’s concern. Everyone in Storybrooke was depending on him, after all, to protect them, to keep them safe and together, to get them back home. On a good day, he was never sure he could live up to their expectations; on bad days like this, he was sure he was going to fail them.

“No problem,” he lied. Abruptly, just before Clark closed his car door, Charming leaned forward and said, “Oh! And both of you, it might be a good idea to stay inside after dark. Like you already noticed, we do have wolves — safest not to go around at night.”

Lois wrinkled her nose. “Wolves. Right. The joys of the country.”

Clark chuckled and nodded at Charming. “Thanks for the warning.”

Charming leaned back in his seat and watched them enter the diner and slide into a booth. He was deathly afraid they had a nefarious purpose for being in town, so maybe that was why he saw everything they did and said as a threat. Maybe it was only his own fear talking.

He wished he could believe that.

“I could really use some good news,” he said aloud before starting up the car and pulling out into the street, headed once more for Gold’s shop.

And maybe wishes still did come true, because before he could get there, his phone rang and Grumpy was telling him that the dwarfs had found their diamonds. The fairies were going to

get their fairy dust. The fairy dust was going to restore Jefferson’s hat so that it could open portals to other worlds again.

He was going to get his wife and daughter back.

It seemed a little too good to be true, but he certainly wasn’t going to complain.

After all, a little too good to be true? That felt just like home.

Storybrooke hid a multitude of secrets, and every bit of digging they did revealed another mystery, but Clark was beginning to think uncovering anything else might be a mistake.

“I can’t believe you, Clark!” Lois exclaimed, throwing her hands up in the air. He was sitting on the bed, their notes strewn in front of him, while she paced back and forth across the wooden floor, her steps muffled by the red and gold rug atop it, and she was most definitely forgetting to keep her voice down. “This was *your* lead! *You’re* the one who insisted we come all the way up here! And now, *now*, you decide that maybe we shouldn’t be here? Shouldn’t be investigating? Shouldn’t be doing our job? There was a man who had his arm torn off two days ago and today...*today*, a man was found ripped in half! And you think we should just leave?”

Clark sighed and looked away, caught without an answer.

It had been bad enough at the stables yesterday, finding blood on the hay in a stall, smelling the stench of tears and more blood and some kind of hospital sterilizer or fluid Clark couldn’t put a name to, seeing the dents in the wood door, as if someone had been locked inside the stall and had pounded uselessly to be let out. It had been stranger to have the sheriff approach them straight out — abandoning his earlier tactic of tailing them everywhere they went — and yet his warning about the wildlife had turned out to be true since Clark had heard wolves howling throughout the night. But what turned the town’s eccentric mysteries into dangerous threats was the morning discovery that a mechanic had been found ripped in two.

“Wolves,” Granny had told them shortly. “We get them once a month or so, coming into town. Just stay inside and we’ll handle it. Don’t go out.”

Sheriff Nolan’s added warning at lunchtime had been almost identical. “Stay inside. Don’t go out after dark. Let us take care of it — you have nothing to worry about.”

Clark had managed to keep Lois inside by insisting they write down everything they’d seen and heard and try to come up with a reasonable explanation for any of it, but she was getting stir-crazy now — and probably hungry, too, since dinner had come and gone an hour or so before — and he hadn’t helped matters by blurting out his fear that they were just making things worse with their questions.

“Look, Lois, this town is keeping a secret — maybe dozens of them — and us being here, asking questions, is only making them more and more suspicious of us!” Clark paused, took a deep breath, doing his best to stay calm and measured so that Lois wouldn’t see just how scared he was. “You’ve heard them, seen them, and you know that nothing here works the way it does in Metropolis or anyplace normal. What happens if they decide we get too close to this secret? Or if they decide it’s better not to risk letting us drive off again?”

Lois gaped at him. “I can’t believe this! Are you trying to tell me you think we should just leave?”

“I’m saying I think we should be smart about this,” he retorted. Losing his temper never helped; he had to remain steady and rational, able to balance Lois’s love of rushing off in pursuit of whatever cause or story captured her attention. “We’re not getting anywhere the way we’re doing things. So...we back off, we pretend we’re fine with everything, that we believe them and are listening to them. And then we *quietly* go out and try to find out why everyone in this entire town thinks they come straight out of a fairytale.”

The passion was gone, suddenly, from Lois. Taking its place was a perceptive scrutiny that made Clark want to shrink away, hide behind something sturdier than thick glasses and colorful ties. He loved her drive to right the world's wrongs, her need to be the best at everything she set her hand to, her tenacity and determination. He loved her ability to look beyond the shields and walls he threw up, too — the same ability that had allowed her to see Superman as a man and Clark as a hero. Loved it and feared it all at once. It was when the sparks faded to be replaced by this searing, burning gaze that she could strike him to the deepest part of his heart.

"This has to do with Dr. Hopper's answer to our question earlier, doesn't it?" she asked quietly, and despite the hundreds of questions they had asked during their short stay, she didn't need to clarify which question she meant.

There had been a man at the diner when Granny had told them of the brutal death during the night, his manner as mild-mannered as Clark often portrayed himself to be, his patterned vest and beret marking him out in a strange, gentle way. His eyes, behind his glasses, had been kind and curious, and sad.

"Poor Billy," he'd said, shaking his head. "So soon after he reclaimed who he..." At Granny's sharp look, he'd quickly cut himself off and offered a pale smile. "Ah well, soon the danger will be over, I should think."

"Danger," Lois had said sharply. "I thought you said it was wolves."

"It was," Granny interjected gruffly. "Wolves are dangerous."

"Not on purpose," Dr. Hopper had said quietly, meeting Granny's gaze. "Sometimes it's simply in their nature, something they can't control."

Even Clark had risen an eyebrow at that and Lois had scoffed openly. "If wolves are coming into town and walking all the way to the harbor to tear a man in two, I think they've gone beyond pity."

"Maybe," Dr. Hopper murmured. "Maybe they're just confused."

"Either way," Granny had said, darting a glance toward the door, something she'd done all afternoon, "we'll have to deal with it."

"It's a shame you can't just call for Superman," Lois had said casually, making Clark tense at her side.

Dr. Hopper smiled, a blank smile, as if he were confused and merely wishing to be polite. "Superman?" he repeated. "Who's that?"

It had brought both Lois and Clark up short, and Clark had been only more surprised when further questioning revealed that apparently no one in Storybrooke had ever heard of Superman.

"It's strange," Clark said now, rising from the bed to stride to the window and look out at the bit of forest he could see past the curtains. "I don't mean to sound vain or anything, but Superman's been around for two years and has been in the news in every country. But there's a small town in Metropolis's backyard that's never even heard of him?"

"You're talking about him separately again," Lois pointed out with the same amused exasperation she always used to remind him he was Superman.

"Doesn't this worry you at all?" he burst out. "I'd think *you* would be more shocked by this than me."

"Why?" she demanded. "Because I used to have a...*crush*... on Superman?"

Quickly, he held up placating hands. "No! Just...it's one more thing to prove that this town is hiding something."

"Clark, we don't need any more proof to know this town is hiding something. What we need is to find out *what* they're hiding. I still haven't ruled out the possibility of mass-delusion."

He shook his head. "You know that's not all. Dr. Whale and his reattached arm, remember? And it's more than that..." He

trailed off, trying to find a way to put into coherent words the multitude of conversations he had overheard. "There's *nothing* I know of that could convince so many people of something so unbelievable. You can't hear them, Lois — they *literally* think they're fairytale characters. Dwarfs going to mines with pickaxes and nuns digging out their magic wands and schoolteachers thinking they're royalty. It's...it's so unbelievable that I can't help but..."

But he couldn't say it. Not out loud. Not in front of Lois. She barely believed a word he said after finding out how long he'd been lying to her; she'd never believe him again if he said what he was thinking.

"Say it," she commanded softly, and she stepped up close to his side and laid a hand on his arm. "You can't help but...what?"

"Can't help but believe it," he whispered, turning to look at her. "They believe it so strongly and they never break character and there are things happening here that are just impossible."

"You believe they're fairytale characters?" she asked. He couldn't tell if she was listening or just mocking him.

"I...no, not that. But something. Men don't grow their arms back and dead people don't rise as if it's an everyday occurrence. There *is* something...different...something almost magical here, and maybe it's not fairytales, but it's something. Something strange. Something...something alien."

"Alien," Lois said, as if she'd never said the word before in her life. As if she weren't looking into the eyes of an alien at that very moment. "That's why you want to back off. That's why you're so scared."

He wanted to deny it. Wanted to change the subject and tell a joke and break the quiet tension blanketing them. Wanted to say honestly that he wasn't scared.

But he couldn't.

Even if he didn't hate lying, he couldn't, not with Lois's hand on his arm, not with her large, dark eyes looking up at him so openly, so earnestly. Not with this truth boiling and searing inside of him so that he *needed* to let it out, let it go. Usually, it was his parents who listened when he could keep in the secrets and fears and desires no more, but lately...lately, it had been, more and more, Lois who was there to listen and soothe and calm. It was a gift, her trust and attention, even more so because he *had* lied to her, and he treasured her openness, her presence. So even though he didn't want to admit that he was terrified, he seized at this opportunity to relax his rigid hold of his private insecurities. And hopes.

"Maybe they're like me," he whispered. "I mean, not Kryptonian, but...but alien. Maybe they're from somewhere else and trying to live life here on Earth, trying to be as normal as they can be, safe and unbothered. Maybe they...maybe they can do things that humans can't and only have our fairytales to use as a way of relating. Maybe they're hiding these secrets to protect themselves from discovery."

Lois's lips curved in the faintest hint of a smile. "Like you."

"What if they are?" he asked her, suddenly impassioned, as if he had stolen her earlier excitement for his own. He turned to face her fully, raising up his hands to gesture in the few inches between them. "What if...what if they're *all* from another world? Refugees just like me? They could —"

"They could what?" Lois caught hold of his hands, held them still. "What could they do, Clark? Even if they are, somehow, from an alien world, even if they know of Krypton — even if they somehow incredibly knew your parents...what would that do? They'd be telling you stories of a place you never knew, people you already know through the globe they left you! Even if they are aliens...that doesn't mean anything. *You're* not an alien, Clark. *This* is your home, Earth, Metropolis, out there with Jonathan and Martha and Perry and Jimmy and...and *me*. You don't need them. You already belong."

Clark was frozen, arrested at the open vulnerability in Lois's eyes, gleaming with light reflected from the window, the touch of her hands tight and desperate on his own. "Lois," he breathed, and had no more words, because she was saying the same thing she'd told him when he'd flown her up into the sky, into that frozen void between the earth and the moon, when he'd told her he'd wait for her forever. And she'd told him she did love him, secret or not. Told him he wasn't alone anymore.

Whatever his own eyes showed, Lois smiled and tilted up her head and kissed him. She was light and brilliance and so very soft, a homecoming calling him back from the skies and the alien wildernesses he traversed in his mind. She was everything and he'd been so afraid he would lose this forever, so he wrapped his arms around her and cradled the side of her face in his hand and deepened the kiss. She'd wanted a hero first and an ordinary man next, and instead of either of those, she had *him*, but for the first time, Clark began to let himself believe that she wouldn't give him up anyway.

"I love you," he whispered when her lips lingeringly left his, while she was still safe in the circle of his arms and he in hers.

Her smile grew wider, and her eyes shone with a light all their own, scorning the reflected glare from the window. "I love you too. So...what do you say we sneak out and find out just what exactly goes on in Storybrooke by night?"

"Well, since I know I can't convince you to give up finding out the truth of any secret, I say let's go."

She laughed, happy and sparkling and incandescent so that Clark couldn't take his eyes off her. He loved her more than life every instant of every day, but these moments...these were some of his favorites. "Clark Kent — always up for a challenge," she teased.

Clark had been half afraid there'd be a guard at the foot of the stairs, someone stationed there to make sure the strangers to town didn't wander out, but there was no one. In fact, the entire town felt deserted. It was so quiet, so still, that Clark felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise, and he tensed, hard put to keep his feet on the ground when his every instinct was telling him to take to the air and flash ahead until he found where everyone had gone.

The howl of a wolf broke the silence, uncomfortably close, but one glance at Lois's determined face told Clark that he'd never be able to convince her to return to their room. So, straining his hearing, looking through buildings to see what was around corners before they reached them, he continued forward.

