Permission to Flourish
by gldnrgd7

Summary

Sequel To Bulletproof:
Six years after leaving National City to give Kara space, Mon-El isn't the man he used to be. He's found his calling, but can he find where his heart belongs?

Notes

Author’s Notes:
• This story is the sequel to Bulletproof. Please read that one-shot before diving into this one.
• I swear – sometimes I have no idea where some stories come from – and this is one of those stories that’s a complete mystery to me. It just came to me not long after writing Bulletproof of the vocation where Mon-El would find his calling after leaving National City and I just couldn’t NOT write it.
• There is angst in this story but I promise a happy ending.
• DCTV Cameos!!
• There’s a few original characters in this story. I hope you like them. I hope you love them.
• Comments are welcomed, flames are destroyed with my freeze breath.
• Sooooo many THANKS to juliakaze for creating the gorgeous Mood Board for this story. It is perfection and I can't stop getting emotional about it.
I've been around for you
I've been up and down for you,
But I just can't get any relief
I've swallowed my pride for you
I've lived and lied for you,
But you still make me feel like a thief
Six years after leaving National City:

Mike Matthews’ day job was stressful and noisy, and not infrequently, leaked into his nighttime despite his ability to work efficiently and occasionally at super speed when not observed by others. So when he had time alone in the peace and quiet of his secluded garage apartment, he liked to veg in front of the television – at least during weeknights. He flipped on the television to watch a favorite sci-fi program – the one indulgence he seemed to be allowed during his busy week. But just as he got comfortable, his hand tucked behind his head on the couch, his show cut away, and a news crawl immediately appeared on the screen.

A nationally recognized news anchor appeared on the screen, her face stricken and pale. Mike knew immediately something was horribly awry somewhere and straightened up, sitting at the edge of his seat.

“Breaking news from National City this evening. Reports are pouring in, confirming that…what appears to be alien spaceships have arrived on the outskirts of the city near the Port. We are hearing reports that these aliens are hostile – I repeat…they are hostile. Forces are gathering in the city to repel the aliens at this time, with Supergirl being at the forefront of this fight….”

The news report droned on, but Mike heard none of it, his attention diverted by the buzzing of his
cell phone on the coffee table. Sensing who was on the other end of the call, he answered it in a flash. “I’m watching,” he announced before the caller could even ask. “Am I ready for this? I don’t see how I have a choice.” Mike whisked out of the room and returned with a duffel bag, dropping it on the floor at his feet. “I’m already getting my things. Just going to lock up before I leave. See you there?” Mike hung up the phone and dropped it into his bag.

It took less than a handful of seconds to lock the deadbolts on his door, hoist the duffel over his shoulder, and take to the sky like he’d never known anything else.

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Dominators! He should have known. After Kara fought the Dominators years ago on Earth Prime, it seemed only a matter of time before they’d show up here on Earth-38. Arriving just in the nick of time to join the fight, as Supergirl, Superman, and Martian Manhunter, along with a throng of heroes he’d never seen before, struggled to bring down a horde of berserkers, Valor wasted no time jumping into the fray. And ‘fray’ it was, to be sure. It appeared Supergirl and her team had invited others to their fight, including heroes he could only assume were her allies from another Earth. Mike caught sight of Guardian fending off a Dominator with his shield, as well as Alex using her powered exoskeleton to toss one of the aliens into the waiting blast of fire from a man he could only assume was Heatwave.

He hovered over the Dominator shuttle plying it with his heat vision until it sputtered and then exploded. Gathered Dominators stopped for a moment, realizing that their ride back to the mothership just bit the dust, which allowed Valor to invite himself to the party. Landing on the ground, he put his weight behind a single punch that sent one careening back into the ship’s fire.

“One down,” he told himself.

“Behind you,” someone shouted. An orange streak flashed before his eyes, and the apparent Dominator behind him disappeared to…he didn’t know where.

A second later, the orange flash materialized into a person beside him. “I’m Barry,” the man in the blood red suit announced, an open grin on his masked face.

“Ah!” Mike immediately recognized the name as the speedster from Earth Prime who befriended Kara long before Mike’s arrival on this planet. “Barry Allen…nice to meet you finally. I’m Mike…uh…Valor,” he indicated his suit. “Is there a plan here?”
Barry tossed him a small bag. “Put one of these behind the ear of each Dominator you come across. Other than that, knock them around until the tech geniuses get their stuff set up. Then get clear when we get the signal.”

“And the signal is…”

“You have super hearing?” the speedster asked.

“Yes.”

“Then keep your ears tuned to the comms. You’ll hear the signal when it comes,” he answered cryptically.

So they went to hand-to-hand, taking out the horde and trying to stay alive. Dominators were extremely strong, their strength rivaling that of Superman, Supergirl, and Valor. So as they fought, it was best to avoid physical contact whatsoever. He concentrated on using his speed to place the tiny transmitters. At one point, he looked around, but Supergirl was nowhere to be found.

An ally went down, and Valor went after her, pulling her from the melee of attacking aliens. He dragged her from beneath the body of a Dominator and removed her from the fight. She looked up at him and smiled behind her red mask. “I’m Speedy, and you can fly.”

