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**Rating:** PG-13

**Summary:** *Chloe ran away from Metropolis three years ago with some very special memories but the past comes back to haunt her. Lex finds himself in a quandary. Is he willing to sacrifice everything, including happiness, to close a deal ?*

## HOPE AND HAPPINESS

### CHAPTER I: Choices

The sun was setting in Metropolis and Lex Luthor was standing by the panoramic window of his office, his hands in the pockets of his expensive black trousers, surveying the city landscape with a pensive air.

His private meeting with seventy-five-year-old Rocco Ferrucci to negotiate the acquisition of the exclusive ' Speranza ' department stores had produced an unexpected result and put Lex in a quandary. In fact, the old man's condition for the sale had taken the young billionaire by surprise, and he wasn't a man easily stunned. However, Lex wasn't going to allow a ' small ' detail to stop him from purchasing one of the leading companies in its field. Lexcorp needed to enter a business such as this in order to acquire respectability in the eyes of the consumers. God knew the world tended to identify his young corporation with his father's and the fishy business Lionel had always seemed to be involved in.

Lex made use of all the acting tools he had learnt to master as a Luthor and, with his habitual poker face, lied through his teeth. He had to plan his strategy and his response had helped him buy the time he needed. Lex's mind was working at full speed because he knew the Italian-American couldn't be fooled for long. The blatant lie he had told the old man about the press vultures wasn't far-fetched, but if Ferrucci hired a PI to do some digging, the truth would come to the surface and Lex couldn't afford that.

Several courses of action took shape in his mind, but most of them entailed jeopardising Lexcorp and his own personal fortune. Lex weighed the economic variable and thought it could be solved by his team of lawyers and someone willing to sign the papers. However, there was one aspect which he found difficult to come to terms with- was he willing to sacrifice himself and any possibility of ever being happy to close this deal?

### GOTHAM CITY-CHLOE'S FLAT

Gotham's skyline was dark and oppressive even in daylight and now that it was almost nightfall, it seemed more so. Chloe had always been a cosmopolitan girl who enjoyed the

beat of the city, its rhythm and even its smog. However, she missed the clean and indescribably blue skies of Kansas. Gotham wasn't Smallville, and it was a far cry from Metropolis- the city she loved for what it had given her and from which she had run away a little over three years before.

Funny how things can change overnight, how a seemingly simple undercover assignment for The Daily Planet could put a life upside down. It had taken one night- or, rather, a few hours- to truly know herself. Although it had been a glimpse, she couldn't or wouldn't forget it; it had meant too much and it had made her the woman she was now. She wouldn't have changed a thing about that night. True, she had run away, afraid of the consequences, but she had no regrets. All of her had been there, still he didn't know. He shouldn't know.

Chloe looked out of the window once again, trying to make out the stars and constellations she knew were there, but saw only the light that appeared to illuminate the cloudy skies of Gotham almost every night- the bat signal. She wondered what kind of man would patrol the streets and skies of that city dressed like a flying rat. Somehow, she couldn't picture him as someone like Clark- he had to be a darker character, a hero more appropriate for a gloomy city such as Gotham.

She closed the curtains and walked towards the fireplace on whose mantelpiece lay an invitation with embossed gilded letters. She had got it a month before and had had internal arguments over the wisdom of attending the soirée. She had even drawn up a list of pros and cons which had decided her not to come until she walked by a shop window and saw the perfect dress to wear to the do. After a week of debating with herself, she had caved in and entered the exclusive shop to buy the garment, as well as an expensive pair of shoes and a matching bag.

She had stopped thinking about herself just when she had discovered what it meant to be truly alive. It had been a conscious choice which had brought about a different kind of happiness. But now, it was time to start being a little selfish again.

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## **CHAPTER 2: Surrender**

Lex Luthor's private helicopter landed on Wayne Enterprises' helipad early in the afternoon, and the young billionaire was welcomed by his friend and former boarding-school classmate Bruce Wayne.

Flying to Gotham had been a spur-of-the-moment decision; Lex was in a tight spot and thought he had nothing to lose. Attending a boring soirée in a city that wasn't Metropolis could present him with a viable alternative to the unsavoury ones he had considered thus far, and he was so strung-up he wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth.

As it was customary when visiting Gotham, Lex was staying over at Bruce's and ended up entertaining the guests when the lord of the house disappeared into thin air to respond to

one of his usual mysterious emergencies. Lex could play the role of host on auto-pilot but would have rather stayed in the background to do what he liked best, observing people from a safe distance and, taking into account the predicament he was in, it was exactly what he had been looking forward to.

“Master Bruce said he'd be back before nine, Mr Luthor,” murmured Alfred Pennyworth when Lex helped himself to another glass of champagne.

“I'd like to know how he does it, Alfred. I've always pictured in my mind ways to extricate myself from these tedious do's without actually carrying out any of the exits I've envisioned,” he answered with a smirk.

“Oh, here he is, sir,” responded Alfred on spotting the tuxedo-clad Bruce entering the room.

“It was high time you turned up at your own party, Wayne,” voiced Lex when Bruce joined him.

“I can tell you've been doing a great job, Lex. At least, no one has deserted the soirée so far. My, my ... I think I've arrived just in time to witness the entrance of the Belle of the Ball,” answered Wayne looking towards the blonde young woman wearing a tight-fitting sequined blue dress that attracted the attention of the male guests.

“Chloe Sullivan in Gotham City,” murmured Lex, letting his eyes run over her figure before focusing them on her face.