When he found where everyone had gone, it was all at once. One instant, it was silent and still, the next there was a roar, a seething morass of sound and movement and light that pricked straight into his brain with painful intensity at the level of telescopic vision he'd been employing.

"A-a crowd," he stammered, his head in his hands, his eyes squeezed tightly shut. "Up ahead — a mob. Torches an-and guns, bats, weapons."

"What?" Lois leaned into him, rubbing a calming motion over his back as he anchored himself to the sound of her heartbeat and the sight of her worried, intent features.

"Sorry." He stood up straight and shook off the last of the painful backlash. "There's a mob up ahead, chasing something into an alley. I can't tell what it is. I'd think Superman might be needed, but until we know more, I'm not sure it's a good idea to bring him into Storybrooke. Besides, the sheriff should be — " Sucking in a sharp breath, Clark swiveled his head back the way they'd come. "He's on his way. Come on, out of sight!"

Grabbing Lois's hand, he ran toward the first open door he saw, the windows lit up with the glow indicating lights were still on inside. The library, he thought, remembering seeing it earlier, looking up at the clock tower it boasted. Lois reached behind them and pulled the slow door closed just a moment before the squad car raced by, tires screeching as it turned in the direction of

the mob.

Lois let out her breath and looked up at him. "Any idea what the mob was about?"

"I couldn't quite — "

"Hello? Is anyone there? Please...please, help me!"

At the sound of the female voice, colored with an Australian accent, emerging tentatively from deep inside the library, Clark exchanged a quick glance with Lois before hesitantly moving toward it. He tried to keep his steps slow, but Lois strode forward confidently and turned back into the shelves. Clark hurried his own pace when he heard her stumble to a halt.

"What *happened*?" Lois exclaimed, and Clark well recognized the sound of outrage in her tone. "Who did this to you?"

Clark came up short, too, when he rounded the corner. He stared, horrified and aghast and surprised yet again, though he'd been beginning to think nothing this town threw at him could surprise him anymore.

Standing before them was Belle, the kind young woman who'd met them at the line and helped them into town. She met their eyes calmly enough, but her breaths were edged in panic and her heart beat so rapidly he almost looked down at her chest lest it come tearing its way out of her and her pupils were dilated with fear.

She was also chained to a heating pipe with iron manacles.

Chapter 4: Magic And Science

Belle was angry. The library was her sanctuary, her haven from the world she didn't know and didn't have curse-memories to understand. It was her visible, tangible proof of Rumpelstiltskin's love, the love she'd seen grow in him during her time at his castle, believed in even when he'd sent her away with cold words and blank eyes, relied on during the long years of her imprisonment in the Queen's tower. Rumpelstiltskin had given her this library — her freedom, her independence, the world in its four corners, the knowledge she loved to collect — and she did not in the least appreciate having its warm, inviting interior filled with the ghosts of her nightmares, the shadows of her time in chains, and the echoes of her many hidden tears during long, lonely nights.

So she was angry. Angry to have her haven tainted in such a way, so callously, so thoughtlessly. Angry at Ruby — her *friend* — for locking her up, as if a manacle around her already-scarred wrist could protect her from whatever Ruby might do to her as a savage wolf, or from the mob out for Ruby's blood.

Angry, because it was better to be angry than to be afraid. Better to pretend that she was breathing hard, that black dots were swimming at the corners of her vision and her stomach was twisted up in dull, twisting knots, because she was bottling up all she wanted to rant and rave at her friend. Better, because anger could — for a short time — cover up her rising panic, the inferno of fear and the torrent of thousands of memories of endless days locked away, vulnerable to Regina's whim and whatever pirate might next break into her cell to grill her for information on how to kill Rumpelstiltskin. Better to think on *why* she was angry than to give weight to the keening whisper that murmured dark and terrible things — that she'd never be free, that she'd never *been* free, that she'd never get to see Rumpelstiltskin remember how to smile when he looked at her.

But she'd never been very good at staying angry, not when it was always so easy to look at someone else and see the weaknesses and the insecurities and the hidden strengths that drove them to do what they did. So, before she was ready — before she was *free* — her anger was fizzing away, going wispy and ephemeral, leaving only cold terror and stark panic.

When she heard voices coming from near the doors, hushed and quick, she was half-convinced she was only imagining them.

But she didn't care anymore — she just wanted *out*, wanted this length of cold iron taken off her — so she called out for help and hoped with all of her heart that it was Rumplestiltskin. He'd been tentative in his approaches ever since she'd snuck away from his house and almost got sent over the town line — almost forgot him, and the thought of that was enough to cover her in cold sweat even when she wasn't chained up — cautious not to pressure her, but she hoped anyway.

And like uncounted times in Regina's cell, her hope was disappointed.

The two strangers who'd so alarmed and preoccupied Rumplestiltskin over the past several days — which had made it impossible to find the time to try a hamburger with him — stared at her for a long moment, clearly taken aback by the sight of her.

There probably wasn't anyone worse who could have found her — except Regina, but the Queen was cunning in the ways of self-survival and knew better than to approach her while Rumplestiltskin yet drew breath — but at the moment, Belle wasn't inclined to care.

"Please," she said again, hating to beg but too desperate not to. "Please get this off me!"

The woman muttered angry questions and dark imprecations, sounding not unlike Rumplestiltskin in one of his more annoyed moods, while the man stepped closer to examine the manacle. He moved slowly, keeping each of his gestures and touches soft and light, and Belle found herself relaxing a bit, her fear receding.

"It's all right," he murmured, his voice a soft undertone adding deeper layers to the comforting outrage of his companion. Lois, Belle remembered. Lois and Clark.

"Please," Belle whispered. She tugged on the chain yet again, and knew that she'd have to wear jackets or long-sleeved blouses for awhile. If Rumplestiltskin caught sight of the red ring surrounding her wrist, Storybrooke would be lucky to emerge with just a street or two unscathed.

"Careful," Clark warned her. He shot a look to Lois over his shoulder, and she nodded and stepped up close to Belle, her dark eyes demanding Belle's full attention.

"Who did this to you?" Lois asked quietly, fixedly, while Clark's hands brushed Belle's wrist past the manacle. "Why are you here?"

"This is my library," Belle said, proudly, the words like a cloak, a shield, reminding her that not all was bad or painful or confining. "But...she didn't mean to. It was...a...a prank. A joke. I just...I don't like being locked up." And her breaths were coming short and sharp and painfully edged again, because the chain *wasn't coming off*, and she needed to be free!

She glanced down, a half-crazed look, just in time to see Clark pinch the manacle between two fingers and crack open the hard iron as if it were butter.

"Belle!" Lois was saying, and Belle looked up to meet her gaze just as Clark finished stripping the iron chain off her and throwing it to the side. She'd have to find it later, Belle thought numbly, pick it up and get rid of it. Maybe she could ask Rumplestiltskin to melt it down into cinders for her.

Idle thoughts, really, but they helped mask her shock.

Her mind raced even as she hugged her arm to her chest, soothing the raw marks with her fingers, reassuring herself that the chain was gone and she wasn't locked up anymore. She was in her library, not her cell, and she was facing strangers — strangers with an astonishing secret — not the Queen. And Rumplestiltskin was never far away, not anymore.

"Are you okay?" Clark asked mildly. He stood in front of her, one shoulder tilted behind Lois, protecting her from all sides. He looked normal, ordinary, brown eyes a paler shade than Rumplestiltskin's, glasses like Archie's, hands in his pockets like Leroy's, and yet he was so much more than he appeared.

It wasn't surprising, not really. Belle had sacrificed her

eternity to a monster and discovered a good man buried beneath his beastly layers. She'd tracked down, and faced, a deadly Yaoguai, only to find a cursed prince beneath the appearance of a flaming wild dog. She above all others knew that no one ever showed the depths of themselves on their surface. And yet...and yet Rumplestiltskin had said the people of this world had no magic, no curses, no blessings from fairies, nothing but ordinary, mundane things, each one alike to another.

Usually, his information was more accurate than this.

Belle started, suddenly aware that both Lois and Clark were staring at her somewhat warily. "I'm fine!" she said, too quickly, too cheerfully. She hoped they'd attribute it to her relief at being rescued. "Thank you, for saving me!"

"No problem," Clark said.

"You're sure you're all right?" Lois pressed, and when Belle nodded, she straightened and asked, "So do you know what all that fuss outside is about?"

She didn't have curse memories like everyone else, and most of the time Belle was grateful for it — she had no wish to juggle two sets of memories, particularly when one set wouldn't have Rumplestiltskin in them — but right now, she happily would have taken a few, just enough so she could know what kind of explanation would satisfy these strangers. But then, more than just satisfying their suspicion, she thought she might need to make certain they weren't out to hurt anyone. She was pretty sure they weren't — almost certain the man's gentleness with her and the woman's enraged concern for her meant they had good hearts — but maybe they thought revealing the existence of a cursed town to the rest of this magic-less world was a good thing.

And Belle knew it wasn't.

David needed time to find a way to bring back his wife and daughter.

Henry shouldn't be thought crazy *again*, as Rumple said he would be by people from this world.

Ruby would be hunted down, considered wild and dangerous by people who did not understand magic just as she was by those who *did* know of it.

And if the world descended on them, Rumplestiltskin would never be able to find his son.

So, she fashioned a trembling smile and darted a look about as if afraid they were being spied on, and she said very quietly, "I can't tell you, but I know who can. Come on, we have to find Rumplestil — " Just in time she caught herself and said, "Mr. Gold. He can explain everything."

"Uh...could you excuse us for one second?" Lois asked, her smile brittle and fleeting.

Belle nodded, and watched as they moved away, turning behind a bookshelf so that she could only see patches of them past rows of the books she'd slowly been making her way through. Biting her lip, Belle reached out and leaned her hand against the smooth, comforting feel of books. Her panic was slow to ebb away, her fear leaving behind oily tracks through her thoughts, but she was able to breathe without feeling as if she were about to pass out and the black dots were gone from her vision, so she supposed she was recovering.

With a deep breath, Belle looked over to where the chains had slid. If she didn't face them now, she wasn't certain she'd be able to later. She could ask Rumplestiltskin to take care of it for her, but if she did, Ruby might end up in trouble with an angered Rumplestiltskin and Belle herself would feel a coward. She'd once told her beloved beast that bravery would come to those who did brave things, and he'd been trying so hard for her lately to be brave and honest, so she took a shuffling step forward, and another, and another, and then, quickly, as if it were a snake that might bite her, she reached down and picked up the long, heavy chains.

It wasn't as satisfying as she'd hoped it would be when she

threw them into the garbage can beneath the reception desk, but it was something. She still felt as if they were lurking, hidden, ready to jump out and attack her — a silly, ridiculous notion that she did her best to ignore. The important thing was that the chains were out of sight, and even if they weren't, the manacle itself was broken, thanks to the two strangers.

"Belle?" Lois's voice was soft, her smile more real, as she and Clark approached the reception desk. "You say Mr. Gold can explain things? Like the mob?"

"Yes," Belle said, sensing a trap in her words.

"Can he explain...anything else?" Clark questioned, casually. Intently.

Belle smiled faintly. "If anyone can, it's him."

Lois hesitated, though Belle would have thought she was the sort to charge forward without scouting ahead first. "You...you do realize there's a mob out there, right? It might be dangerous."

"That's all right. I'll be safe — we're only going down a block anyway." Belle shrugged, relatively unconcerned. She knew very well, from the ogre wars that had ravaged her land so long ago, the dangerous and destructive force of a mob, the unreasoning fury and bloodlust that accompanied and controlled one, but everyone knew that Rumpelstiltskin protected her and even a crazed mob would find that ample reason to pull itself back from harming her. She hadn't feared for her life since the white-garbed stranger had freed her from her cell and told her to find Mr. Gold.

"All right," Lois said decisively. "Then to Mr. Gold it is." She slid a darkly amused look up to her friend. "Or should I say, follow the yellow brick road?"

Belle wasn't sure what the statement meant, but Clark chuckled, his hand resting on Lois's lower back as Belle led them from the library.

Night had cloaked all of Storybrooke and the lights lining the streets were banked, providing only a dim aura of radiance. Ruby's howling had faded, Belle realized, and she tried to convince herself that it was because she had gained control of her wolf instincts, or fled outside the town, or was sleeping — anything but that the mob had succeeded in killing her.