“Valor,” he provided his codename to her. “And…yes, I can.”

“Cool.”

“Are you okay?” he shouted over the noise.

“I’ve had worse,” she pluckily replied, rubbing at an injured shoulder. She came off as much more petite than she actually was, and she wore an outfit made of thick red leather. Whipping an arrow out of the quiver attached to her back, Speedy notched it into her bow. “Thanks for the assist, but there’s no rest for the wicked,” she said with a roguish smile before diving back into the fight.

Valor flew up for an overhead view, taking out a few Dominators with his heat vision and by diving
down upon them with his super speed and a punch combination. It went on and on, a seemingly endless supply of attacking Dominators until the signal was finally given, and he soared above the crowd to watch as a high-pitched whine passed over the city in a giant wave, taking out all of the remaining Dominators. The creatures grabbed their “ears” and screeched in pain before crumbling to the ground, dead.

When it was over, Valor dropped like a stone, slamming feet first onto the pavement, his knees bending to absorb the impact, his royal blue cape fluttering dramatically around him. Clark was the first to approach him, their matching grins telling the tale of a long-held friendship.

“Clark,” he greeted, joyfully. Clark’s impossibly strong arms wrapped him in a welcoming embrace, his hands slapping Mike powerfully on the back. Mike returned the embrace with equal back-slap fervor, as men do.

“What kept you?” Clark joked.

“Can’t believe you started the party without me.” Mike shook his head.

“Well, if you hadn’t decided you needed to make a dramatic and well-timed entrance….”

“I’m on the other side of the country,” Mike reminded his friend and mentor. “Philadelphia isn’t exactly a stone’s throw. Besides, it looks like you had everything handled.”

“Come and meet the rest,” Clark grabbed his arm and pulled him toward the milling crowd. He took them through each of their names, assuming that the others had already experienced their introductions. He had already met Barry and Speedy, but there was also Vibe, Black Canary, Mr. Terrific, Wild Dog, Jesse Quick, as well as the team of time travelers that included Heatwave, Vixen, White Canary, and Firestorm.

He looked for her. Surreptitiously, unwillingly, his eyes darting away from each face, hoping to find hers somewhere in the crowd but to no avail. He felt his heart sink, though he hadn’t been wholly unaware of the hope he’d been carrying within. Even through the supersonic flight to National City, he hadn’t really taken the time to truly consider seeing her again. He’d been more concerned about an alien attack and what it might mean. Or maybe he hadn’t wanted to examine the possibility too closely.

“She’s with J’onn and Bruce,” Clark told him.
“I wasn’t—“

“You were,” Clark insisted firmly. Mike’s shoulders slumped with defeat, finally admitting to himself that his heart had been searching for her in the crowd. “It’s okay,” Clark said, his hand grasping Mike’s shoulders in comfort. “She’s returned to the DEO. They managed to capture a Dominator, and they wanted to secure it before interrogating it. Kara’s there to keep Bruce from killing it.”

“I see.”

“Do you want to join them?” Clark asked, expecting his friend to jump at the chance to see Kara again.

“No,” Mike replied, shaking his head and taking a step back. “Probably not a good idea.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me!” Clark exclaimed. “You’re going to come all this way and not even see her? After six years?”

“Just a coward, I guess,” he shrugged, a kernel of truth hiding beneath the sarcasm.

“She doesn’t think that about you, Mike.”

“Doesn’t matter anyway,” Mike said, placing his hands on his hips. “It’s been six years. Maybe it’s best if we just…forget.”

“Then why haven’t you done that already?” Clark needled him. “You think I haven’t noticed that there hasn’t been anyone in your life?”

“There has—“

“Anyone real, I meant. Sure, there have been dates here and there but no one you’ve considered committing to long-term.”
“You know as well as I do, it’s not that easy. Not every woman is like Lois,” Mike pointed out. He hadn’t seen Lois in over nine months, not since Samuel was born, and though they emailed on a weekly basis he still missed her. She was the big sister he’d never had.

“You’ll never find your Lois if you don’t try,” Clark argued.

“How do you--?”

“I know you,” Clark cut him off. “I know you – maybe even better than you know yourself. Maybe you’re not looking because you know you’ve already found her.”

“C’mon, Clark,” Mike begged, studying the tips of his blue boots.

“I know it’s hard,” Clark placed a hand on Mike’s shoulder. “The first step is the hardest.”

Mike considered Clark’s position a moment before shaking his head. “I can’t,” he decided. “I just… can’t. I’m sorry if that disappoints you.”

“You could never disappoint me,” Clark promised, a sad smile on his face. “If you’re not ready, you’re not ready. I’ll tell her.”

“Damn it, Clark!”

“She asks about you,” Clark confessed. “When you were training, I made a promise to you that I wouldn’t talk about what we were doing or how you were progressing. And I’ve kept that promise even though it made her angry. But those days are gone and all she wants is to know how you are.”

“Really?” Mike asked. Why would she possibly want to know about his life? He left after coming to the realization that she would never feel about him the way he felt about her. He wanted to respect and honor that, so he removed himself from her sphere in hopes of easing her awkward discomfort. “Why?”
“She cares about you, Mike,” Clark replied. “Maybe your leaving made her realize just how much….”