“Do you know her, Lex? “

“I met her in Smallville. She's the daughter of my former Fertilizer Plant's manager, Gabe Sullivan. She was barely out of high school the last time I saw her but had a great future ahead. The question's where you know her from. “

“She's a friend of Vicki's and a terrific reporter. “

“Are you sure you want her snooping around, Bruce? “ asked Lex, raising an eyebrow while following Chloe with his gaze. “ There's nothing like a big dark secret to attract Miss Sullivan's attention. You won't be safe if you have anything to hide. “

“And what makes you think I'd be in danger around her? “

“You should know better than to underestimate me, Wayne. I don't appreciate being taken for a fool. Your magical acts of appearance and disappearance may go unnoticed to the common folk, but we both know I'm not a regular guy. “

“I'd never presume that, my friend. She's stunning, isn't she? “ added Bruce with a glint, watching Lex's interest in the reporter.

“She's grown into a beautiful woman. But most importantly, she's got brains and, if she hasn't changed since her days as the editor of The Torch, a great sense of humour. A hard combination to find in our circle, Wayne, “ responded Lex, leaving his empty glass on a tray. “ Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll greet an old acquaintance while you mingle with your guests. I believe I've done enough for one night, my friend. “

“Good luck with Miss Sullivan, Lex. She's a hard nut to crack. “

“Do you know from personal experience, Wayne? Don't let Vicki hear you or she'll poke your eyes out, “ Lex answered with a lop-sided grin before crossing the room to seek Chloe out.

The minute Chloe made her entrance she scanned the room in search of her friend Vicki Vale, but her eyes got distracted by the presence of America's two most eligible bachelors. She tried to cover up her shock by sweeping her gaze past them and controlling the hammering inside her chest. When she saw the crowd part like the Red Sea to let Smallville's billionaire cross the room to where she was rooted, Chloe realised it was too late to slip away unnoticed.

*'Sullivan, you can do this. Pull yourself together. Paste on your best smile and look at him straight in the eye. Don't let his all-seeing eyes deter you. Look him square in the eye and you'll be safe. Safe? Who are you kidding? '*

“Miss Sullivan, I never thought I'd ever find you in an event such as this; least of all in Gotham, when our paths haven't ever crossed in Metropolis. It's been a long time. “

“It certainly has, Mr Luthor. What brings you to the city? “

“Call me Lex, Chloe. I'd like to say pleasure but it's business. However my trip's turned out better than I expected. How did you end up in Gotham, Chloe? I was surprised to stop reading your name in The Planet when you were unquestionably the best reporter of the two cousins. “

“I'm flattered, Lex. I left Metropolis because I felt it was time to move on. Sometimes I feel nostalgia but I'm happy here... I've got a great job. “

“I'm glad to see you've done so well. How's Gabe? “

“He's great. It took him some time to get used to an early retirement, but he's doing fine now. “

“Is he living in Gotham, too? “

“Yes. We're living together as a matter of fact. “

“I've always envied you, you know. The relationship you have with him is so close and loving. I remember how he hated leaving you alone in Smallville when I sent him away on business. I could tell it wasn't just worry over what scrape you might get into, “ he responded with a forlorn air. “Do you still look for trouble, Chloe? “ asked Lex with a smile.

“Old habits die hard, Lex, but I try to stay away from dangerous stories. I don't want to die young. I have a lot to live for, “ she answered passionately.

“Almost getting killed for a Luthor proved to be too much, didn't it? I've never thanked you enough for what you did for me, Chloe. I was just a friend of a friend and still...,” responded an emotional Lex.

“I did what was right to do, Lex. And I would do it again,” said Chloe with a catch in her voice.

“Have you ever regretted a decision you've made in your life, Chloe? “

“There are things I would have done differently, perhaps. But many a time you've got to take a certain path because it's the only one open and you have to be ready to compromise. “

“Even if it means sacrificing your own happiness? “

“What are we exactly talking about, Lex? I sense this isn't about me,” she answered with a frown, seeing something unreadable in Lex's eyes.

“I'm sorry. I've got too sober all of a sudden, and I assume you're here to have some fun,” said Lex apologetically.

“Are you sure everything's all right, Lex? “ she asked, unconsciously grabbing his arm before removing her hand as if she had been scorched.

“The last thing you'd want to do is getting involved in Luthor business again, Chloe. “

“It can't be Lionel again. He's been dead over three years now. “

“No, it isn't exactly him. Although, it seems everything has to do with my father in a way. Getting away from his shadow and changing the perception people have of me has become my life's mission. I knew it'd be difficult, but I'm not sure if I'm ready to sacrifice it all,” he said gravely, looking straight into Chloe's eyes. “Have I told you how beautiful you look tonight? “ asked Lex, lowering his voice an octave. “ You should have seen the envy in the eyes of the females in the room when you made your entrance. “

“It must be the dress, Lex, “ whispered an embarrassed Chloe, shifting her gaze nervously. “ Perhaps, it's a little over-the-top, but I couldn't resist the temptation when I saw it in the shop window. “

“I understand the feeling, but let me assure you it's not the dress. You could be wearing a rag and still be the most appealing woman in this room. “

“Lex, what are you trying to do? Are you sure you aren't drunk? “ asked Chloe with a hint of reproach.

“I thought you liked being told the truth, Chloe. And no, I'm not drunk. Believe me, you'd know it if I were. I apologise if I've made you feel uncomfortable. Please... forgive me. “

“Apology accepted, Lex,“ she said with a small smile.

“Seeing that you're unescorted and that Bruce's with Vicki, will you allow me to show you to the table? “

“Sure, Lex. Just promise you'll be on your best behaviour. “

“Whatever it takes to escape from Gotham's fortune-hunters. “

“Ah! So all this had to do with your need for a buffer. Do you always have a hidden agenda, Lex? “

“I'd like to say I don't but I can't lie to you. I've come to Gotham on a mission and, let me tell you... my expectations were rather low. This isn't something I can talk about here surrounded by a hundred people I've just met. Have dinner with me, Chloe. “

“You mean now? “

“No, Chloe. I mean dinner for two tomorrow night. “

“Lex, I don't think... “

“Please, for old times' sake, Chloe. I need to talk to you. It's plain business. “

“What do I know about business, Lex? Corporative stuff is alien to me. What could you possibly want to talk about?”