Swallowing back her fear, Belle fixed her eyes on the sign to Mr. Gold's pawnshop at the end of the street and kept walking.

She supposed she could have been afraid, with a perhaps-uncontrolled werewolf on the loose and strangers who possessed the strength of a hundred men following close behind her down a dark, empty street, but she wasn't. Not anymore. She trusted Ruby to control herself, to be as good and noble as David believed her to be, and she owed these strangers faith, as well as gratitude, for their kind actions in rescuing her. And she was half a block away from Rumpelstiltskin — if she shouted his name, screamed at all, she was certain he would appear in a cloud of purple smoke with vengeance in his hand and terror in his eyes.

"So," Lois said brightly, quickening her pace a bit to walk side by side with Belle. "Mr. Gold. He and you are...?"

"Oh, we're together," Belle said, and despite everything, she couldn't help but smile. And cant her chin in the air in preparation of the incredulous looks or the horrified questions or the abrupt stiffening. She'd grown well used to such reactions in the past month.

"Ah," Lois said. And that was all.

Slowly, Belle felt the tension ease from her, and her smile turned softer. She studied the taller woman, aware of Clark's steady presence behind them but choosing to turn her attention fully to Lois. "You don't..." She bit her lip, suddenly unsure.

Lois frowned at her quizzically. "What?"

"Nothing." Belle shook her head, then gestured to Clark. "And you two?"

"We're dating," Lois said, meeting her partner's gaze steadily. Something passed between them — Belle wasn't sure

what, but she could feel it nonetheless, something strong and deep and reaffirming. Clark's smile was caught between relief and joy, disbelief and awe, and Belle's breath caught in her throat. It was Rumpelstiltskin's smile, the one he gave her when she took his hand or stepped into his embrace or told him she loved him. It was strange to see it on a man who was kind and compassionate and clearly competent, a tall and handsome man with a physique to rival Gaston's, but then, if he kept his inordinate strength a secret, perhaps he felt alienated by that. Hercules had not always been easy with his godlike powers, either, if Belle remembered correctly.

"If I may ask," Belle began diffidently, "why did you come to Storybrooke?"

"Clark proposed," Lois said, "I said no — because I needed time to think" — she shot a narrow-eyed glance to her partner — "and we needed time to get to know each other again. Coastal Maine seemed like a good place." Lois paused, then shrugged and added, "We heard there was some pretty interesting fog around here, colored fog. Thought we might check it out."

"Sometimes we dabble in photography," Clark interjected quickly. "We could get some pretty good shots of odd-colored fog."

"I see," Belle said, calmly, conversationally. If her voice shook, just the slightest bit, she hoped they would think it was because she shivered in the cold, and wrapped her arms around her waist. But it wasn't the chill night or the mist her breath made of the air that made her tremble.

Rumpelstiltskin had torn apart a world to find his son. He'd sacrificed the happiness of everyone else, dedicated entire centuries of his life, turned her out and sent her far away when they discovered her kiss could break his curse and rid him of the magic he needed to complete his search. He had killed for his son, this Baelfire Belle knew by name only, by the tiny fragments, the broken secrets, Rumpel would sometimes let slip to her — a gift she treasured with the same care she did his heart — and Belle did not doubt that he would kill again should his quest be endangered. This couple, young and in love and clearly hiding something but still not bad people. Anyone else who stumbled into Storybrooke. Whoever got between him and the son he loved so devotedly, so obsessively, so all-consumingly that everything else faded into insignificance in his eyes — he would kill any of them, all of them.

He would destroy another world if he had to, Belle thought, and she did not think that even she would be able to stop him, not if Baelfire was on the line. Already Rumpelstiltskin burned with impatience, chafed with frustration at the delay the impassable town line presented. Another delay, another obstacle? It might be the final straw that would make him snap and release his hold on his control, his magic, his temper.

But Belle had seen colored smoke only once — the day Rumpelstiltskin dropped his True Love potion into the well of magical waters and returned magic to Storybrooke. The day he had taken her into his arms, and touched her as if she were more precious than the magic roiling outward to engulf the town he'd had a hand in creating, and kissed her.

Purple smoke, like the magic he could conjure with a wave of his hand — to create a pillow for her, to heal her wounds...to kill any who stood in his way.

Lois and Clark had helped her, but Belle was suddenly afraid they would die for their act of compassion.

Unless she did something to stop it. She'd talked Rumpelstiltskin down from murder before; she thought she could do it again. If she was careful. If she was slow, cautious, smart.

Belle turned to look at Lois — intent on the shop before them, the same determined absorption evident in her eyes that Rumpel sometimes exhibited when in the midst of one of his more complicated potions — then to Clark — looking down at

Lois, the corners of his mouth hiding the remnants of a smile, his eyes soft and warm and kinder than she'd ever seen Rumplestiltskin's. When they noticed her attention, when they met her gaze, she smiled at them. "Everything will be all right," she promised with a slight nod. Then she set her hand to the door of Rumple's shop, pushed it open, and led them into the dim interior.

The bell over the door rang and Belle heard Rumple stirring in the back, behind the curtain serving as door to the private backroom. "Rumple!" she called so that he would know it was her.

She heard the tapping of his cane, saw his hand pull aside the curtain, revealing his smile, and heard him say, "Hey," as he always did when he saw her, as if all other greetings failed at the sight of her.

His smile died when he noticed Lois and Clark behind her, and instantly replacing it was his mask. Cool and implacable, courteous and calculating. He was sizing them up, wondering why they were there, what they were doing with her. When his eyes swept over her, ensuring she was safe and unharmed, she realized — far too late — that she had forgotten her jacket and the skin around her wrist, rubbed raw and red, was bare to his gaze.

Before he could do more than straighten, hands tightening over the head of his cane, nostrils flaring, eyes narrowing, Belle skipped forward. She reached out and put her hands over his, gratified to feel them instantly relax their death's grip on the gold handle. "I'm all right," she told him softly. "It was Ruby, but she meant no harm. She was only trying to protect me from the wolf."

Rumple's eyes softened, one of his hands slipping free of hers to brush his knuckle along her cheek. "Oh, sweetheart," he murmured, and she had to close her eyes against the knowledge, the regret, the guilt, shining in his. He wrapped his arm around her, and she gratefully, happily sank into his embrace. For just a moment she let herself rest her cheek on his shoulder and soak in his love, his affection, freely offered and wholly comforting. For an instant, she allowed herself to be vulnerable and fragile and let him give her the sanctuary her library hadn't been able to provide.

But the moment passed quickly, and there was still the matter of the strangers behind her.

"They freed me." Belle wrapped her arms around Rumplestiltskin, tilted her face toward him, and whispered, as softly as mouse, as gently as the stirring of the wind, into his ear. "He tore through the chains as if they were air, Rumple."

His arm stiffened around her, and she stepped back to see his dark eyes light up with intrigue and plans. Rumplestiltskin was a devious strategist, pulling strings and arranging deals to suit his schemes decades in advance. She knew that he would look at strangers in his way and see only an obstacle to be removed; but he would look at strangers with a dangerous secret and see opportunities to be found and weaknesses to be taken advantage of.

What she hadn't counted on, though, was Clark realizing the danger he and his companion were in.

"Well, I'm glad you're safe, Belle," Clark said with a smile nowhere near as warm as the ones he'd offered earlier. He wrapped his hand around Lois's arm and tugged her back to the door. "We'd better be going, though — the sheriff told us to stay in our rooms at night, so —"

"Oh, come now," Rumplestiltskin said, and his arms slipped away from Belle entirely as he prowled forward. "No need to be leaving so soon. It seems I owe you a thank you for helping Belle."

"No thanks necessary," Clark assured him hastily. Lois was frowning, but she followed Clark's lead and pulled the door open

for them both.

Rumplestiltskin smiled his dealer's smile. "I'm afraid I must insist."

The door slammed shut, the bell chiming its warning with a clatter.

Clark and Lois exchanged a quick, startled look before turning to face Rumplestiltskin together. Rumplestiltskin came to a halt, leaned on his cane, one leg ahead of the other, knee bent, his smile never wavering.

Belle sighed exasperatedly and moved forward. "They helped me, Rumple," she reminded him. "They didn't have to, but they did."

"Yes," he nodded, "in a most unusual way."

"I don't know what you think you saw," Lois said boldly, and Belle admired her courage, "but whatever it was, there's no reason to keep us here."

"Strangers with secrets in a town full of secrets."

Rumplestiltskin tipped his hand in an open-palmed gesture and raised his eyebrows. "Maybe coincidence. Maybe something else." When Lois and Clark only exchanged another look, Rumple shrugged. "Of course, you can leave any time you wish."

Lois glared at him. "Thank you," she bit out, and whirled to tug on the doorknob.

It didn't budge. Belle resisted the urge to roll her eyes. Sometimes Rumple was a bit too fond of his own showmanship and the games he played.

"It'll open," Rumplestiltskin said softly, in no more than a whisper that Belle, standing right beside him, had to strain to hear, "when the proper amount of strength is applied."

Oblivious to the words, Lois turned back to them, eyes flashing fire and fury, but Clark, his voice calm, his eyes narrowed, said only, "Aren't you afraid I'll break the door?"

Belle caught her breath and Lois stared up at him quizzically; Rumplestiltskin smirked. If he'd still been an imp, with his scales and his claws and his high-pitched giggles, Belle was certain he would have clapped his hands and bounced in place with maniacal glee. His trap was set and it appeared his prey was taking the bait. Slowly, tenderly, Belle brushed her hand over his arm, reminding him that she was there, that he *wasn't* an imp anymore, that he was a man she loved, a man trying to do better.

"I'm certain that you could cause quite a bit of damage should you wish it," Rumple observed. He tilted his head, studying Clark closely. "Of course, then someone might end up getting hurt, and that's not really something you like to risk, is it?"

"Clark," Lois said warningly.

"It's all right, Lois," Clark assured her. He met Rumplestiltskin's gaze calmly enough, though he had to take a deep breath before he spoke again. "You know who I am?"

"Unlike the rest of this town," Rumple said wryly, "I've thought it prudent to learn *something* of this world we now occupy. And strangely enough, what might not warrant much more than a few tales in our land is startling enough to warrant quite a lot of uproar in this one. It appears I can't escape exceptionally strong knights in shining armor no matter how many worlds I visit...*Superman*."

"I know who you are, too," Clark retorted. Belle wondered if Rumplestiltskin noticed that Clark was surreptitiously reaching out to clasp Lois's hand. "Everyone in town talks of you in whispers. They're afraid of your power and your ruthlessness, but I'm not. I knew someone just like you once, *Rumplestiltskin*, a man named Lex Luthor — he hid behind reputation and power, too, and thought that fear would work in his favor, but in the end he fell."

"Oh, very good," Rumplestiltskin said sardonically. "But to a man with super hearing, figuring out my name is hardly a miraculous feat. It does make me wonder, though...just how

much would a man give in order to keep his secret safe from others who *don't* possess the advantage of extraordinary hearing?"

"Really?" Lois demanded, stepping forward to confront Rumplestiltskin directly. "*This* is your big play? Threatening to unmask him to the world? That'll be kind of hard to do when you don't want the world to know you exist, won't it?"

"Hardly," Rumple scoffed, but the corners of his eyes were crinkled, and his stance had lost its ease. Belle felt a tightening in the pit of her stomach — she recognized the warning signs of Rumplestiltskin's enjoyment with his games waning, of his patience coming to an end. Lois had come too close to the truth for comfort with her wild stab, and at any moment things could turn dangerous.

"I think it will," Lois continued, relentless now that Rumplestiltskin was no longer smiling. She took another step forward, her eyes level with Rumple's. "I think you'd rather remain safe and hidden here, and I don't think you're willing to leave town."

Belle inwardly groaned. Mentioning leaving town was *not* the wisest move, not when it would only remind Rumplestiltskin that he was trapped here while these strangers could leave anytime they wished.

Sure enough, she could see his shoulders tightening, could feel that crackle in the air as his magic surged beneath his control, ready to lash outward, and she knew even without looking that his eyes had gone hard and implacable.

"Wait!" she called out before he could loose whatever magic was moving beneath his skin. She darted forward, holding out her arms to either side to keep distance between Clark and Rumplestiltskin. Lois was too near Rumple for Belle to jump between them but at least she could keep Clark back, keep herself in Rumple's line of sight — the only chance she had of keeping things relatively peaceful. "We don't have to do this," she said evenly.