“No,” Mike shook his head. “She was very clear. She did not have those kinds of feelings for me.”

“We have a saying here on Earth about absence making the heart grow fonder.”

“I don’t want ‘fond’,” Mike answered, sadly. “I never did.”

Clark tilted his head to one side for a second and listened to something outside of the human range of hearing. Mike attempted to tune in but without knowing where to focus, Clark could be listening to a football game on a television set three miles away for all he knew.

“Apparently, defending the Earth against alien invaders makes the humans hungry. Big Belly Burger?”

“Nah,” he answered, nonchalantly. “I’m not—“

“You don’t need to rush back,” Clark said, ramping up a pitch to convince him to stay that Mike already knew was going to succeed. Mike rarely denied Clark anything. Logically, he knew that Clark was simply playing for time in an effort to get Mike to stick around for a while longer. Time he would use to try to convince him to see Kara, or worse, orchestrate an ‘accidental’ meeting. But he’d rarely been able to withstand a full-on Clark Kent Midwestern charm offensive. “Stay for one meal. Meet the rest of the gang. Get to know them for five minutes. I know they have a lot of questions about you.” Clark chuckled, indicating that Mike was going to be in for an intense but friendly interrogation, before adding, “You just flew three thousand miles across country at hypersonic speeds and then fought a cadre of Dominators. You need to eat. I insist. I’ll even pay.” Clark used his mentor voice, which made staying for dinner non-negotiable but then lightened the conversational tone by grinning, “And I’m sure Bruce would love to see you.”

“Great,” Mike sighed, his voice notably lacking in enthusiasm. He had a complicated relationship with Bruce Wayne, a.k.a. The Dark Knight. They were allies and with Philadelphia being closer to Gotham than Metropolis, had proved over time that they would always have each other’s back when in a tight spot.

But Bruce wasn’t his friend, so much as he was Clark’s and it was a dynamic not unlike befriending the best friend of one’s older sibling. While anyone who gave Mike a hard time would feel Clark’s
wrath, Bruce was given carte blanche in this arena and took a nearly sadistic pleasure in running roughshod over Mike at every opportunity.

“Clark, please tell me you haven’t told Bruce about what happened with me and Kara six years ago,” Mike’s stormy-gray eyes begged. Between the three of them, Kara hadn’t been a forbidden subject. After all, she was Clark’s beloved cousin. But Mike had always steered clear of divulging the specifics of the night that drove him away from National City. Away from her. Instead, Mike had always chosen to speak of Kara’s positive qualities whenever the subject came up in Bruce’s presence. To that day, Clark and Lois were the only ones that knew the full extent of Mike’s heartbreak.

Clark’s grimace was all the answer that Mike needed to his query, but he compounded the already sinking feeling in Mike’s gut by adding, “How could I predict that a situation like this would bring us all together?”

“How could you not? This,” Mike indicated the field of battle, strewn with Dominator corpses, “was bound to happen sooner or later.”

Clark looked around and nodded. “Point taken.”

“All you did was give him ammunition.”

“You know he’s just baiting you. You should try standing up to him.”

“You know I can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“Because he’s just baiting me.”

After a moment, a wide grin spread across Clark’s face, and he sighed in a somewhat melodramatic fashion, a hand over his heart. “The student has become the master. I couldn’t be more proud. I’ll tell him he can knock it off now.”
Mike did a double-take, his eyes widening to a nearly impossible size. “Are you kidding me?” he asked, stupefied. “This has all been some sort of an elaborate test?”

Clark’s laugh was hearty and unrepentant, his eyes sparkling with mirth. “In the beginning, it was just supposed to be a joke, but then it just became a kind of game. We wanted to see what it would take to break you…but we never could.”

“Good to know I make an excellent verbal punching bag.”

“Hey,” Clark defended. “It wasn’t without purpose. You’ve seen how it can be, people wanting to tear you down even though all you want to do is help them. Sometimes it’s hard not to lash out, not to get angry—sometimes it’s hard not to say, ‘I quit. These people can save themselves.’ Bruce and I just wanted to thicken your skin a bit, especially in light of the reason you came to me in the first place.”

“My skin wasn’t the problem,” Mike pointed out. “It was my heart.”

“Well, you know what I think. You’ve made your heart so bulletproof nothing’s getting through, and that’s no way to live. You need something to remind you of why you keeping fighting.”

“I have something,” Mike reminded his friend. “I have twenty-four somethings, which is why I need to get back to Philly sooner rather than later.”

“Let’s get changed and we can meet the others at Big Belly. It’s just a few blocks down.” Clark threw an arm over Mike’s shoulder and led him from the field of battle, leaving the agents of the DEO to clean up the mess.

TBC

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Chapter 2

Oh, she don't see the light that's shining
Deeper than the eyes can find it
Maybe we have made her blind
So she tries to cover up her pain and cut her woes away
'Cause cover girls don't cry after their face is made

Alessia Cara – ‘Scars to Your Beautiful

Chapter 2/11

“We’re not going to get anything out of him…her…it,” Kara cringed, resigning herself to an evening wasted on interrogation.