“Are you still a coffee addict? “

“Sure. The world would stop existing if Chloe Sullivan ever said 'no' to her daily caffeine fix. Are you thinking of opening a chain of coffee houses in Gotham? You know, you should talk to Lana, Lex. She's got more experience in the field than me. “

“I'm not interested in managerial skills, Chloe. I was just trying to tempt you with the promise of drinking the best coffee in Gotham after dinner if you accepted my invitation. “

“You know my Achilles' heel, Lex. However, I... “

“Is there someone in your life that might object? Is this the reason for your reticence? “

“Why is it that whenever a woman says ' no ' to a man, he immediately jumps to the conclusion there has to be another guy? “

“I must be losing my touch, “

“Because you can't believe a woman could turn you down? “

“No, because I can't remember being so gauche with a woman before. It's just dinner, Chloe. No strings attached. “

“OK, Lex, you win. Dinner... no strings attached,” answered Chloe, chiding herself internally for being so weak.

“You've made my day, Chloe Sullivan,” he responded with a sincere smile.

*'Oh, this is a mistake, a gross mistake, Sullivan! How could you capitulate so soon? There goes your declaration of independence. You don't need anyone, least of all a man, to feel complete. Ha! Liar! You can't say “no” to him, you never could. You've made your bed and now you must be ready to lie on it! '*

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### **CHAPTER 3: Resolutions**

#### *LEX'S GUESTROOM AT WAYNE MANSION*

Lex was stretched on the bed still wearing his formal outfit minus the jacket, tie and shoes. His mind was in a whirl after the events of the night. Chloe Sullivan. Who would have thought their paths would cross again in Gotham after almost ten years?

He remembered he had taken an instant liking to the teenage reporter. He had admired her tenacity, her commitment, her loyalty and that infinite capacity of giving without asking for anything in return. He couldn't understand how Clark could have been so blind not to see the amazing girl he had had straight under his nose, a girl who worshipped the ground he walked on. Lex had seen the promise latent in the petite blond but nothing had prepared him for the woman who crossed Wayne's door. Her beauty wasn't manufactured or skin deep; it went beyond her looks. And Lex knew by just looking into those green eyes again that she was still beautiful inside. And, for the first time in months, he felt not everything was lost.

## *CHLOE'S FLAT*

Chloe arrived at the flat around three o'clock in the morning, kicked off her shoes and went straight into the kitchen to plug in the coffeemaker. She needed a large cup to control the emotional upheaval she was in. She felt like shouting, crying or smashing things to give vent to her tension, but she couldn't- she wasn't alone in the apartment, and giving explanations was the last thing on her mind.

She hated herself for being so weak when it came to Lex. She considered leaving a message for him on Wayne's answer phone or writing a letter backing out, but she knew he wouldn't let it rest. He would demand an explanation and she wasn't ready to lie, least of all to him who could read anyone with those implacable blue-grey eyes of his. More than three years before she had seen those orbs light up with tenderness and so many other emotions. He believed they hadn't met in ten years and she didn't have the courage to correct him, not if it meant hurting him like she knew she would, if he ever found out the truth. She had done what she thought was best for everyone involved.

Lex couldn't know how it hurt to hear him ask her about the willingness to compromise even at the expense of sacrificing one's happiness. She was aware he wasn't talking about her because he didn't know what had happened forty-five months before, but that didn't make things any easier. By the look in his eyes, Chloe had realised there was something that was eating him, and she craved to help him but didn't want to make her offer too obvious. She wished she could repay him for everything he had given her- 'repay', what an awful word for something so precious. Chloe told herself she had accepted his invitation because she owed him, but she knew in her heart that it was because she loved him- even if he'd never love her back.

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## **CHAPTER 4: Confiding**

### *CHLOE'S FLAT*

"Chloe, sweetheart, what's the matter?" asked a worried Gabe.

"Nothing's the matter, dad," she responded with one of those smiles she reserved for the times when she felt the world around her was falling to pieces.

"You can't fool your old man, honey. I've known you for twenty-seven years. What's bugging you?"

"I saw Lex yesterday night. He's staying at Wayne Mansion..."

"And?" said Gabe to encourage her to elaborate.

"He invited me to have dinner with him tonight."



“Dinner? “ And what did he say? “ he asked strangled at Chloe’s behaviour.

“I said ‘yes’, dad. But...”

“But... are you worried because of me, Chloe? He’s no longer my boss and you’re a grown-up woman. I’m still your dad and you’re my little girl. I can’t lie to you; I’d rather you went out with someone whose surname wasn’t Luthor, but I’ve always respected Lex. And besides, it’s just dinner, isn’t it? “ stated Gabe.”Isn’t it? “ he insisted when Chloe didn’t answer and shuffled on her seat.

“You don’t understand, dad. “

“What is it I don’t understand, Chloe? That you’re afraid of going out with somebody after three years? You’re a great girl, Chloe, and I’m proud of you and what you’ve done, but it’s time to start thinking about yourself. I know what I’m talking about, honey. Don’t let life pass you by. “

“Dad, have you ever regretted...? “

“No, never. Not for you, sweetheart. However, I forgot to think about myself for a long time, inventing excuses. Don’t let that happen to you. “

“I don’t know if going out with Lex is the wisest thing to do, dad, “ she responded, her eyes brimming with tears.