Clark peered at her, a crease in his brow, and Belle dared not look away to gauge Lois's reaction. "Belle," he said mildly, thoughtfully. "Even after all this time of listening, I don't know who you are. What story do you come from?"

"Belle!" Rumple called sharply. Belle thought she saw Lois from the corner of her eye glaring at him, probably mistaking fear as anger as so many others did. "Don't go any closer to him!"

"Story?" Belle repeated, frowning at Clark. "What do you mean, story?"

"I mean, everyone in this town seems to think they come from some fairytale or legend or nursery rhyme. Rumplestiltskin, Snow White and the seven dwarfs, Jiminy Cricket and the Blue Fairy, the Evil Queen, Frankenstein, Red Riding Hood. But... which story is yours? I only remember one woman in the story of Rumplestiltskin, and she was a miller's daughter."

"Enough!" Rumple snapped, and there was more than fear in his voice — there was sheer terror.

Belle turned, slowly, to look at him. In all this time, he had said nothing of fairytales or legends, and even when she asked him what books she should read, he had never mentioned that there were stories of her friends and family here, in this world without magic but with, apparently, a man possessing superhuman strength and hearing.

"What does he mean, Rumple?" she asked.

"Nothing," he said. Rumplestiltskin never lied, not outright, not without the use of half-truths and misdirections, but that was a blatant lie, and Belle could do nothing but gape at him. She knew he'd tortured thieves and traded for princesses; she knew he possessed the darkest of magics and was able to rip hearts still beating from their owners' chests; she knew he'd beaten her father when he thought him responsible for Belle's death and sent a wraith to consume Regina's soul in revenge for the Queen

imprisoning Belle. So what, after all that, could he be so afraid of her learning that he would lie so flagrantly, so obviously?

"I know of a Belle," Lois said suddenly. "She's the girl who traded herself to a beast to save her father's life. She's the girl who tamed the beast and fell in love with him. She's the girl who broke his curse and found a handsome prince beneath the fur and claws. I don't see any fur and claws," she added cuttingly, "but I think I could guess who the beast is."

"You don't know what you're talking about," Rumplestiltskin sneered. "Are you telling me that distinguished investigative reporters like yourself and Mr. Kent believe that *fairytales* are *real*?"

"I don't know what I believe," Clark said. "But I do know this town isn't from this world. And I think the people of Metropolis — people everywhere — will think it very interesting to discover that the Belle from Beauty and the Beast really exists."

"They might be disappointed that there isn't really a handsome prince at the end, though," Lois muttered.

Maybe if Belle hadn't been so caught up in this revelation that these strangers knew her story — or at least a distorted version of it — she would have been able to stop Rumplestiltskin. Maybe if she'd been watching the strangers instead of staring at her true love, she would have realized that Clark had stepped up behind her. Maybe if she'd been less curious, she would never have asked about the fairytales and Rumplestiltskin wouldn't have felt so threatened by the ending he hadn't been able to give her, the secrets involved in whoever the miller's daughter was to him.

Maybe. Or maybe it would have happened anyway. Clark was very fast, after all, and Lois was between Belle and Rumplestiltskin, and Rumplestiltskin could never think clearly where she was concerned.

Regardless, it didn't matter. Clark stepped up behind her, he moved his arm in front of her — probably to move her out of the way — and Rumplestiltskin snapped.

He snarled, red smoke coiling around his hand as he grabbed Lois and threw her backward. Clark let out a shout and pulled Belle into his hold — later, she thought he was probably trying to protect her from the magic Rumple was wielding, but at the moment, it felt as if he were capturing her, and all she could remember was Regina's guard wrapping his arms around her and hauling her toward a cage. She let out a cry and thrashed against Clark's hold.

Lois was still sliding across the wooden floors toward the glass counter, dazed, red magic curling up around her to keep her immobilized. Rumplestiltskin was looking toward her, stepping toward her, but at the sound of Belle's cry, his head jerked in her direction.

Stark, cold fury obliterated all hints of the softer, kinder man beneath the guise of monster. It was the Dark One, now, stalking toward Clark, the Dark One lowering his voice to a sibilant hiss as he murmured, "Let her go now, dearie, or all your strength won't be enough to save you or your companion."

Belle tugged on Clark's arm, desperate to run to Rumple, to reach out her hand and calm him with her touch, to soothe away the terror eating away at him that only she could see, to banish the fumes of smoke rising from his hands — black now rather than red, and that was an even worse sign than the fact that he was reverting to using the word 'dearie.'

But Clark was afraid, too, and Rumplestiltskin had tossed aside Lois and now threatened her, and maybe Clark — even with his gentle friendliness and his kind compassion — was more like Rumplestiltskin than it would seem.

Whatever his reason, he hesitated, and then, instead of releasing Belle, he tightened his hold around her. Belle could feel his heart pounding in his chest, strong and rapid, frantic with

terror. She could hear the catch in his voice and feel the tremble in his frame. She could read all the signs of terror in him that she saw in Rumble and that was what finally made a cold sweat break out all over her skin.

“No,” Clark said, his tone hard and unyielding even with that tremble marring its steadiness. His grip was impossible to escape but didn’t hurt. “I won’t. Not until you let Lois free and allow us to leave here unharmed.”

“And if I don’t?” Rumblestiltskin murmured, his own voice caught halfway between a purr and a snarl. He was gripping his cane with a white-knuckled hand, as if he would raise it up in the air and beat Clark physically with it, disdaining the black smoke and lightning crackle emanating from him.

“You’d better,” Clark said softly, “because I don’t think you want Belle ending up hurt. And *you* know just how strong I am.”

“Oh, no,” Belle breathed, and she closed her eyes and slumped in his hold. “You should *not* have said that.”

There was no way, she thought with a sinking heart, that even *she* would be able to stop Rumblestiltskin now.

Lois had been in binds before. She’d been tied up by every kind of thug on the planet, put into precarious positions by several different masterminds, manhandled by guards and soldiers and police officers of every sort, but she had never, during all those times of danger, felt as vulnerable and helpless as she did now.

Mr. Gold — Rumblestiltskin, if Clark was to be believed, and right now, Lois was having an incredibly hard time *not* believing in fairytales and magic — had simply waved his hand and Lois had gone spinning. She’d seen Superman perform extraordinary feats, including hurling criminals back a safe distance away with merely his super-breath, but this...this was something else. Gold had waved his hand, red smoke had blinded Lois, and then she found herself on the floor. And she couldn’t move.

There were no knots, no ties, no frayed edges of a rope. There weren’t any weak links or broken chains or rusted locks. There was just...smoke. Red smoke. Red smoke that changed to black and curled around Mr. Gold’s hands like a pet begging to be released.

Lois twisted and writhed on the wooden floor, her legs banging against glass counters filled to the brim with dusty junk, but the...smoke...didn’t give at all. Her arms were bound to her sides, her legs encased side by side, and she couldn’t maneuver her way to her feet no matter how hard she tried. She let out a low growl of frustration and squirmed again until she was facing Clark.

Only one problem — Mr. Gold stood between them. His back was to Lois, but there was nothing she could do to attack him or leap on him or distract him in any way. He didn’t spare her even a glance as he advanced, slowly, one halting step after another, on Clark. Lois didn’t need to see his eyes to know that he was furious and dangerous and intent only on Clark and the woman Clark held in his arms.

Not that Lois was jealous or anything, but Clark was holding Belle awfully tight, and she definitely lived up to her namesake — not that Lois really believed she was supposed to be the beauty from the fairytale, of course, because that would be ridiculous. But she was beautiful, and Clark was holding her pressed up against him, and Lois had seen him do worse with other women — Mayson came immediately to mind, no matter that the assistant DA had been dead for several months now — but she herself was flat on the floor, trussed up like a goose waiting for Christmas dinner, and —

Forcefully, Lois made herself stop and take a deep breath. It was one thing to babble aloud, quite another to do it in her own mind. She was a professional and she was sure she had been in worse situations than this, so she wouldn’t panic. She’d be calm

and rational and she would find a way to escape this...this *smoke*...if it was the last thing she did!

“Are you sure you know what you’re getting yourself into?” Mr. Gold asked, stepping sideways so that Lois could just barely catch his expression, and something in his voice made a shiver run down Lois’s spine. Or maybe it was just the way the magical smoke was tightening around her wrists, her elbows, her legs, a glowing shimmer that was about as possible as a man who’d fallen from a sixty-story building showing up again to finish trying to ruin Lois’s life and her burgeoning relationship with Clark, or lights that could implant information in her brain when shone into her eyes, or a cyborg powered by Kryptonite, or a man who could fly.

Actually, Lois considered, this all wasn’t nearly as far-fetched as it probably should have been.

“I know enough to be wary of a man capable of reattaching a severed arm with only a wave of his hand, as if it means nothing,” Clark said. Lois could tell he was guessing, but Mr. Gold’s lips twitched, a minute expression that read like a smile on his sharp features.

“Oh, very good,” he said with a casual arch of his brows — completely belied by the sheer desperation broiling in his eyes when he looked at Belle. “You only got two details wrong — you’re mistaking a monster for a man, and no one ever gets anything for nothing.”

“Rumple,” Belle said, softly, almost reprovingly.

Clark’s hands flexed around Belle’s arms, holding her back-to-chest against him, but Lois knew him well enough to see the fear and the uncertainty lurking behind his glasses. And strangely — since none of these townsfolk seemed to know anything about Superman, and since she was apparently used to a cold-blooded player like Mr. Gold — Belle didn’t look afraid at all. Lois tried not to think about that maybe being because she had no doubt that Mr. Gold could save her.

“That sounds,” the man who might or might not be Rumblestiltskin said very slowly, “like you’re proposing a deal.”

“Yes,” Belle interjected, staring at Gold intently. “A deal — deals are good, right, Rumple?”

Lois wanted to say something about the ridiculousness of Belle from Beauty and the Beast calling Rumblestiltskin by such an absurd nickname, but the situation seemed a bit too tense for humor to be appreciated, and anyway, she thought, with a name like Rumblestiltskin, there weren’t many *good* nicknames. So instead, she worked her way to a nearby counter and wedged herself up into a seated position, then tried very hard to wriggle out of magical smoke — which was about as impossible to do as it sounded.

“I don’t make deals with Belle’s life,” Gold said quietly, somberly. “Not anymore.”

Belle stared at Mr. Gold, mouth parted, eyes gleaming with silver light.

“What about Lois?” Clark demanded.

“Oh, she’s unharmed. For now.” Gold darted a glance to her, a cold smile reshaping his mouth.

“Then let her go,” Clark said, or rather, *Superman* said, his voice hard and grim. Lois stared at him, standing there in his suit and tie, his glasses dulling the color, the spark, of his eyes ever so slightly, changing the shape of his face, aided by the lock of dark hair falling over his brow. Clark Kent, the one person who’d befriended her no matter how she pushed him away. The partner who’d been there for her every time she needed him. The ordinary man she’d fallen in love with and chosen over her beloved superhero. But right now, he was more hero than man, his jaw set, his eyes fixed, his muscles rigid as he formulated a threat he might actually be able to carry through.

Superman, even while he was Clark.

She still wasn’t used to them being one and the same, but

looking at him now, she thought, suddenly, that it wasn't that hard to get used to, after all.

"Let Lois go," he ordered, "or I'll take Belle somewhere you can't find her. Somewhere you can't reach her."

"Will you?" Mr. Gold hissed, and he let out a laugh without smiling, a laugh caught between scoffing and irony. "What a twist — turns out the evil Queen and the superhero have the same methods."

"Hey!" Lois began to protest, hotly, when their time abruptly ran out.

"I'm done with this," Mr. Gold decided. And he reached out a hand and made a quick, graceful flourish in the air.

Lois let out a garbled, frantic exclamation, trying and failing to leap to her feet.

There was a surge of violet and crimson, dancing outward from long fingers. Clark tensed — Lois thought he was caught between standing as he was, or moving to protect Belle with his own body — and then Lois blinked and Clark was standing behind her, near the rear of the shop, shimmering magic binding him still, and Belle was staggering forward and Gold was gathering her into his shaking arms.

It was scary and unexpected and disorienting, but Lois had followed and reported on Superman for two years, written more articles on him than even Clark had — and fast as that magical smoke had been, Superman was faster. Lois had no doubt that he could have avoided it, could have gotten out of the way — whether he could have done so safely with *Belle* was another question — but for whatever reason, Clark was letting Mr. Gold think he had the upper hand.