“Give me five minutes alone with him,” rasped the stone-gravel voice of the Batman as they closed the door of the DEO conference room. “I’ll get it out of him.”

Supergirl pinned The Dark Knight with a glare, crossing her arms at her chest, her body language speaking volumes about her feelings on the notion of torturing any sentient being. Torturing this one made it that much easier to torture the next, and the next one might be more ally than foe. But, despite the company he kept and the allies he’d made, Bruce Wayne was notoriously wary of aliens – of all kinds.

“I think we can all agree that this was just a small incursion looking to secure a beachhead for full-scale invasion,” Bruce continued. “It’s safe to say we can expect an invasion force…and soon. We need numbers.”

“We’re not getting anything from this one,” Martian Manhunter pointed out. Involuntarily, Bruce took a step away from J’onn. Aliens like Clark, Matthews, and Kara were one thing, but it was
difficult to get accustomed to the Green Martian.

Reading Wayne’s discomfort clear as day, right there on the surface of his mind, the Martian shape-shifted back into his Hank Henshaw persona.

“How can you even know with the gibberish it was spouting?” Bruce grumbled, toying with the flechettes built into the wrist of his gadget-heavy suit.

“Gideon, the AI on board the Waverider, provided us with an audio translation program. Winn’s been back at the CIC doing simultaneous translation,” J’onn informed him.

“Guess I was out of the loop,” he seethed. His steel-blue eyes reminded her of Mon-El’s, except instead of the soft affection she dreamed of seeing, she saw only hard chips of ice with pinpoint pupils like laser beams.

“It’s not my fault you were late!” she defended. She flinched away from the unrelenting bore of his stare. She hated the idea of Mon-El becoming anything like this unbreakable, broken man. Feared that her actions so long ago now, did just that.

“Well, maybe if I’d been given a heads-up! How long did you know this was coming?” Bruce turned his well-honed and ruthless interrogation tactics upon her. He was a man without fear of reprisals, even from those far stronger and more powerful than he. “You had enough time to gather your little league of superheroes from other dimensions.”

“Parallel Earths,” she corrected. “Dimensions are a whole different….never mind,” she waved away her babbling explanation. Discomfited by the Batman’s intense stare and prosecutorial tone, she crossed her arms over her chest as though to protect herself. Confused why the blatant sneer beneath his black bat cowl was directly focused upon her, she gathered her courage, dropped her arms, and stepped directly into his personal space, nose to nose with him. “What is your problem?” she demanded.

Bruce Wayne reached up and tore off the Kevlar cowl designed to strike fear into the hearts of criminals. Unashamed, he revealed his true face to her, the crow’s feet gathered around his cold, blue eyes, and the streaks of silver in once mahogany hair; because what he had to say should be spoken between people and not personas. He breathed deeply, expelling the air in his lungs with barely concealed rage. “I don’t like people who hurt my friends.”
His fierce expression dared her to deny it, but all she could do was drop her arms in defeat. She’d known instantly of whom he’d been speaking. Clark and Bruce were friends, after a fashion, so it made sense that The Dark Knight would have become allied with Valor. She’d even seen news footage of them stopping a terrorist attack on the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia. If the definition of ‘seeing’ the footage was expanded to mean watching it over and over every day for three weeks, examining it for every detail and drinking in the sight of him as though he were a tall glass of ice water in the middle of endless Kaldarvian desert.

Kara recalled how proud she’d been of Mon-El for what he’d done that day – and every day afterward.

One hand went to grasp at the glyph over her heart, the broken instrument that had never quite ticked the same after Mon-El left, or with the same passion. More than anything, she wanted to don her glasses to hide the emotions his accusation brought to the fore. Like Bruce Wayne, she was unbreakable and broken. Pleading eyes turned to J’onn.

“I’ll be outside if I’m needed,” he said, as though he could read her mind and ducked quickly out of the room. For a moment, she breathed a sigh a relief that, for once, her weakness would go unwitnessed by the man she thought of as a father figure.

Seeing a chink in her emotional armor, Bruce went for the coup de grace. “Furthermore, it strikes me as hypocritical that a woman so unwilling to torture a hostile didn’t hesitate to destroy a man she called ally with so little effort…and even less remorse.” His comment cut her to the quick as though each word were constructed of razor sharp Kryptonite.

Her eyes filled with tears and the air caught in her lungs. “Re-re-remorse?” she stuttered. “H-how dare you? You think I don’t regret the things I said that day? That I don’t regret the stupid girl I was? So afraid of someone showing me any real affection that I pushed away the one man who ever loved me for me? You think I don’t regret?” Her eyes flared white-hot for a moment before shifting back to the steady, cornflower-blue. “I assure you, Mr. Wayne, I am nothing but remorse.”

Kara dropped into one of the chairs at the table, wiping at the tears streaming down her face, all the fight having left her. Bruce Wayne, seeing her true face for the first time, no longer saw the heartless bitch he’d imagined when he’d heard the story, too full of herself to care. Instead he saw a broken little girl, dying on the inside. The boiling rage he carried on Matthews’ behalf dropped to a simmer at her genuine tears and the sight of her fingers worrying her red cape between them, like a little girl clinging to a security blanket.