“What is it you’re afraid of, Chloe? Is it him? Because if that’s the case, you shouldn’t have accepted his invitation. “

“Oh, dad, this is so uncomfortable! “

“You don’t need to speak about it with me, honey. Maybe Vicki...”

“No, no. I don’t want to involve anyone outside the family circle, dad. “

“It’s your life, sweetie. You don’t have to consult with me or anybody else for that matter. You know that whatever decision you make, I’ll be right by you- even if I don’t agree with you. “

“I don’t know... what...I’d have done without you, dad, “ stuttered a tearful Chloe.

“Come on, honey. That’s the past now, “ he responded, wiping her tears with his thumbs.

“It’s not the past, dad. If only you knew... “

“Lex? “ asked a surprised Gabe when the truth dawned on him. “Oh, my God! “

“Now you see why I’m a nervous wreck. “

“It was bound to happen sooner or later, Chloe. You’ve been playing with fire all this time. Lex isn’t like anyone you know. Are you ready to face the consequences of what you did when you left Metropolis for good? “

“I’m not planning on telling him, dad. You said it yourself, it’s dinner and then, we’ll go our separate ways. “

“Are you sure this is what you want, sweetheart? “

“He said dinner...no strings attached. “

“I’m not asking what he said but how you feel. I could tell when you left Metropolis that you loved the man. Now, tell me how this has changed. “

“It hasn’t changed, but it cannot be. “

“Why not? “

“Because he doesn’t love me, and I know him, dad, just I knew him then. He’ll feel obligated, and I couldn’t do that to him. “

“You have to see the big picture, Chloe. This isn’t only about you. Think. What will happen in a couple of years? Honey, if you wait more... if you don’t hurt him now... I don’t believe he- or they, for that matter- will ever forgive you. “

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## **CHAPTER 5: Just Business**

### *BON VIVANT RESTAURANT- GOTHAM CITY*

Lex got to the restaurant fifteen minutes ahead of time. Chloe had insisted on coming on her own, despite his offer to pick her up at her apartment, and he hadn’t pressed the point. She wanted to make clear it wasn’t a date, and he preferred it that way. Tonight was about business, although it shouldn’t. For God’s sake what they were to discuss after the dinner should have been anything but business! He hoped he wouldn’t come out like a cold bastard but, after evaluating the alternatives, he had made up his mind. He needed ‘Speranza’ to purge Lionel’s ghost once and for all, and Chloe was the key.

A quarter of an hour later, the young reporter was ushered to the table where Lex was already sitting. As she approached the enigmatic young man in an Italian suit, the knot in the pit of her stomach grew tighter and the legs that were propelling her grew weaker. He smiled at her and she hurried to the table lest her knees gave way. Always the gentleman, Lex drew the chair back for her and grazed her cheek with a kiss.

“I’m glad you’ve come, Chloe,” said Lex warmly.

“I have to thank you for the invitation, Lex. I haven’t eaten out in a long time, ” she answered sincerely.

“What’s wrong with the men in Gotham? Are they blind? “

“Lex...” warned Chloe.

“What? “ he asked, raising his eyebrows.

“You’re doing it again. You don’t need to flatter me. I’m here, aren’t I? “

“Why do you insist on denying who you are? You’ve always done that. You’re no longer in Smallville, Chloe. I’ve never understood that feeling of inferiority. “

“You should have been born a girl and spend your high school years around perfect Lana Lang to understand what it feels like. “

“You’re worth a hundred Lanas. “

“Careful, Lex. You’re talking of your former partner. “

“Don’t get me wrong. She’s a nice girl and a very good business partner, but you’ve always been ten times more woman than her. “

“What is it that you’ve got up your sleeve, Lex? “

“We’ll have dinner first. Then, we’ll go to Gotham’s best coffee house to drink that java I promised you last night, and we’ll talk about what’s on my mind. But, believe me, Chloe, what I’ve just said isn’t a pick-up line or something to warm your heart. It’s the truth. “

“Whatever you say, Lex, “ responded Chloe, browsing the menu.

“Look at me, Chloe, “ he said, tilting up her chin. “ I meant every word I said, “ he stated, fastening his eyes on her.

*‘You wouldn’t think so highly of me if I told you here and now what I’ve been hiding from you for three years.’*

Despite the tangle of emotions inside her brain, Chloe couldn’t deny the meal had been the best she had had in years, and the company... Well... She couldn’t think of a better escort or conversationalist. She had let him lead the conversation and provided him with answers to his questions- a lot of which turned out to be about her. On several occasions, she had tried to turn the tables, but she must have been too distracted to cross swords with him because he always managed to take control of the conversation again. By the time they finished

dessert and were ready to leave the restaurant, Chloe was even more confused than before.  
*'What in hell's name does he want to talk to me about? '*

## GOTHAM'S JAVA

"Well, Lex, are you going to keep me waiting? As much as I've enjoyed the meal and the company, you said this night was business. So far you've managed to sidestep most questions about you and succeeded in making it all about me. I'm flattered you seem to be interested in a common mortal like Chloe Sullivan but, knowing you, there has to be a reason behind so many questions. "

"You're right. But you're a much more interesting subject than me, Chloe. You wouldn't be interested in what I've been doing with my life these past ten years. "

"Why not? Why do you think I wouldn't be interested? "

"I didn't want to spoil our first dinner together, Chloe. "

"Don't you ever feel the need to unburden yourself to someone, Lex? "

"Why would I want to submit another human being to the filth I'm immersed in every day, Chloe? "

"It's unhealthy, Lex. "

"I appreciate your concern, Chloe, but I've never been good at opening up, " he said gravely.

*'You opened up to me once, despite the fact that you didn't know who I was, and cried on my shoulder. I've always wondered if you really ignored who I was the moment you made me feel alive for the first time in my life.'*

"Have you ever heard of 'Speranza', Chloe? " he blurted.