Maybe he thought he could lure the sorcerer into a false sense of complacency, or maybe he'd wanted to try to get closer to Lois. But Lois had a bad feeling about this. Superman was invulnerable, yes, but he was susceptible at least to hypnosis, and obviously — judging from the fact that Mr. Gold had been able to move and capture him — he was also vulnerable to some forms of magic. So maybe it'd been a bad idea to give up their bargaining chip.

But then Lois looked back to Belle, clinging to Mr. Gold, and Mr. Gold's eyes falling shut as he dropped a kiss into the girl's hair, and she remembered Belle's kindness, her admission that she loved Mr. Gold, the way she'd tensed as if expecting to be criticized for that love, and Lois realized that Clark had made the right choice. He'd made the only choice that Superman could without becoming someone as bad as whoever the evil Queen was.

More than that, he'd made the only choice that Clark Kent — farmboy from Smallville, naïve world traveler, devoted son, steadfast friend, and good man — could ever make. He wasn't a killer and even trying to use Belle as a bargaining chip had probably made him uncomfortable.

So they would confront this problem as they always did — together, side by side, and improvising every step of the way.

"Let me up," Lois demanded. As much as she wanted to rant and rave, to threaten and pace, she spoke quietly, calmly; she thought that Mr. Gold didn't react well except to an argument given rationally and clearly. Or maybe he just liked toying with his prey. Either way, she wanted to face it on her feet.

"It's all right," Belle murmured as Mr. Gold studied Lois, making her feel like a subject under a microscope.

"Very well." The slight man gave a negligible wave and Lois was suddenly standing on her feet. Her arms were still trapped at her sides, her legs still bound together, but at least she wasn't helpless on the floor.

"You make deals," Clark said, drawing the attention his way. Lois wondered if he'd been able to test the strength of their magical bonds while she'd been distracting the other two. "I think we can make a deal here."

"Oh, do you?" Mr. Gold sneered. He was fierce and derisive, but Lois could see the way he kept his shoulder between them and Belle, noticed him give a slight reassuring squeeze to Belle's hand, clinging to his elbow. There was more here than there appeared to be. Clark was looking at this Mr. Gold, this Rumpelstiltskin, as if he were another Lex, but Lois wasn't sure the comparison was a good one. Lex had been deceptive, but once you got past the lies, he was fairly straightforward — greed, lust for power, arrogance, envy. Whatever good had once been in him had been scoured away, seared to ash by blinding ambition and overriding obsession.

But Mr. Gold had layers. It was apparent in the wordplays, in the woman at his side, in the open tenderness he'd shown when Belle hugged him after admitting she'd been locked up. There was more than ambition in dark eyes, more than arrogance in the way he stood to protect Belle and his tiny, hidden shop. Lex thought he loved Lois, but he would never have shown such blatant fear for her safety, never listened if she asked him to stop what he wanted to do, what his ambition demanded of him.

"Not Lex," she murmured at a volume only Clark would be able to hear.

He flicked his eyes to her, then looked back to Mr. Gold.

"A deal can only be made between two interested parties," Mr. Gold said evenly, his accented voice cadenced to a rhythm that would have rung odd in the normal world but that fit their surroundings perfectly. "What could *you* have that I'd want?"

"Our silence," Lois asserted. "You don't want your town overrun by the outside world. We want to leave town intact."

"As well as your own silence," Clark added, "about Superman."

"Sounds like two deals to me," Gold commented with an affected shrug. "Our silence in exchange for yours, and your lives in exchange for... what, exactly? If I have no reason to spare you, then I don't have to worry about making any deal about silence. You'd be silenced either way."

"There is something we can give you in exchange for our lives," Clark said, and Lois was glad to hear it, because she was coming up with a blank herself — well, aside from a lecture on the sanctity of life and the evilness involved in casually discussing murder and the biting remark that perhaps he wasn't so far removed from Lex after all. But Clark was calm, in control, every bit Superman no matter that he looked exactly like Clark. She tried to edge over to him, just a bit, but her magical bindings didn't give at all and she stopped trying before she overbalanced and fell.

Gold cocked his head, Belle peering over his shoulder. "And what's that?" Strangely, he sounded intrigued, as if the prospect of an interesting deal were more fascinating than anything else currently happening.

"Your lives in return," Clark replied, and his eyes glowed with red heat, twin beams of scarlet fire that reaped a trail of destruction down the center of the pawnshop floor. Glass shattered and flew outward, but a gust of Clark's breath kept it all safely away from Lois, and when she managed a look up through squinted eyes and windblown hair, she saw a blue shimmer standing like a sphere around Gold and Belle, protecting them from the sparkling shards of glass scattering through the room, the sparks flying upward from gouges in the wooden floors, the old junk — busted up lanterns and beer steins with dwarf illustrations and a glass mobile of unicorns and a hundred other objects Lois couldn't make out — swirling about in a miniature hurricane caused by the man standing in its center.

Superman.

His arms were still bound at his sides, muscles clenched tight, hands balled into fists, and his glasses had disappeared somewhere, but he stood there, straight and tall and so powerful that Lois gaped for a moment before she reminded herself that

she had seen this same man being chastised by his diminutive mother.

Clark was bound, but nothing had bound him to the ground, and as easily as he ever did, he defied gravity, rose to hover in the air. His eyes still glowed with inhuman heat and only the fact that he kept up a semi-steady gust of air between Lois and the flying wreckage ensured that the tiny, close shop didn't shoot up to uncomfortable temperatures. Lois wanted to shrink in on herself, but that would mean she'd have to tear her eyes away from the sight of Gold standing upright, hands loosely placed on his cane, his eyes tight, Belle staring about with an expression similar to Lois's own, and all that separated them from Superman was a transparent blue wall.

It was a stand-off that well could have lasted far too long — Clark couldn't grab hold of Lois and fly them both to safety, not with his arms still trapped at his sides — but one tiny thing broke it almost before it could begin.

Amidst the hundreds of items that had graced the counters and shelves, among the hundreds of thousands of shards of glass flying in all directions and leaving furrows in the walls and threatening to shatter the windows in the doors, one object caught Gold's attention. He was cold and implacable and untouchable, impervious to the damage being done to his shop, but then his eyes latched onto something flying toward a wall — something small. Something white. Something fragile.

Abruptly, the wall flickered, shimmered with silver light, and Gold reached out a hand toward whatever the small, curved object was.

Clark was there first. He darted forward, hovering a scant few inches above the cluttered floor, and lifted high enough to grab the object out of the air, pluck it from Gold's reach before the older man — or whatever he was — could touch a finger to it.

Belle let out a tiny sound, or Lois assumed she did from the way she started forward, stopped only by Gold's quick, restraining hand. The rush of wind, the hum in Lois's ears from fire burning through the air, the clatter of junk and debris and glass pelting against various surfaces — it all went silent immediately as everything still in the air dropped to the floor, as the sparks went out and Clark's eyes returned to their silvery brown and he closed his lips over whatever super-breath remained to him.

"New deal," he proposed, his voice cutting through the quiet like diamonds through steel. His long fingers completely encapsulated the small white...teacup? Lois frowned, but sure enough, it was a teacup in his hands, white with a few gold and blue accents along the edging. "You agree to two deals with us, and I *don't* break this cup."

Gold's — Rumpelstiltskin's, really, however that worked, but it was easier to think of him as Mr. Gold, an ordinary human that was dangerous but still defeatable — eyes narrowed, his mouth pursed. "What makes you think I care about the cup?" he asked, and gave no sign to acknowledge Belle's worried look up at him.

Clark pointedly looked about at their demolished surroundings. "Because the rest of the shop's in shambles, and yet the cup's the only thing you tried to save."

There was a long moment during which Gold said nothing, and Lois found breathing difficult. Finally, though, he gave a twitch of his lips that should, by definition, have been a smile but very obviously wasn't. "Fine. You give me the cup, and I agree to negotiate two deals with you and your partner."

"And make them," Lois interjected quickly. "Not just negotiate them — you have to make them."

"And make them," he parroted back, maybe a bit too easily. Someone was confident in their deal-making abilities, Lois thought wryly, and yet the Rumpelstiltskin from the fairytale hadn't exactly come out on top for all the deals he made. Of course, she realized with a darted glance to Belle, watching the

proceedings with bright, interested eyes, the Rumpelstiltskin from the fairytale wasn't the beast who'd won a beauty's heart either.

"Unbind us first," Clark ordered, fingers flexing around the cup.

"Hand over the cup first," Gold countered. Lois wanted very badly to know what was so special about the little teacup — particularly when there were about three or four tea sets worth of cups strewn across the floor — but for the moment, she was just glad to have leverage over the powerful...magician? Sorcerer? Well, whatever he was.

"No." Clark's jaw was set, his eyes flinty hard, undimmed by his glasses. "Let us free first." When Gold still hesitated, Clark added in a steely voice, "You were right when you said I don't like risking people getting hurt — but I think it fair to warn you that I don't have *any* problem with shattering cups. So...let us out of these bindings first."

"How about simultaneously?" Gold said acerbically, and he waved his hand in the way Lois was really beginning to hate.

She stumbled, windmilling her arms to keep her balance as she was abruptly freed, the smoke vanished into thin air. Clark settled to the junk-strewn floor, but his brow was creased as he looked down at his now-empty hand, leaving Lois wondering uneasily if Gold had intentionally let them think he couldn't get the cup himself, if he had only just summoned up the spell necessary to transport the cup away, or if Clark was still playing weaker than he really was.

Regardless, the cup was now cradled safely in Belle's hands, and now Lois could see that the teacup had a tiny chip missing from its rim. Stranger and stranger, she thought, her mind racing with possibilities.

But there was no time to consider it, so she shook aside the oddity and moved quickly to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Clark. She could feel him fractionally relax at the touch.

"Now the deals," Rumpelstiltskin — it was getting harder and harder to think of him as Mr. Gold — said, and in direct contrast to his earlier purring growl, he now sounded brisk and businesslike.

"Yes," Clark said slowly, clearly considering each word before he spoke, something Lois could only deem wise considering the obvious cleverness of who they were up against. She felt a little as she had when up against Arianna Carlin — two steps behind and in the middle of something that could only be considered crazy.

Clark straightened when Lois gave him a short nod, his voice once more firming. "You agree to allow us to go back home, unharmed and unthreatened, *safely*, along with everything we brought with us. In return, we agree —"

"The town line," Gold interrupted.

"What?" Lois scowled at him, sure he was already trying to wriggle in some loophole. That was what he was known for, wasn't it? Or...no, actually, it had been the miller's daughter he made the deal with who'd looked for a loophole — but that was beside the point. The point was she was sure Rumpelstiltskin didn't really want them leaving town so easily, not after having maybe-almost-sort-of bested him.

"I can't guarantee your safety all the way to Metropolis," Gold said fastidiously. "I *personally* can only guarantee it in Storybrooke, so if I were to promise you safety all the way to 'your home,' I'd have no way to hold up my end of the deal. Therefore, the deal can *only* include your safety until you cross the town line — unharmed, unmolested, and with all your belongings, of course."

"Oh." Lois exchanged a surprised, somewhat alarmed look with Clark, because if Gold was this careful about the details, they'd have to be even more alert than they'd thought. But also because, Lois thought, she hadn't really expected Rumpelstiltskin

to be so uptight about what he could or couldn't do for them, or to clarify his position.

"All right," Clark said, clearing his throat. "And in return, we agree to leave town without harming any of its inhabitants — including you or Belle — or damaging your teacup. Agreed?"

"No," Gold said calmly, unequivocally.

"No?" Clark's confidence slipped a bit, revealing his fear. Which meant, Lois thought with a sinking feeling, that he *wasn't* completely sure he could manage to get her and himself safely out of Rumpelstiltskin's clutches.

"You must agree not to harm Belle or me — and all of our belongings — *forever*."

"Forever," Lois repeated dubiously.

"Well, with your speed, Mr. Kent," Gold lifted his left hand to gesture to Clark, "all you'd have to do to fulfill the terms of the bargain would be to zip yourself and Ms. Lane across the town line. You'd then, under the terms of *your* proposed deal, be able to return here, with a clear conscience, and threaten us as much as you like. So, the deal must state that you agree to leave us unharmed *forever*."