A crisp, white handkerchief appeared in front of her face. How many things did he have hidden in that suit? She accepted the handkerchief gingerly, as though it came with ulterior motives attached. “I didn’t mean tho-ose things I said,” she explained with a hiccough. “I was scared and everythi-ing
I said just came out…wro-ong. And it was like…I couldn’t stop it! He scared me,” she confessed.

“I’ve known Matthews a long time,” Bruce said, crossing his arms. “Longer than you now,” he realized as he said it. “And he is about as scary as a fluffy bunny. There’s not a mean bone in his body. Even Clark gets angry from time to time and clearly so do you…but not him, not really. And believe me…I’ve tried to stir it up in him. He doesn’t even get angry at the criminals. He just cracks a joke—usually about the marital status of their parents—and then hands them over to the police like he’s sending kids off to the principal’s office.”

Wayne’s words, though delivered in a comforting voice or his version of it anyway, did not console. Instead, they served to enflame the grief inside of her. Grief that, rather than fading over the years, had only grown stronger. “All I wanted was time,” she wept, wiping at her tears with the Batman’s handkerchief. “To figure out what I wanted. I thought I couldn’t be Supergirl and have a relationship, but just when I started to feel like I had a handle on Supergirl, everything began to spin out of control again. My sister was slipping away, my best friends were going behind my back to create Guardian, and I knew Mon-El was holding something back from me. I didn’t know who to trust.”

“You could have left it alone,” Bruce said calmly. “He said his piece and walked away. You could have left it alone.”

“It was so awkward!” she exclaimed. Standing up from her chair, she wrapped her cape around her like a protective shield. “I just wanted to make it…less awkward.”

“Well done,” he deadpanned.

“I never said I was good at it! At any of it! I’d never been in a relationship before. Not one that lasted more than five minutes, anyway. You have no idea what it’s like to live your whole life with a secret—not like this. Mon-El was the first man who never knew anything but me…just as I am. He knew all the parts of me, and in that moment, nothing in the world was more terrifying than that. And what’s worse was that…I felt like…I didn’t know him at all.”

“Because you were too caught up in your differences, instead of all the things that made you alike,” Bruce allowed.

“Right! But Alex helped me see.”
“See what?” Bruce swept his cape aside in a gesture far grander than he had intended before taking a seat in the chair opposite hers, ready to hear her side of the story.

“She made me see that I was just pushing him away because I was scared of being hurt. Scared of being bad at it. Because I did feel the same way, I was just too much of a coward to admit it, even to myself. And when I did admit it, I wanted to tell him...tell him...that I had been an idiot. A blind idiot. I had been so locked into my view of who I thought he was supposed to be that I blinded myself to who he actually became. He stopped drinking, worked really hard at his job, kept helping people even though I had stopped training him....”

“Went to college and got an education,” Bruce added, providing her with a tantalizing glimpse of Mon-El’s last six years.

Kara’s head snapped around to look at him, she dropped back into her chair, focusing her intense gaze on Bruce. “Really?” she asked, grateful for this tiny piece of information. “He did?”

“University of Metropolis,” Bruce confirmed with a nod. “School during the day, tending bar at night. He helped Clark when he could and did his homework behind the bar on slow nights. Summer school, too. Got his four year degree in three by keeping his eyes on the prize.”

For some reason this knowledge, these golden nuggets of information sent tears rolling down her face again. “Please,” she pleaded softly, “tell me?”

Bruce drummed his fingers on the conference room table and worried his lower lip between his teeth, an action that seemed wholly unlike The Dark Knight. Coming to a decision, he shook his head slightly and Kara’s heart dropped into her stomach. “Matthews made Clark promise not to reveal details of his life to you.”

“I know!” she sighed, tears tracking down her cheeks. “But I don’t understand why.”

“He said...he hoped that if you weren’t getting any information that eventually you’d stop asking, and your life could go back to the way it was before he arrived. He wanted it to be like you’d never met. He said he wanted to give that to you.”

“But that’s not what I wanted. I never wanted that!” Kara bent over and placed her head on her knees, the ache in her heart so intense she wanted to curl into a ball.
“He said your life as Supergirl had many burdens, and he was done being one of them.”

“Burden?” she asked, horrified by the word. “He was never a burden.”

“He crash-landed on this planet and crowded you. He took your time, tested your patience, and disappointed you at every opportunity. He said it made him happy to give you back the space he took from you the night his pod crashed. Personally, I think that’s a load of bullshit, about it making him happy, I mean.”

Clinging to a tiny shred of hope, she begged, “Please, I need to see him. You can talk to him…get him to understand.”

Bruce shook his head again. “He thinks he’s doing what’s best for you, and if you truly knew him…even a little bit…then you’d know that—“

“He’s always going to do what he thinks is best for me,” Kara finished. “But don’t I get a choice?” she countered. “He imagines me happy and that my life went back to the way it was before he arrived, but that isn’t true—none of that is true. And after all this time...there’s no reason to think it ever will. What about my choice in all of this, Mr. Wayne?”