*'Well, Sullivan, this is what you've been waiting for, isn't it? Business. How good he is at avoiding the hot seat! '*

"Yes, the department stores. "

"Right. Rocco Ferrucci, the founder, is thinking of selling the chain. "

"And you're considering buying it, aren't you? "

“It’s what Lexcorp needs to dispel for ever the idea that a Luthor can only be involved in morally questionable ventures, Chloe. Did you know that ‘Speranza’ means ‘hope’ in English? I can’t pass up this opportunity. “

*‘Hope. If you only knew how ironic all this is, Lex. ’* “ I understand the necessity of showing the general public you aren’t Lionel, but I don’t see what it is you expect from this conversation. “

“I’m coming to it, Chloe. Ferrucci is a seventy-five-year-old pater familias, who built his emporium from the ground. His dream was to leave his corporation to his grandchildren when the time came for him to retire, but his only son died in a car accident twenty-five years ago and left no children. The department stores are Rocco’s only legacy. You must be aware of the importance Italian-Americans give to family. “

“I’ve seen all three ‘Grandfathers’, Lex, and a few ‘Sopranos’ episodes, “ she said ironically.

“Well... I had a meeting with Ferrucci last week, and I made him an offer he would find hard to resist. I thought the old man was ready to cave in but, then, he popped up a question out of thin air... a question I should have foreseen. He took me by surprise- dad must be laughing at me wherever he is for my unforgivable lack of vision. Ferrucci twisted my arm, Chloe, and I had to tell him a blatant lie. “

“Did you paint the Luthors as ‘The Brady Bunch’?” she joked.

“I could have tried, but we’ve had way too much exposure in the press for him to ignore what we Luthors are really like, “ he responded with a smirk.

“You mean what Lionel was really like, Lex. “

“You give me too much credit, Chloe. “

“They don’t know you as well as I do,” she answered, toying with her spoon.

“I don’t think this is such a great idea, “ he mumbled.

“What are you talking about, Lex? “

“I invited you tonight because I wanted to reacquaint myself with you. I’ve always felt comfortable around you. You were one of the few people I actually enjoyed talking to when I was in Smallville. When I saw you at Bruce’s mansion yesterday, you reminded me of how much I miss having someone like you in my life. Last night I was desperate, grabbing at straws, and then an idea took shape in my mind. But, now, it doesn’t seem such a great idea. I respect you too much for that, and I would be a cold-blooded bastard if I asked you what I meant to ask you when I crossed the restaurant door tonight. You deserve better than that. “

“Why don’t you let me judge for myself, Lex? “

“No, Chloe. I’ll find the way. I always do. “

“Let me help you. I owe it to you, “ she said, placing one hand on top of his.

“If there’s anyone here who owes anything that would be me, Chloe. You risked your life to help me once. I’m eternally indebted to you. “

“Please, Lex. Indulge my curiosity. What was the question Ferrucci posed?”

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## **CHAPTER 6: Duel of Stares**

Lex drove Chloe home, despite her protestations. She’d have preferred to take a taxi to clear her head and to prevent him from learning where she actually lived, but he was adamant and she was too weary to argue with him. Besides, if he had wanted to know her address, he would have just made a couple of phone calls and got the information he needed.

“When are you leaving, Lex?” she asked when he parked in front of her building.

“In a few days. “

“Are you certain... “

“Yes, Chloe. That you could even consider it, confirms what I already knew about you; but it wouldn’t stop there. Ferrucci wouldn’t buy it,” he interrupted her.

“I thought what you’d told him was enough. “

“It just bought me some time. Do you want me to go up with you, Chloe?” he added, turning in his seat.

“No, it’s all right, Lex. This is a safe neighbourhood, and dad’s at home.”

“Have you told him who you were seeing tonight?”

“Yes.”

“And what did he say?”

“That I was a grown up woman now.”

“Didn’t he object to your going out with me?”

“Not everyone sees your father when they look at you. My dad’s always respected you, Lex, and that hasn’t changed. “

“Give him my regards, Chloe. You’re really lucky to have each other. “

“Remember you’re not alone, Lex. Don’t get lost. “

“I won’t. “

Lex stayed in Gotham for a whole week but all to no avail. He couldn’t find a way out or, maybe, he hadn’t tried enough. Chloe remained the best choice, but he couldn’t think of a reason worthy of carrying out such a dangerous charade. Still, like some moth to the light, the younger Luthor kept returning to the thought of the beautiful blond and ended up driving to her apartment the day he was supposed to be leaving for Metropolis.

Gabe was watching his favourite Discovery Channel show when the doorbell rang.

“Chloe, how many times have I told you to check you’ve got your keys in that purse of yours?” exclaimed Gabe, opening the door with the chain still on to find Lex standing in the corridor.

“Mr Luthor?” asked a surprised Gabe.

“Chloe said this is a safe neighbourhood, Gabe. You should check the security here. Nobody stopped me on my way up. Can I come in? “

“Err... Chloe isn’t at home, Mr Luthor; but, please, do come in,” said a flustered Gabe, removing the chain.

“Thanks, Gabe. Please, call me Lex,” he responded, stepping into the cosy living room.

“Have a seat, Mr... Lex,” said the older man, turning off the TV. ”Can I get you something to drink? I used to keep a bottle of scotch, but I’m afraid... “

“It’s all right, Gabe. I can see you’re having a beer. I could use one. “

“A beer? Are you sure?”

“Relax, Gabe. I can enjoy a cold beer as the next man, “ he responded with a lopsided grin.

“OK, I’ll be right back, “ said Gabe, marching into the kitchen.