"What about you?" Lois challenged, unable to resist taking a confrontational step forward. "You could come after us as soon as we cross the town line — and then, if we agree to your deal, we wouldn't be able to fight back or harm you in any way."

Gold took a deep breath, his eyes somewhere carefully between Lois and Clark, and Belle wordlessly slipped her hand into his, still holding the chipped teacup with her other hand. "We can't cross the town line," the pawnbroker admitted quietly, the sarcasm lading his tone little more than an afterthought.

"Storybrooke is our prison. So, unless you choose to come back into town after leaving, there won't be many opportunities for me to direct any threats your way."

Lois and Clark exchanged another look; she could tell he wanted to agree to the deal.

"You'd better hurry," Rumpelstiltskin advised them, his momentary fragility banished when he shifted his weight. "I don't usually make counter offers. A deal is a deal and I've given you my offer — our earlier agreement said only 'two deals'; what those deals were to be about wasn't clearly specified. My patience is dwindling and your bargaining chips aren't as firmly in your hold as they were moments ago."

Lois knew they had no choice, and it wasn't like she was ever coming anywhere near this strange town again after she managed to get out of it, so she nodded, and Clark said, "Fine. It's a deal."

"Excellent." Gold made that smile that wasn't a smile again.

"Now, the second deal: you never tell another soul about Storybrooke, its inhabitants, or anything connected to it, and I refrain from telling anyone else about the truth behind Superman."

Lois felt Clark shift behind her, looked up to see him nod toward Rumpelstiltskin's companion. "What about Belle?"

Gold paused. Lois was expecting him to sigh and shrug and agree that she was part of their deal, but instead he looked down at Belle, stepped aside to let her move forward, and he softly asked, "Belle?"

The young woman frowned and darted a glance up to Rumpelstiltskin, then shrugged with a small, pretty smile. "I'm afraid I don't know much about Superman, or this world." She looked at Clark, tilted her head as if to see him better from a different angle. "You use these magical abilities of yours to help people?"

"He does," Lois asserted firmly. She could feel Clark's gaze on her, but she focused her attention on Belle, on her blatant curiosity and understanding gaze. "Superman is a symbol, a man who does what others can't, who saves those who would be lost otherwise. He's hope for all of us, showing us what we should be doing, what we *could* be doing. He's more powerful than we

could ever hope to be, but he takes those powers and he uses them to fight for truth and justice. But the thing of it is..." And she had to pause because Clark was still watching her and she knew without even looking what his expression was — that part-proud, part-awed, and part-envious expression — and for once, for all time, she wanted to wipe that expression from his face. She didn't want him to be envious of his alter ego or to feel as if he had to split himself into parts for *her*. She wanted him to know, without a doubt, that she loved him.

So she let out the smile fighting to get free and she said, "The thing is that Superman can't be those things or help anyone or give us hope — not unless he can be Clark, because Clark's the one who gives Superman that hope and he's the one who lives out truth and justice every moment of every day. Without Clark, there can't be a Superman, so he has to keep that part of himself a secret. If he didn't have that protection, he's too much of a target, too vulnerable through the people Clark Kent loves, so he hides behind glasses or a cape — he hides so that he can keep saving people and he doesn't have to leave behind his loved ones."

She'd known all these things — of course she had, she wasn't stupid — but here, in this moment, they were *real*. They were right and important and so very true that she wondered that she hadn't seen and understood before, but she was almost glad she hadn't, because this way...this way she got to say them out loud and see Clark's awed, wonderstruck expression firsthand.

Belle gave her own sidelong look to Rumpelstiltskin — who looked as if he were only just barely refraining from rolling his eyes — and she had her own smile on her lips. "I understand," she said. "And you have my word that I will not betray your secret — a promise that's *not* contingent on this deal," she added.

Lois managed to tear her gaze away from Clark's burgeoning smile; she glanced at Gold and was surprised that instead of irritation at his companion's words, he almost looked...proud. He wasn't smiling, not exactly, but he looked as if he *could* smile now, and that was probably just as good as a real smile from him, Lois figured.

But the instant was gone almost as soon as it began, and he was once more composed and brisk. "So," he said, "I agree not to tell your secret, and you —"

"Rumple," Belle interrupted, a warning tone silvering her voice.

He met her gaze, and then he did roll his eyes and sigh. "Fine. I agree not to tell *or* relay through any other means the secret behind Superman and Clark Kent, as well as Lois Lane. Happy?"

Belle's satisfied smile indicated that she was, and Rumpelstiltskin turned back to Lois and Clark, his eyebrow raised expectantly.

"And we agree the same about Storybrooke," Clark said. Lois purposely kept quiet, hoping to fade into the background. "So it's a deal?"

Rumpelstiltskin narrowed his eyes, then gave a minute nod. "Deal."

"Deal," Clark repeated. Lois was hoping they could leave then, as soon as possible — before anyone realized that *she* hadn't agreed to this second deal — but Gold looked straight at her, his eyes gleaming with mischievous humor, as if he could hear her thoughts.

"Ms. Lane?" he asked politely.

Whatever the explanation behind it, Storybrooke was a *huge* story, a big deal that would be sure to garner tons of attention. She could definitely win the Pulitzer for uncovering something of this magnitude — magic and fairytale characters and regenerating arms and a man who could bind Superman with a wave of his hand — and it was hard to even *consider* giving up this opportunity.

But Clark was staring down at her, and he was a big secret

too, one she'd been keeping in one way or another for over a year. He — Clark Kent, the man from Kansas who still called or flew home to his parents at least once a week and was there for her every time she needed him — was worth protecting, worth the lies and the secrets and the silence in place of prize-winning articles. *He* was worth it — and for whatever reason, he was identifying very strongly with this town.

So she met his gaze, and she smiled at him, and she said, "Deal."

Because he was one secret she didn't regret.

Chapter 5: This World And Another

The door closed behind Lois Lane and Clark Kent with a last tinkle of the overhead bell, and Rumpelstiltskin was left standing amidst the debris of his shop, afraid to look at the woman standing at his side. He'd been careful, ever since the incident with Robin Hood and the hug she'd given him even after he'd tried so hard to convince her — convince them *both* — he was much too evil for her, tried so hard to not show her the darker parts of himself, to reveal only the parts of himself he knew she'd liked. But this confrontation with this world's equivalent of a sorcerer... well, this had certainly revealed his colder deal-maker side, and he didn't want to look over at Belle and see disappointment in her eyes. Seeing that once in his life was more than enough. *I thought you'd changed...* she'd whispered once, and that had almost destroyed him all on its own.

But her hand was slipping from his elbow and she was turning to face him, and as much as his cowardly instincts were urging him to run or to put her off before she could speak, he'd been trying so hard to be brave for her — to be *worthy* of her. Besides, she was holding their chipped cup — the one she'd dropped her first night at his castle when he'd scared her with a calculated quip; the one he'd held onto ever since that night and for which he'd made deals that didn't benefit him — and he couldn't walk away, couldn't hide, without making sure it was safe.

Steeling himself, wrapping himself in numb neutrality, he turned to face Belle, his eyes fixed on the cup in her left hand. Then, slowly, he raised his gaze to meet hers.

She was smiling at him.

"You let them go," she said, and it was Robin Hood all over again, showing her the darkest parts of himself, allowing mercy for his own selfish purposes, expecting condemnation but receiving approval. He understood it this time no better than he had the last.

"Well," he began, though he wasn't quite sure what explanation he could give her. "Superman is fairly powerful in his own right. I'm sure you noticed he was rather quick."

"He is," Belle agreed, her smile undimmed. "But I know you, Rumpel, and fast as he was — powerful as he was — it doesn't take you any longer than the snap of your fingers to turn them into... I don't know, flowers or something."

He gave her a sharp look, then tried to hide that he'd done so. If this was her subtle way of informing him she'd figured out that he'd turned Gaston into a rose for her, he would let it pass him by unremarked; he knew how to pick his battles.

"Maybe," was all he said aloud, every word truth because she deserved that. "Going up against him might have been more trouble than it was worth, though. Some people are better courted as allies than as foes."

Belle stepped closer to him, and even her knowing smirk was the same as she'd worn in Sherwood Forest when calling him out on his half-hearted excuse for letting Robin Hood and his pregnant wife escape with the wand they'd stolen from him. "I think you like Clark," Belle said archly.

Rumpelstiltskin sniffed disdainfully. "Please. I have no doubt he and Prince Charming would get along famously — they're

cast in the same mold."

"Mmm," Belle hummed. She was looking up at him as if she knew a secret he didn't, and it both scared and thrilled him. "Maybe," she said, mimicking him. "Or maybe he reminds you of someone else."

He arched a carefully raised brow at her, his mask intact though he really had no idea what she was talking about — this teasing byplay was much better than the scathing disappointment he'd expected and he didn't want to ruin it.

"Someone else," Belle prompted with a widening smile.

"Someone who's more heroic than he wants people to know. Someone who hides away the best parts of himself but uses those parts to color everything he does. Someone who's more vulnerable than the world would ever believe. Someone who keeps secrets every day."

Belle usually ended up surprising Rumpelstiltskin, one way or another, but he could usually hide it. This time, however, he couldn't help but gape at her incredulously.

Her smile turned into a full-fledged grin. "Exactly," she proclaimed with no little satisfaction.

"Belle," Rumpelstiltskin whispered, but nothing else because she was so very wrong he couldn't narrow down all the arguments enough to simply make *one*. Because she was so very much more than he deserved that he dared not speak or move lest she vanish like a mirage.

She softened at his whisper, her expression thoughtful as she studied him. Then she gave him her quiet smile, the one where she tucked a corner of her lips into her mouth, and she crossed the few inches still separating them and wrapped her arms around him in a loose hug. He really didn't deserve this — deserve *her* — but Rumpelstiltskin didn't let that stop him from holding her close and leaning his brow against hers. Sometimes he thought that, when she one day realized how wicked and flawed he really was and left him, if she would only let him hug her every once in a while, just for a moment, an instant, then maybe he would be able to survive the broken, withered heart she'd leave behind.

"Oh, Belle," he murmured without opening his eyes, simply luxuriating in her closeness. "I so wish I was as good as you think I am."

"You just forget sometimes," she said gently, so full of assurance and faith. "But you're remembering more all the time."

He had shown his wife the best of himself, and Milah had seen only things to scorn. He'd unveiled the worst of his blackened soul to Cora while teaching her the magic to make her a powerful queen, and the miller's daughter had still left him, tearing out her own heart to do so. But he'd tried to show Belle the little bits of good he could still pretend to and only ended up showing her all the worst and darkest parts of himself, and yet she kept seeing in them something better than he'd ever been. He was so afraid that one day that would change, and he was so relieved every day when it didn't.

Belle leaned more fully against him, her eyes fluttering closed, and it didn't escape him when a tiny tremor passed through her slight frame. Carefully, slowly, so as to keep his enraged indignation bottled up, he trailed his left hand up from her waist to lightly encircle her right wrist. She let him, silent as he surveyed the ring of chafed skin braceleting her wrist, but another tiny tremor ghosted through her, the reverberations of it echoing through his soul.

"I'm so sorry," he whispered, his breath dancing along the inside of her wrist.

"It's all right," she said, and she was so much stronger than he was, so much more ready to forgive. And since that was really the only reason she could stay with a beast like him — a beast who would never change into a handsome, good prince, as Ms. Lane had so helpfully reminded them both — he really couldn't begrudge it, so he reluctantly let go of his intentions to punish her

wolf-friend.

“Ruby is safe,” he told Belle, and hoped she understood he meant from *him* as well as from the mob.

“Really?” Belle brightened, the marks on her own wrist forgotten.

“Yes. Just before you arrived with the visitors in tow, our daring prince managed to convince the mob she’d been framed by a jealous rival.”

“Good,” Belle said with clear relief. “I’m glad.”

Rumplestiltskin hesitated, not wanting to ruin this moment — or the ground they’d tentatively regained since she’d moved out of his house. But she was worn and strained from this incident, and he knew her nightmares would haunt her tonight — and he did not want to go back to his lonely, empty house and lie sleepless in a bed he’d magically ensured still smelled of her, did not want to spend another night here in his shop, trying and failing not to think of those few, brief days when she’d been a home worth going back to. So he took a deep breath and said, “Belle, the library is yours, you know, and the apartment, and... and you can say no, of course, but... tonight —”

Belle wrapped her arms more tightly around him and whispered, “Will you stay with me tonight?”