Drumming his fingers on the table again, Kara clearly saw the conflict warring in Wayne’s eyes. “He said you always had to have the last word.”

Kara groaned, frustrated and heartbroken over her lack of progress. After six years, most people would give up, to be sure. For the first year she could get nothing, not even with Winn’s help, because Mon-El had taken pains to go off the grid. No bank account, no phone, no permanent address; only a PO. Box in Metropolis, where the DEO sent his stipend checks. But even after a few months he stopped cashing those.

Clark provided monthly updates to the DEO but those were disturbingly lacking in detail, and after Valor made his official debut alongside Superman, the updates stopped altogether. When his official, suited debut came, Kara was shocked to discover that Valor apparently had all the abilities of Superman and herself. Suddenly, he could fly, and there was heat vision as well as arctic breath. Somehow, Clark’s training had drawn all of those latent abilities out of him, making him a hero in a way she never could – had never really tried.

Just another reminder of all the ways she had failed him.
She had underestimated him in a hundred different ways by allowing herself to see only Mon-El’s surface potential. In the beginning, she had wanted him to be a hero because she believed it fulfilled her destiny to make him so and not because it might have been his. Clark had not been blinded by such ego; he had seen only a lost man in need of guidance. If only her eyes had been opened sooner.

Such had been a recurring theme in her life for the last six years since his departure. If only….

Resigned to the knowledge that Bruce Wayne will never divulge the information she needed to hear, Kara leaned back in her chair, her entire aura pulsing with misery. “Every morning when I get to work, I sit at my computer and check the Philadelphia Inquirer for any news on Valor,” she confessed. “Every day…usually more than once. After the first year, J’onn ordered Winn to stop helping me run internet searches on his alias. Said he deserved to be left in peace. Winn seemed to be relieved. There was a job opening at the Inquirer for a reporter, so I sent them my resume last year. ‘Thank you for your interest, Ms. Danvers, but your skillset doesn’t match our needs at this time.’ They were looking for someone who could report on mergers and acquisitions, movements in the stock market and that sort of thing…not my specialty, but I figured what the heck, right?”

“You would have left National City?” Bruce gaped, his mind spinning at this revelation.

“Leave National City?” she scoffed bitterly. “I’d be tempted to leave the suit behind if he asked, retire her for good if it meant earning his forgiveness.”

“He would never ask of that of you,” Bruce replied, his voice nothing but confidence. “It’s not his way.”

Kara smiled for the first time since Bruce had met her. Not the sunshine smile that Matthews spoke of with such reverence but a small half-smile, an upward tic of her mouth. “I know that…now,” she said sentimentally, as though recalling a long ago memory. “It’s one of the things I love about him.”

“So you do love him?”

“Oh yes,” she sighed. “Although, after all this time, I do wonder if it’s him I love…or just the memory of him. The strange thing is that I didn’t see him clearly before he left, but now…it’s like I see him in my mind with fresh eyes—see him with my heart. The way I always should have seen him. I just don’t know if that’s…true. Or if it’s just the romantic dreams of a silly little girl.”
“I doubt he’s the same man you remember,” Wayne said. “He’s thoughtful, quiet around new people – withdrawn even. He seems most comfortable with children. Says they don’t judge and they love without prejudice.”

It stings, the implication that her prejudices so changed him on a fundamental level, but her heart somersaulted at the image Wayne provided anyway. Kara gave him a full smile though it didn’t reach her eyes. ‘Comets’, he’d heard Matthews refer to them – but he just didn’t see it. “I never would have imagined that,” Kara said. “Mon-El around children. He always seemed like a….” the smile slipped from Kara’s face, and she chuckled, sadly. “I was going to say ‘bad influence’, but he was never that was he?” she asked herself more than the man sitting in front of her. “He was only ever just trying to find his way.”

A knock on the door preceded Clark’s entry into the room, his hands shoved deeply into the pockets of his khaki slacks, his bespectacled blue eyes saying everything with his sadness.

“A Clark?” she greeted, a hint of a question in her tone. Bruce spun his chair in Clark’s direction to face him.

“I’m sorry, Kara,” he answered, shaking his head. “I tried to get him to stay. I really did.”

Her throat tightened again, but this time she fought against the gathering tears. For some reason it was easier to show her emotion to Bruce Wayne, a virtual stranger, than it was to lay herself bare before her own flesh and blood. “I know,” she told her cousin. “I know you tried.” Clark approached her and pulled her into a hug which did nothing to bolster the tenuous strength with which she clung to her emotional control. “I won’t…I won’t ask about him again, okay? I know that puts you in an impossible position.” A single tear slipped down her cheek, but she swiped at it quickly, not wanting to make Clark feel any more torn between them than he already did.

“I didn’t know when I made that promise to him that it would go on this long. I thought you’d at least find a way to be…friends.”

“I don’t think that’s what either of us wanted.” She blew out a deep breath as she wrangled her control. ‘Friends’. It was such a lukewarm word, so unequal to the depth of feeling she swam in with every thought of him.