Lex took advantage of Gabe’s absence to let his eyes roam the room. The apartment wasn’t luxurious but it looked and felt like a home; something Lex had never managed to accomplish either at the mansion or his penthouse in Metropolis.

Lex was perusing the knick-knacks on the mantelpiece as Gabe opened and closed cabinets in the kitchen when, suddenly, he realised he was no longer alone in the living room.

“OK, here... “ Gabe interrupted himself when he came back with the can of beer to find Lex and a tiny tot in what appeared to be a duel of blue-grey stares. “ Hope, honey, what are you doing up? “ asked Chloe’s father when he found his voice again.

“I’m thirsty,” she said, holding Lex’s gaze.

“Thirsty?” echoed Gabe, setting the tray down on the coffee table and wondering if he could risk fetching a glass of water. The girl was as curious and as intelligent as her mum, and she could ask the most inconvenient questions. “I’ll bring you the water and you go back to your room,” blurted Gabe before hurrying to the kitchen.

Lex was beginning to feel uncomfortable. Never in his adult life had he failed to hold anybody’s gaze, but this child seemed capable of seeing straight into his soul, and he didn’t have anywhere to hide. Suddenly, the girl started to walk towards him and, looking up at his bald head, she blurted: “Does it hurt?”

“What? This?” he asked, feeling his scalp. ”No, honey, it doesn’t hurt,” he said with a strangled voice.

“Can I touch it?” murmured the girl, coming closer. “I promise to be careful.”

“Please yourself,” responded Lex, crouching down for her to be able to reach the crown of his head. *‘What the hell am I doing?’*

“It’s smooth,” she answered with a wide smile that revealed two dimples and made her look like a miniature of her mum.

“Is it? “ he said with a sincere smile. “Well, thanks,” he added. *‘God! Am I blushing? Leave it to a daughter of Chloe’s to accomplish the impossible deed!’*

Chloe finished working at the paper at around five and did some shopping before taking the bus home in time to watch her favourite TV show, Investigative Reporters. It had been a particularly exhausting day at the editing room, and she was looking forward to kicking her shoes off. Little did she know what she would find on opening the door- Lex bonding with her little Hope in the living-room.

Lex heard the keys jingle in the lock and looked towards the entrance to see the young woman standing rooted to the spot with a transfixed look on her face.

“Here. Let me help you, “ said Lex, taking the shopping cartons of from her arms.

“Thanks, “ she whispered, kicking the door shut.



Chloe led the way to the kitchen and lowered the groceries onto the counter, avoiding Lex's all-seeing eyes. She had dreaded this moment and it was finally there. She could feel the blood pumping in her ears until it was the only sound she could hear.

"Mummy, can I have a chocolate?" asked Hope, entering through the swinging door.

"Hello, sweetie," answered Chloe, holding her tight and kissing her forehead. "You know you can't eat candy before dinner."

"Here you are!" exclaimed Gabe, joining them in the kitchen. "Why don't you come with grandpa, Hope? We can watch some cartoons. Come on. Let's leave them alone, shall we? Mummy needs to talk."

"OK," responded the girl, grabbing Gabe's hand. "What's your name?" she asked the younger Luthor from the doorway.

"Lex," he answered.

"Goodbye, Lex," she responded, waving her little hand.

"Goodbye, Hope," he smiled. "She's a very special child, Chloe. Why didn't you mention her before?"

"Why don't you go back to the living-room, Lex?" asked Chloe, swallowing the lump in her throat. "Would you like a cup of freshly made coffee?" she offered, hoping he said 'yes' and left the kitchen because it suddenly felt too small for them both.

"Gabe offered me a beer, but I won't turn down a hot cup of coffee."

"A beer? I've never pictured you as a beer kind of guy!" she said jokingly, trying to break the ice.

"Neither has Gabe. But I assure you I'm as human as the guy next door."

*I know, Lex. That's why this is going to be so damn difficult.*

"Make yourself at home, Lex. I'll bring the coffee in a couple of minutes."

Lex returned to the living-room and stood in front of the window. The sun was already setting, and the landscape was acquiring that spectral look so unique to Gotham. Before coming to the apartment, he didn't understand what a person like Chloe could find in a city such as Gotham- a city that oozed death and oppression; now he knew why she had run away.

Finding out she had a daughter had been a shock, but he couldn't fathom the look on her face when she opened the door and saw them together in the living-room. He doubted she

hadn't mentioned the girl out of shame; what he had read in her eyes when she walked on them was something completely different and that unsettled him.

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## **CHAPTER 7: Hope**

"Here's your coffee, Lex," said Chloe, setting the cup down on the coffee table with shaky hands.

"Thanks," he said, observing her pale countenance before lowering himself down in an armchair. "Where's the father, Chloe?"

"There's only me."

"But surely the child must have a father. What's happened to him?"

"It's complicated, Lex."

"Did he deny any relation to the child?"

"No!" she exclaimed. "He can't deny anything he doesn't know has ever happened."

"Are you saying you haven't told him?"

"I thought it was the best thing to do at the time."

"The best for whom? Have you thought of Hope? Don't you believe she'll resent you for not telling her who her father is?"

"She's young, Lex."

"We both know that the wounds that are inflicted in childhood never heal. They define who you are. You wouldn't like that for your child- not you, Chloe."

"It wasn't an option, Lex. I couldn't tell him about the pregnancy."

"Why not?"

"I couldn't do that to him?"

"Is he so high and mighty? Were you afraid of what he might do or ask you to do?"

"Oh, I knew what he would have done!"

"Is he such a bastard?"

“On the contrary, Lex, he would have made an honest woman of me, and I couldn’t allow him to do that.”

“Was he married?”

“No, he wasn’t married. But that wasn’t the issue.”

“Is it Clark?”