His answering grin was a little bit crooked, a little bit watery, and wholly sincere. “I’d like that.”

“So would I,” she assured him. “But first...” She brought her left hand away from his shoulder to show him the cup she still cradled in her palm.

“Ah, yes, of course.” Rumplestiltskin reluctantly stepped away from her and regarded the mess of magical items from a handful of worlds arrayed all about him in a mess of chaos and ruin. A wave of his hand and a flare of smoke saw the shop and everything in it returned to its rightful, whole state.

Belle shot him a sidelong glance, a crease in her brow and a smile hidden in the corners of her mouth. “If you could just fix everything, why did you agree to Clark’s deal to save my cup?”

Rumplestiltskin let his hand curl around hers, the cup safe and protected between their shared hold. “Because,” he admitted quietly, “this cup was all I had of you after Regina told me you were dead. And, well... I hadn’t been able to keep you safe, but I thought... if I could keep the cup safe...” He trailed off, knowing it was a foolish sentiment, afraid she would laugh.

But she was Belle, and she always took whatever he gave her as if it was precious. Her hand tightened over his and she rested her head against his shoulder for a moment. Eventually, when he could breathe again, she said, “And you did keep it safe.”

At that, he had to let out a tiny laugh — because maybe he had kept a porcelain cup intact, but he hadn’t protected *her* from anyone, not even himself. “Indeed,” was all he said, though, because he was not a man to turn away when someone offered him what he wanted.

When she lifted her head from his shoulder, he tightened his grip on his cane and moved behind the main counter. “Shall we?” he asked, gesturing to the tiny hidden pedestal where he kept the cup. Belle placed it there with all the reverence he himself would have, and the tight band that had constricted around his chest when he’d caught sight of his cup spinning madly in the air eased a bit.

He closed and locked the shop behind them and they walked together to the library, a puddle of illumination spilling out from the cracks in the boarded-up windows. When Belle mentioned the manacles in the trash, Rumplestiltskin took vicious pleasure in melting them down to dust and reshaping the particles into one of her favorite books from the Dark Castle. Her delighted smile was more than reward enough, though he then had to be content with only one of her hands on his elbow as the other clutched the book close to herself.

After locking the library behind them, Belle led him up the

narrow stairs into her small, sparsely furnished apartment. He let her sit him down and fuss over the cool air dancing in through a window she’d left open and serve him some hot tea, because it reassured her. And maybe because it reassured him, too.

Finally, when she was sitting beside him with her own cup of tea, Rumplestiltskin set aside his teacup and tentatively took her chafed wrist, cradled it between gentle fingers. “May I?” he asked her in little more than a whisper, his other hand hovering over the raw marks.

Belle studied him for a long moment during which he couldn’t bring himself to look away from her, to sever this connection between them. He’d sent her away from his castle with the — dishonest, *he hoped* — excuse that his power meant more to him than she did; she’d moved out of his house because he had been practicing magic in secret and hadn’t wanted to tell her the reason for it — so used to keeping the secret of his son tucked very carefully hidden from all — and now he was afraid he might have ruined everything by bringing magic into the room with them after she’d invited him up with her. But he couldn’t bear to keep staring at the mark of her demons rubbed into her flesh, not when he could *fix* it.

Belle let out a shuddering breath, then shakily nodded. “All right.”

He gave her a slight smile — so much more restrained than the overwhelming relief he felt — and skimmed his fingers over her soft flesh, leaving it pure and unmarred.

“Thank you,” she said when he was done, her voice unsteady as he continued to dance his fingertips along the inside of her wrist.

“No matter,” he finally replied, forcibly taking his hands away from hers.

She smiled, and his heart leapt in response, and they sipped their tea and he answered all her curious questions about Superman and the reporting duo he’d just made two deals with. Then he insisted on seeing to clearing away their tea things while she went into the bathroom and readied for bed. He washed the cups and set them to dry, then removed his shoes and socks, his suit jacket, his tie, his belt. It would be easy to summon a pair of pajamas to his side, but this loosened, softened attire was what he’d worn when they’d slept side by side in his house, and he didn’t want to frighten her or make her think he was going to pressure her for anything more than what they’d once shared.

Belle came out of the bathroom with an adorably shy smile — as if this was the first time they’d done this — and when he emerged from the bathroom with the top several buttons of his shirt undone, she was already lying in bed, all lights but a single lamp beside the bed turned off. Rumplestiltskin crossed to the bed and was as surprised and awed and grateful as he had been the first time she’d asked him to stay to calm her nightmares, in a larger room with a softer bed, when she pulled the covers aside for him, welcoming him.

He maneuvered his bad leg onto the mattress and lay back, and Belle was there instantly, curling into him, conforming to his side, the tension escaping her body all at once as he tucked her close, wrapped her in his arms. He felt warm all the way through, comfortable in a way he never was; he felt *loved* and that was such an unfamiliar feeling that he didn’t think he’d ever stop marveling at it.

Belle tangled her fingers in the opening of his shirt, as if seeking to pry away his layers, his armor. As if unaware that she already had and that she had long since found her way to his cowering, brittle heart. He still felt the same breathless awe as he had the first time they did this, when they’d been reunited after three decades apart, when they’d held each other close to chase away mutual nightmares. He had missed this, since she’d left, missed it and *ached* with longing to have it back.

And now here he was. Just for a night — he knew that, knew

she needed time to heal from what had been done to her, to remember what it was to be free — but still here, welcomed, accepted, *wanted*.

“I love you,” Belle murmured sleepily.

Rumplestiltskin blinked away tears. “And I love you, too,” he whispered.

He was a creature of habit, unbalanced when there was a deviation in his normal routines, but despite the strange surroundings, he slept deeply and without nightmares, and he woke to sunlight and Belle smiling at him, her cheek cradled on her hands.

“Good morning,” she said, and kissed him on the cheek. “Thank you for staying.”

And even if he hadn’t slept a wink all night, that would have been enough to wake him up and put a smile on his face. Enough and more than to see him dressed — in a suit he did conjure because appearances were important and perception was everything — and outside of Granny’s, Belle at his side, as he waited for Lois and Clark to emerge from the diner.

They regarded him warily, almost suspiciously, when they did finally exit the diner and saw him waiting, but then, he would have been severely disappointed in them if they *hadn’t* been wary of him. They had been careful with the wording of their offers, their negotiation, and that was something that always served to win quite a bit of his approval; so few thought to calm themselves and listen to the words of the deals they accepted so easily. They were also fairly good at concealing their secret — if Rumplestiltskin wasn’t so good at spotting secrets, seeing straight to what mattered most to a person, he might have missed it when he decided to investigate the strangers to town.

“We get an escort to the exit, huh?” Lois remarked with a sarcastic twist of her mouth.

“Just to make sure the deal is fulfilled in all aspects,” Rumplestiltskin said with a dry smile of his own.

“And what about your side of the deal?” Clark asked. “We can’t harm you at all, but as soon as we’re over the line, you can do whatever you like to us.”

Rumplestiltskin’s smile grew just a bit. They’d obviously pondered their deals quite a bit after leaving him; most people did, usually too late. “I told you,” he repeated, “we can’t cross the line and magic is only within the boundaries of Storybrooke.”

A bit of the tension in the superhero’s shoulders eased.

“*Why* can’t you leave the town?” Lois asked, a puzzled crease in her brow. Curiosity was her prevailing flaw, Rumplestiltskin thought, as well as perhaps one of her greatest strengths.

“If I recall our deal correctly,” he said in a cold tone, “you are prohibited from writing an article about us, so why do you need to know?”

“If we can’t tell anyone, then what’s the point of not telling us?” she retorted.

Rumplestiltskin smirked. “If you can’t tell anyone, what’s the point of knowing at all?”

“Please,” Clark interjected as Lois drew in a deep, angry breath. He stepped forward, one hand held out beseechingly. “We just... we just want to know where you’re from.”

Belle’s hand tightened over Rumplestiltskin’s arm, and he narrowed his eyes, studying the taller man before him.

“Look,” Clark said, his voice dropping to just above a whisper, “you know I’m Superman. I’m from another world, a planet called Krypton. I only found out a couple years back from a message my father left me, but I...” He paused, searched for words, then blurted, “I just wanted to know if maybe there were others. Others like me. If you’re from another world — “

“Another world,” Rumplestiltskin interrupted — and maybe he spoke quickly, and maybe he gave the truth for free, and maybe it wasn’t wise, but he couldn’t keep looking into earnest brown eyes and seeing an abandoned son searching for answers.

It hurt too much and pulled too deeply and cost far too high a price to the walls he’d erected around his heart. “Not another planet. You’re from *this* dimension — this time and space is your own. We, on the other hand, come from a world very different from this one, a world of magic and magical creatures. A world that exists on a different plane. We’re different, you and I, and so there’s no way I can help you find what you’re looking for.”

The disappointment on Clark’s face, the smile he used to try to cover it, hurt even more than his desperate plea for answers, because Rumplestiltskin dreamed nearly every night of looking into a different man’s face — a different lonely, searching son abandoned to this world — and seeing disappointment less politely concealed.

“Right,” Clark said. “A different dimension, huh?”

“Of a sort,” Rumplestiltskin said with a shrug. He’d gotten so good at hiding this type of pain that Belle didn’t even notice the sharp piercing pain to his heart, didn’t press closer to him, though there was a puzzled slant to her eyes.

Lois stepped forward, one hand patting a soothing rhythm on Clark’s back. “So what brought you here?”

“A curse,” Belle answered when Rumplestiltskin canted his chin back, irritated by the continuing questions. He was letting them go — what more could they expect from him? “The Evil Queen cast a curse that banished us all to this world without our memories.”

Clark’s brow creased. “So what changed?”

“All magic comes with a price,” Rumplestiltskin snapped, “and all curses can be broken. Now, if our round of Twenty Questions is over, shall we be on our way?”

“Sure.” Lois gave him a sour smile. “The sooner the better.”

“My thoughts precisely,” Rumplestiltskin returned, and his smile had centuries more of bitterness behind it.

Belle watched him closely while they dropped Lois and Clark off at Tillman’s Garage and waited for them to emerge with their repaired vehicle. She didn’t speak until they’d disappeared inside, presumably to pay the bill.

“Rumple,” she began softly — which meant, he knew from experience, that he wasn’t going to like what she wanted to talk about. But he owed her far more than just a listening ear, so he turned his head to look at her. “Maybe... maybe they could help. You know, with the search...?”

“It’s all right,” Rumplestiltskin told her with the flick of a single finger. “They can’t hear us; a simple spell even Superman would have a hard time penetrating.”

She nodded and waited, as if she knew that he needed to swallow back the lump in his throat at her care of his secrets. “They could help, Rumple, with your search for your son. I know you’ll find a way to cross the town line eventually, but they could start looking for Baelfire now.”

“No.” Rumplestiltskin looked back to the dark interior of the garage, noticed Hansel and Gretel working in the back — well, Gretel was working while Hansel played with something on the ground.

“They’re good people,” Belle pressed. “You know they are — you said he’d get along with David, and I know you like the Prince no matter how much you deny it.”

Rumplestiltskin contented himself with a roll of his eyes to answer her last accusation, but he shook his head to the first. “Of course they’re good people. Clark Kent couldn’t hurt a fly even if it was enchanted to destroy everyone he loved, and Lois Lane would hurt it only under duress. But they’re from *this* world, Belle, and that means that what *they* think is the right decision will be different from what *we* think is right. Clark exists in this world with his powers on display only because he hides in plain sight, exposing himself as a disguise. But if we were to tell them that Bae was here, somewhere among them, a stranger from another world — a world that possesses magic they can’t even

begin to comprehend outside the realm of fiction...what would they do to him? What would happen to him?"

Belle sighed and looked away, her eyes tight. "I just...I just wish..."

"I know." Rumpelstiltskin gathered his bravery and reached out to take her hand, offered her a smile. "I will find him, though. It's my quest, my journey — I wrote the curse that brought us here, I gave it to Regina, and I arranged for Emma to be our savior, all for Bae's sake. A town line isn't going to stop me for long."

He knew she didn't like being reminded of the fact that he'd been the one to manipulate their coming to Storybrooke, but she offered him a smile anyway, and squeezed his hand tighter. "Right. We'll find another way."