“But it would be something, at least.”
“Would you have been satisfied to be ‘just friends’ with Lois?” she asked, truly wondering if such a thing was possible or acceptable. Would it be easier to put Mon-El behind her, to put him on a shelf somewhere like a project that never got completed, or settle for a tepid life as friends? Always wondering but never daring to cross that line. She believed that putting him on that shelf might be far kinder to the both of them.

“We tried friends,” Clark said, seeing her dilemma clearly. “It didn’t work out.”

“I wish things would ‘not work out’ for me and Mon-El the way they didn’t work out for you and Lois,” she shrugged, attempting a smile but failing miserably.

“I’m sorry, Kara. I truly am.”

“No one’s sorrier than I am,” she replied. Like a thousand times before, she wished she had just grabbed him that night in her apartment when he confessed his feelings to her. Grabbed him and kissed him until their skin created sparks. But wishing to turn back time never solved anything – if the last six years had taught her anything, they had taught her that. “J’onn once told me that I made my choice and that I should own it. Maybe it’s time I start doing that.”

Kara offered Bruce his handkerchief back, but he waved her off telling her to keep it.

“Where are you going?” Clark asked.

“I think everything is well in hand here,” she replied stiffly. “I think I’ll just head home and get some rest. It’s been a long few days.” It was an excuse, and everyone in the room knew it. Kryptonians didn’t get tired, not without employing Herculean effort, but they did get emotionally weary, and Kara was showing clear wear and tear around the edges.

Alex caught her on her way out of the building, and by the look on her sister’s face, Kara knew that Clark had briefed her before coming to the conference room. “I heard,” was all she said.

“I’m okay,” Kara nodded, lying just a little.

“Do you want me to come home with you? We can have a slumber party, like old times,” she suggested, a forced smile on her face. Alex didn’t like the idea of her sister going home to an empty apartment – not in this state.
“No,” Kara shook her head quickly. “I think I just need to be alone right now.” Better to get used to it, she told herself.

“Okay,” Alex agreed. The pity shone so bright in Alex’s eyes that Kara was forced to turn away from the glare of it. “If you change your mind….”

At the top floor exit—the exit created specifically for her to come and go—her feet rose from the ground. “I know,” she said to her sister as she hovered in the air. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

She was home in less than a minute, slipping into the fourth floor window of her living room she always left unlatched. In the shower, she cried until the water ran cold before stepping out and struggling into a nightshirt.

Wearily, she climbed into bed and pulled the covers over her head, her blinking eyelids like sandpaper to her sensitive, overwrought eyes. Exhaustion dragged her down to sleep almost as soon as her head hit the pillow.

TBC
Chapter 3

You can't make the snow fall in summer

Or make him not want her

Not leave you behind

Maybe he'll stay in touch years down the road

And hope that he's still on your mind

The sun may come up and go down again

I'll still swear it's a beautiful life

Charlotte Martin – “Beautiful Life”

Chapter 3/11

“Mr. Matthews! Mr. Matthews!” shouted a familiar voice that had grown dear to him over the last few months. He turned to find a set of blonde ringlets barreling at him, waving a page of construction paper artwork in one hand, and he couldn’t stop the dimpled smile from spreading across his face.

Mike Matthews settled his glasses firmly on the bridge of his nose and dropped to his haunches, placing his forefinger over his lips to remind this little hellion to lower her voice a few notches. Familiar with the instruction, she followed suit and changed her shout into a library whisper.

“Mr. Matthews,” she rasped. “Look what I drew!”

“Well,” he grinned as he took the page from her, the same grin that had all the little girls in his class and even some of their mothers, swooning, “What do we have here?”

“See that’s Valor, saving the school bus,” she announced before he even had a chance to look at the crayon drawing. “See! He’s holding the school bus up with one hand!” she squealed excitedly. “And that’s Supergirl stopping that runaway train! Isn’t she strong?”
“She sure is,” Mike chuckled dryly, his student’s excitement catching like a house on fire – as usual. His eyes were drawn to the yellow-haired stick figure in the drawing, and he gulped uncomfortably. “Is this one for me, or does this one go home to be put on the fridge?” he asked.

“For you,” she chirped, her ringlets springing up and down as she bounced on the balls of her feet.

“Well, thank you very much,” he grinned. “How about I pin it to the wall behind my desk?”

Amelia nodded excitedly, always happy to have her artwork displayed where others could see.

The twenty-three other students in his class milled about as he ushered Amelia towards her seat. As usual, Eric and Miguel were near their desks, their heads locked together in deep discussion about who they could torment next – always had to keep one eye on those two hooligans. Yvonne sat in her chair in the back corner, thumbing through a book that was at least two years more advanced than her second grade level. She was brilliant but so hard to reach.

Olu was a natural leader who had yet to learn to channel her ability into anything other than bossiness, but she still managed to have a bevy of other girls following her around. Currently, they all had their heads crammed together near Olu’s desk in the back. Alan, wearing glasses like Mike’s, preferred to eschew all social activity unless absolutely necessary. He reached up and nudged his slipping glasses back up the bridge of his nose, Mike mirrored the boy’s actions in a sympathetic show of solidarity.