“Clark? No, not Clark. Wherever did you get that idea from, Lex?”

“Well... you’ve always been in love with him.”

“Was, Lex, was. That’s ancient history. Besides, you’re aware he’s never looked at me that way. The closer we ever got to having something was a chaste kiss on the lips when we were in eighth grade.”

“Then, if Clark isn’t the father, who is it?”

“Clark isn’t the only man in Metropolis, Lex.”

“You’re right; but I still can’t understand. If he wasn’t married, and if you were sure he’d have wedded you and accepted his parenthood, what stopped you from telling him the truth?”

“Several things; starting with the fact that he wouldn’t have remembered me.”

“I can’t believe Hope’s the result of a one-night stand.”

“Well... technically, she is, but I’ve never thought of her that way. I told you it was complicated, Lex. It wasn’t anything sordid or seedy. It felt so right... I wouldn’t change anything about that night.”

“If things were the way you describe them, why wouldn’t he remember you, then?”

“There was a moment I thought he knew me, deep down, and I felt really special because he trusted me enough to unburden his soul. It started like comfort, but it turned out to be so much more...”

“You said he didn’t know you.”

“I said he wouldn’t remember what happened that night. I never said he didn’t know me.”

“Was he intoxicated?”

“Yes.”

“He didn’t force you, did he?”

“No, Lex, he didn’t.”

“I still believe you should have told him. He’s got a moral and legal responsibility to you and the girl.”

“That’s one of the reasons I haven’t told him. He’d have felt cornered or started wondering why I’d been there for him that night, and I didn’t want that. He’d have dissected everything, and I couldn’t allow that to happen.”

“Listen, Chloe, I don’t pretend to have all the answers- God knows I’m the least suitable to give advice as far as love or human relationships are concerned-and you don’t need to say any more. You don’t owe me any explanations. However, I’ve been thinking... Are you still willing to do what you said a few nights ago?”

“You mean... that Ferrucci business?”

“Yes. But, would you be ready to take it a step further?”

“A step further? Lex, do you know what you’re talking about?”

“I’m offering you a solution that would help us both. Hope’s young. I can see she’s loved and well-adjusted- I know you and Gabe- but... I’d love her as if she were my...”

“Lex,” she sobbed, her eyes brimming with tears. “Stop!” she added, putting her fingertips on his lips. “Oh, God!” she exclaimed, wiping the tears that were trailing down her cheeks. “We’ll need something stronger than coffee,” she stated, going back into the kitchen and rummaging through the groceries to get the bottle of scotch she had bought at the supermarket. “It may not be like the one in your cellar, but it’ll have to do,” she said, handing him a tumbler with the amber liquid, and making an effort to check the tears that were threatening to fall again.

Lex grabbed the glass and swallowed a large gulp, bracing himself for what was to come. He had a grim sense of foreboding that was increased by Chloe’s demeanour and the way she averted her eyes. He knew what she was going to say but tried to put on that mask of cool detachment he was so used to wearing- anything to control the tumult that raged inside him.

“I should start at the beginning. As you already know, before moving to Gotham I worked as a columnist for The Daily Planet. I loved that job, but working in an office has never been my thing. At that time, I craved for the opportunity to do some field work, and the atmosphere in the editing room got really tense when Lois came on board. Perry White started giving her assignments in the street. I’d never had any problems with my cousin- we’ve always got along- but I resented Perry’s decision and told him so. A week later, he

granted me my first investigative assignment in six months, "she explained, sipping her scotch.

"When was this?" interrupted Lex, finishing his drink.

"Forty-five months ago," she answered, holding his gaze and swallowing the lump in her throat. "My informant'd told me the man who had the intel to expose the subject of my research was going to attend a costume ball at Metropolis Plaza. The problem was how to sneak into the party without being on the guest list. Fortunately, Perry cashed in a favour and got me a formal invitation."

"Forty-five months ago... October, " murmured Lex to himself, leaving the armchair and walking towards the window. "What was the exact date, Chloe? The date of the costume ball?" he asked, loosening his tie.

"October 10<sup>th</sup>", "she responded, looking at his back.

"Go on, please, " he requested, putting his hands in the pockets of his black trousers.

"I made contact with the target and managed to strike an amicable conversation. I was about to get the information I wanted, and leave the tedious do for good, when I overheard a man picking a fight, and recognised the voice as belonging to someone I hadn't seen since I graduated from high school. I could tell he'd been drinking, and I'd never seen him like that in public. I thought something pretty bad must have happened for him to lose control in front of all those people. He was on the verge of a major breakdown, and I acted on impulse. I dumped my contact and somehow managed to talk this other man into leaving the ball with me. "

"You were wearing a green dress, weren't you?" he asked with glassy eyes, turning round from the window. "I remember your voice sounded familiar but... I couldn't see your face behind the mask. I was intoxicated when I arrived at The Plaza and hell-bent on picking a fight with anyone. I wanted to numb what I was feeling... I remember hating my dad for dying without having heard me out. We'd had one of our worst arguments that day. As usual, he'd had the upper hand and made me look like a fool. Still, what really pissed me off about the whole situation was that I couldn't shed a tear for him. I felt he'd succeeded; he had turned me into an insensitive bastard just like him. We talked about this in my room at The Plaza that night, didn't we?"

"Among other things you'd bottled up for too long. "

"When I woke up the following morning, despite the splitting headache, I couldn't remember feeling so peaceful in my life. The night was a blur, and my mind was full of fleeting images and sounds- a woman in a green dress, tears, soothing words, comforting arms and an indescribable feeling of being loved and treasured. For months, I'd wake up in the middle of what I thought was merely a recurring dream of my mum, " said Lex with watery eyes, lowering himself next to Chloe on the sofa. "You should have told me,

Chloe, " he added chokingly, cupping her face in his hands and wiping her tears with his thumbs.