"Yes." Rumpelstiltskin found that he could smile. Odd, considering the memories and nightmares of the son whose hand he'd let go of while he'd hung over a portal to a world without magic, but then, she was Belle and she was good at performing miracles like conjuring up smiles from darkness. "We will."

Her smile grew wider at his use of the word 'we,' and he basked in her light. With her at his side and magic at his fingertips, it was only a matter of time until he finally found his son and righted all of his wrongs.

Soon, very soon, they would be reunited. And then it didn't matter what happened.

Clark kept his eyes on the Cadillac leading them to the town line. Lois kept up a steady stream of chatter — one of her most employed gifts — as she drove with all her customary flair for carelessness, purposefulness, and ruthlessness, but Clark listened with only half an ear. The words spilling from his partner were nervous habit, more to fill the silence than to actually say anything, and she would be much happier if he were able to pull something useful from their dubious allies.

Not that he was getting much from them. A curious sort of barrier had surrounded Rumpelstiltskin and Belle shortly after Clark followed Lois into the garage to retrieve their car — from Hansel and Gretel's father, if the comments Clark had overheard had been accurate — and it hadn't dropped yet. A spell, he imagined, some form of magic that kept him from eavesdropping on the legendary imp and the storied beauty.

But the barrier hadn't been formed until after Belle had started talking about a search, and Clark was having a hard time concentrating on anything but the fact that Rumpelstiltskin wasn't quite as content within Storybrooke's borders as he'd wanted them to think he was. Something was out there, in the real world — maybe even in Metropolis — and if there was something Rumpelstiltskin wanted, Clark was pretty sure that he'd be trying to find a way past the town line. In which case, that 'forever' they'd promised him would certainly end up in *his* favor.

The really irritating part of the whole thing, Clark thought, was that he wasn't even surprised. Even with Belle as their advocate, he'd had the sinking feeling that Rumpelstiltskin had let them off too easily. The murmured babble of the townsfolk that Clark had been listening to almost non-stop for the past several days touched on the deal-maker only rarely, as if to avoid attracting his attention, but from what little *was* said, Clark got the impression that Rumpelstiltskin always got what he wanted even when it appeared he didn't.

And his magic was terrifying, even to Superman.

Clark darted a quick sidelong glance at Lois, a habitual smile curving his lips in acknowledgement to whatever she was currently talking about. There for a few minutes, he hadn't been sure that he'd be able to get her out of that pawnshop alive and well. He'd been so afraid that Storybrooke's magic would be stronger, faster, more powerful than he was, and it had made him

breathless and shaky with terror.

Lois was his life. She was everything to him, the reason he could smile after rescues that went bad or saves that came too late, the anchor that grounded him to Earth even though it wasn't his native planet. If she died — worse, if she died when he was right there, with her, unable to get to her in time...what would be left of him?

His parents would try, he knew, and he would probably try for their sakes, but there wouldn't be anything super about him if Lois were gone. There'd just be Clark Kent, outcast, loner, drifter, wandering from one place to the next without any spark inside to give him the strength to be Superman for an entire world.

No, whether Rumpelstiltskin had ulterior motives for those deals they'd made or not, Clark was beyond grateful that he'd made them. It had ensured Lois's escape from Storybrooke, this world within a world, and her safety, and nothing was too high a price for that. Besides, if Rumpelstiltskin *did* eventually find a way beyond Storybrooke's strange borders, well, Superman was more blatantly powerful than Clark Kent, and perhaps Mr. Gold would be just as blatantly weaker outside the magical protections that made him Rumpelstiltskin.

"Huh," Lois said, the word catching Clark's attention because she fell silent after voicing it. She slowed their car down and crept toward the town line, now visible just before them, her eyes locked on the Cadillac that had pulled over to the edge of the road and come to a complete stop.

Clark tilted his head and stripped away the outside of the car with his x-ray vision — glad that Rumpelstiltskin's spell hadn't taken this power from him — to see Mr. Gold and Belle sitting there side by side, watching the car behind them.

"Should we pull over too?" Lois asked, glancing to Clark.

"I don't think so," Clark said. "In fact, I'd say he's eager to see the backs of us."

Lois's lips twisted into a grimace. "Yeah, sure. The minute we cross that line, we can't touch him."

"So it would seem," Clark murmured, though he'd spent all night using his perfect memory to go back through the precise wording of their deals and realized that just because he couldn't *harm* Rumpelstiltskin or Belle didn't mean he couldn't *immobilize* them.

"Well, who cares?" Lois decided with a shrug. "The sooner we get out of here the better, if you ask me. If we could write the story — assuming we could even get anyone to believe us — then I'd be all for staying and figuring out how a world 'from another plane' can involve so many of *our* fairytales. But since we *can't* write about it...well, what's the point?"

Clark had no answer to that. He knew, of course, that Lois loved him and that she didn't view him as a story at all, but all the same, he couldn't deny the now-habitual fear that she *would* think him not worth the effort of getting to know since she'd promised him her secrecy. He should be past that by now, he thought, but it was engrained within him, and so all he could do was recognize it and then move past it, hopefully without letting Lois know just how truly afraid he was that he'd eventually prove to be too much work and effort and secrecy for her to want to deal with.

When they drove past the line, Clark was almost sure he could feel it, an invisible haze that clawed and pulled at him, straining to keep him from leaving. Lois didn't betray a reaction, not even the most miniscule of shivers or a jump in her heart rate, but Clark couldn't shake the conviction that whatever kept Storybrooke separate from the world had recognized him as different, too, and tried to hold onto him.

"*We're different, you and I...*" Rumpelstiltskin's words repeated over and over in his head.

Different but not quite different enough, Clark thought. Still

stuck on the outside, and even though he'd known there was very little chance that a town full of storybook characters could have any connection to Krypton, he was still overwhelmed with disappointment. His mom told him often that he had a tendency to brood, and this, Clark knew, would certainly prove her right — he could all but hear her telling him the way to a simple solution to setting aside this regret and loss — but he couldn't bring himself to speak, to say anything to make this situation seem right. There didn't seem to be anything to say at all. Krypton was gone, his parents had been dead for decades, and the only way he could fit in on Earth was by splitting himself in two; an encounter with outsiders brought here by magic didn't change any of that. And if even Rumpelstiltskin, with all his daunting powers and frightening ruthlessness, couldn't find what he was looking for here, then what made Clark think he could possibly succeed where magic failed?

The black Cadillac with Mr. Gold and Belle fell away behind them — Rumpelstiltskin's dark eyes glittering with something very near bitterness in Clark's rear view mirror — the clawing haze disappeared, they reached the rental car agency in Boston, and still Clark couldn't stop replaying Rumpelstiltskin's words over and over again.

He was so out of it that he didn't even realize Lois had fallen silent, too, until she turned away from the valet taking their rented car away and tapped Clark's chest decisively. "Come on," she said, and she led him out of sight of anyone, a dark alleyway, empty but for a stray cat Clark could hear breathing behind the dumpster.

"What are we doing?" he asked when Lois turned to stare up at him expectantly.

She smiled almost mischievously. "You know...flying?"

"Flying?" Clark repeated. He narrowed his eyes. "To where?"

"Wherever you want," Lois replied. And she stepped up close and wrapped her arms around his neck.

Something inside of him loosened, just the slightest bit. "Okay," he said, curving his arms around her waist and floating upward into the daylight sky, careful to go quickly enough that the normal human eye wouldn't spot them unless specifically looking.

He probably should have gone straight to Metropolis. Perry would be waiting, wondering why he hadn't heard from them, anxious to get some big story for the next front page. But as much as he loved his life in the city and Perry and Jimmy in the newsroom, Clark wasn't ready just yet to return to the craziness of Metropolis. Strangely, though, he didn't want to go to the quiet farmhouse in Smallville, Kansas that he called home either. He just wanted the same thing he'd wanted for several weeks now, what he'd wanted when he'd forced Lois to come investigate colored smoke in coastal Maine — a few quiet, still moments to figure out if he still had a chance of a future with Lois Lane.

So he took her to a mountaintop, the slopes green and covered with foliage that swayed in a light breeze, the sunlight warming it, though he kept her close and gave her his jacket anyway. A quiet moment, with only the sway of trees and the movement of wildlife and the stir in the air created by ripples moving outward from every movement. A still moment, where he could sit beside her and look out over a thousand miles of forest and river, no cries for help, no stories needing to be investigated. A moment with just him — this strange man caught between her friend and her hero — and her. The woman he loved and wanted to spend the rest of his life with.

"It's beautiful," Lois whispered, nudging her shoulder closer to his until he put an arm around her. "Special occasion?"

"No." He shook his head, let out a smile, then reached up and pulled off his glasses, letting her see the hybrid he was. "I just wanted a moment before we headed back to Metropolis."

"This is nice. I could get used to this." Lois gave him a

sidelong grin. "I can tell lunches are already going to be more adventurous by far."

He chuckled for her, but it was weak. "Right," he said. "I mean, we have to be careful. It used to be if anyone found anything odd about me, I could just move on. But now...if they found out...I couldn't leave, Lois. I hope you know that. I have too much to lose to think about risking any of it. Risking *you*."

She nodded slowly, leaned her head down on his shoulder, and then said, "I wasn't mad at you, you know."

Scoffing, Clark pulled back enough to raise an eyebrow at her. "It sure looked like mad."

"All right." She rolled her eyes. "Fine, so I *was* mad at you. But the truth is...I've been more mad at *myself*. I couldn't believe that you were staring at me the whole time — the *truth* was staring at me with the same pair of eyes in two different men's faces — and I didn't see it. I was so angry at myself for missing what was obvious."

"Lois," Clark began, because he'd wanted to talk about this, to face it and, hopefully, move on, but he didn't know what he could say that he hadn't already said — didn't know how to make right what had already been done. But Lois didn't give him a chance to even search for the magic words.

"No, Clark, I'm not mad anymore. You know why?" Letting out a breath, she angled to face him, his arm falling away from around her shoulders. She looked straight at him, locking their gazes, and even with Superman's strength, Clark couldn't look away. "I'm not mad because it *wasn't* obvious. That town, those people — they're strangers, Clark, outsiders that don't belong here. I wasn't in Storybrooke for two hours before I knew just how messed up they were — I wasn't in that town two *minutes* before I knew they were hiding something — but that's because the *truth* is that they're not from here and this world isn't theirs. But you're not like them, Clark."

And now Clark could look away, could avert his gaze and try to hide from the truth she spoke — she was Lois Lane and whatever truth she uncovered was twice as hard-hitting as anyone else could manage. But her palm on his cheek, tugging him back toward her, made his heart skip a beat with hope.

"You're not an outsider, Clark. I never noticed you were different because that's not what defines you. And I *did* notice the important things — I noticed that you smile more than anyone else I know, and that you actually *mean* your smiles. I noticed that I could count on you and that you always put me before yourself. I noticed that you are a good person, and that it wasn't an act or a mask. It's who you are. It's Clark Kent, and maybe it did take me a while...but I noticed him. And I fell in love with him, and even if he does have a side job — I still love him. I still love *you*. And you're not an outsider, because you belong with me, and when I'm with you, I don't feel like so much of an outsider."

Just like moments earlier, he didn't know what to say, but this time it was because he had a lump in his throat and his heart had swelled to a size that surely even Superman couldn't handle, and he was on fire, his every nerve ending alight with the awareness of Lois's hand on his cheek, her breath minutely stirring the air before him, the body heat emanating from her skin, the rush of blood in her veins and the rapid beat of her own heart.

"I love you, too," he finally managed to get out, a mere expulsion of breath shaped into words every bit as necessary as the oxygen used to make the declaration. He couldn't tell if he leaned forward or if she moved forward first, but it didn't matter. They met in the middle, and her lips were as soft as they'd been when Clark kissed her, as warm as they'd been when she'd kissed Superman, as welcoming as they'd been the day after she'd realized he was both Clark Kent and Superman. She was his one constant, the one thing he could depend on, to make him whole, to keep him sane and safe and *here*.

She was Lois Lane, and he didn't care who he was so long as she let him be in her life.

"So we're good?" he asked, breathlessly, his brow resting against hers.

Her laugh made the rest of the world disappear. "We're Lane and Kent — we're the best."

He laughed, too, and kissed her again because he *could*, because she *wanted* him to, because he didn't want to ever stop.

"Don't leave," she murmured against his lips.

"Never," he promised, and he covered her mouth with his and held his world — the only world that mattered — safe in the circle of his arms.

THE END