"Lex, all your life you've fought against your legacy and the plans your father had for you. I didn't want to add an extra burden to the equation. I knew you, Lex, and I was convinced the minute I told you about the charity ball you would have started having doubts about the reasons behind our meeting. You wouldn't have seen it as casual. You'd have thought I'd been there to get something from you. What's more, you'd have turned something beautiful into a cunningly devised plan to trap you. If I'd approached you and you'd offered to marry me- as I knew you would- you'd have sentenced us both to a life of misery. "

"You don't know if that would have happened. "

"Be honest with yourself, Lex. You'd already been married twice, can you say without a shadow of a doubt you wouldn't have thought I was another blood-sucking bitch? "

"You aren't Desiree or Helen, Chloe. I've never met anyone as giving or as selfless as you. "

"No one is completely devoid of selfishness, Lex, "she responded with a small smile.

"Have you told her anything about her father? "

"Not much. She knows she's got your eyes- many a time I wondered how it was possible my father hadn't guessed the truth. The first time she looked into my eyes, I felt stripped and realised it was going to be hard to hide whose daughter she was. "

"You should have entered the room earlier, then. I've never felt so uncomfortable under anyone's stare in my life, " he smirked.

"That's what it feels like to be at the end of your stare, Lex, when you're determined to show you're in control, " she stated. "The night of the costume ball you let me see your eyes were capable of showing so much more, " she said longingly.

"Before that night I'd only allowed myself to be vulnerable in front of my mother, " he whispered, gathering her in his arms, and pressing a kiss on the crown of her head.

"Knowing how much you loved your mum, I toyed with the idea of naming our daughter after her, but it'd have made matters worse. I chose 'Hope' because I'm an eternal optimist, and I didn't resign myself to the idea that there couldn't be an 'us'... " she said, looking up into his eyes. " It hurt that you couldn't be part of our lives and I hated having to deprive you both of each other. Still, you were her dad and I wanted her to have something to brand her yours so I made your first name her middle name. I thought my dad would see through it but.... Lex? " she sobbed. " Will you ever be able to forgive me? " she grabbed the front of his shirt in a tight fist.

"Chloe," he responded, taking her hands in his, "when I left Metropolis to come to Gotham a week ago, I was seriously considering compromising- even if it meant sacrificing my happiness for two or three years. I was ready to propose a tolerable young woman a marriage only in papers and a cold prenuptial agreement to protect my assets. I was planning on having the marriage annulled after a couple of years and an economic compensation to my wife. I didn't savour the idea one bit, but it was the only way Ferrucci would accept the sale. But then... I saw you at Bruce's and realised there was a chance I wouldn't have to compromise after all, because a marriage with you would have been no sacrifice. However, the more I got to reacquaint myself with you and the more I thought of you as the woman I wanted as my wife and mother of my children, the more I convinced myself I should let you be," explained Lex passionately to a transfixed Chloe.

"Lex, are you saying you backed down on your proposal because you..." she choked on the last words.

"Love you? I've always found it so difficult to utter those three words... Every time I've said them, I've got a slap in my face," he smiled wryly.

"I..." mumbled Chloe, with trembling lips.

"Shh..." he silenced her, placing two fingers on her mouth. "You're so unlike any of the women I fell for in the past," he added, locking his stormy blue-grey eyes with hers. "The answer to your question's a definite 'Yes, Chloe.' I love you for the girl you were- the one who almost got killed for me- and for the woman you've become. I love you because you're beautiful inside, and because you've given something back to me, something I lost when my mother died: hope; hope that someone could learn to love me," he confessed, kissing her softly on the mouth and tasting their salty tears on her lips.

"Mummy... I'm hungry," interrupted a tiny voice.

"Come here, sweetie," said a shaky Chloe, wiping her tears with the heel of her hands and flashing a Sullivan smile.

"Why are you crying?" asked Hope when her mother picked her up and sat her between them two on the sofa. "Has he hurt you?" she questioned, looking at Lex.

"No, honey, Lex hasn't hurt me," answered Chloe smilingly, raising her eyes to meet the billionaire's over Hope's head.

"My mum sometimes calls me Lexie," said Hope matter-of-factly, looking back at Lex and boring her eyes into his.

"Your mum's just told me your middle name's Alexandra," said an emotional Lex, gently caressing her soft baby cheek.

"Are you my dad?" asked his daughter, recognising her blue-grey eyes in his glassy ones.

The young billionaire's heart skipped a beat and, for the first time in his adult life, he couldn't form a coherent sentence and was forced to nod his assent. The little girl's face illuminated with a smile so much like Chloe's that he couldn't hold the tears in check again. Suddenly he felt her small arms wrap around his neck and a smell of talc powder and baby cologne invade his nostrils.

"I like you," she added, climbing down his lap, and running hastily away. "Grandpa, grandpa Gabe!"

"She's certainly something, isn't she?" beamed Chloe.

"Chloe, I know I've got a lot to process yet and that we've got so much catching up to do."

"Lex, I won't ask you for..."

"I know you wouldn't but, given time, it's what I'll want. Nothing would make me happier than to have you and Hope- and let's not forget Gabe- in my life. If I were to pop the question when we're ready, what would your answer be?"

"Do you actually need to ask me that, Lex?" she responded throatily, meeting his lips in a searing kiss that showed him how much she'd missed him.

"Let's call Gabe," said Lex, ending the kiss reluctantly. "Our daughter's hungry and we've got a lot to celebrate," he added, taking her by the hand and leaving the sofa.

"It seems you haven't lied to Ferrucci after all," responded Chloe with a luminous smile.

"I haven't. I'm a family man," smirked Lex.

**THE END**

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