“Seats now, please!” he projected, raising his voice over the din but keeping the tone carefully unthreatening. A quick scramble in the room and twenty-four pairs of legs were dangling from their seats, the occasional untied shoe-lace begging to be rectified.

After art class with Mrs. Fallducci, came math. “Math books,” he called out, clapping his hands together. Another mad scramble, as twenty-four heads dived into twenty-four backpacks to retrieve textbooks. “Page 72. Today we’re learning subtraction in parts, which is going to be great because ‘Math is…?’”

“SUPER FUN!” They all shouted, in unison, at the top of their lungs.

“That’s right,” he laughed.
Mike helped Amelia find her place, flipping her textbook to page 72 with barely a glance. Predictably, his flighty imp, Madison, got distracted by Kesha’s yellow hair bow before she could even get her book open, and Mike couldn’t help but chuckle.

Back at the chalkboard, he took them through the lesson, breaking it down into steps, and then demonstrating the skill through multiple examples. Behind his back, twenty-three heartbeats, each one unique and recognizable to him, pulsed at a steady rate, but the twenty-fourth caught his attention as it ticked up in speed – a troublemaker up to no good, surely. His ears matched the heartbeat with the breathing pattern he knew so well.

“Jason, back in your seat,” he ordered sternly, without stopping the staccato glide of chalk across the blackboard. And without turning around. The pulse in his ears spiked even higher as the entire room issued a collective gasp. After six months in his class, the students already thought he was magic, and he cultivated that belief from time to time because it helped keep them in line. “Do you want a trip to the principal’s office?”

“No, Mr. Matthews,” Jason sulked, climbing back into his desk chair and crossing his arms in a huff.

“Are you sure?” he asked, dropping the chalk in the tray and turning around, his mean face set to ‘medium’. “Because I’m giving them away for free today. Practice the problems on the board,” he said to the rest of the class, separating the instruction from the discipline. Twenty-three pencils began scratching on large-ruled paper.

Jason swung his dangling feet in the chair, kicking the back of Fiona’s chair in front of him. “I’m sure,” he grumbled.

“Glad to hear it. Now stop kicking Fiona’s chair before she gets angry.” Mike leaned down, his hands grasping at the edges of Jason’s desk, seeking his eyes. The child’s hazel orbs are difficult to find through the mop of dark brown hair that falls low over his forehead. “Let me give you a piece of friendly advice, kid. Don’t make a girl angry; they never forget, and they’ll gang up on you if given the chance. Now who has questions?”

Predictably, Amelia’s hand shot into the air so hard her entire body nearly came off the chair. Mike hastened to her side dropping to his haunches to get closer to her level. Amelia usually needed extra attention in math, which he was only too happy to provide. Amelia’s smile was like sunshine, and her bouncing ringlets reminded him of….
They reminded him of her.

She was like a hazy memory now, gold around the edges, but she hadn’t faded nearly enough, and he doubted she ever would. He’d tried to move on a few times, dated a few women that caught his eye, but none had moved him the way she had. None had stirred his soul. And so he’d resigned himself to a life without love and made himself believe he was okay with that. He had a greater destiny, he told himself – and so did she.

Distracted by thoughts of her, Amelia’s voice brings him back to the present. “Mr. Matthews?”

“Yes,” he drawled, crossing his eyes as he looked up at her, eliciting the expected giggle.

“I don’t know what to do next,” she complained, getting flustered. So like Kara when she got nervous or overwhelmed.

“Okay, okay,” he soothed, his voice lowered the way one speaks to a skittish kitten. “Let’s try another one. How about this one…forty-six minus twelve. Remember the steps. What do we do first?”

“Subtract ten…?”

“Very good. And then….” When she scrunched up her face in frustration he gave her a hint, “Take the total and…?”

“Take away two more?” she guessed.

“Very good,” he praised, patting her on the back. “See…you’ve got this! Just trust yourself. Now do five more and the rest are homework.” She wiggled happily in her seat, proud of earning his attention and his praise.

Standing up, he wandered the room, checking the work of his other students, most of whom needed little help, thankfully.
Fifteen minutes later, they were filing out of the classroom towards the playground for recess. And none too soon as far as Mike was concerned, because they all seemed to be coming out of their skin. They needed to run and play—spend a fair share of that pent up energy. No sooner did they hit the sunshine then every last one of them was running and screaming like a horde of banshees. Some headed towards the jungle gym, others towards the blacktop to play kickball, choosing the same teams they always chose in their utterly predictable manner.

Keeping an ear tuned to racing heartbeats and shouting voices, he followed the group to the jungle gym and engaged them in play, climbing the ladder alongside them and even crossing the monkey bars a few times. They laughed together, for a moment no age difference setting them apart and no barrier between teacher and students. For the rest of their lives they’d always remember the teacher that played with them.

Leaving his little climbing monkeys to their play, he headed toward the kickballers next. He played both sides for one inning each, hopping on one leg, his hands clasped behind his back, to even up the playing field a bit.

He bowed out of the game to head back to the jungle gym just as the doors opened and spat out Erica Doland’s second grade class. Like a giant litter of undisciplined puppies, they ran willy-nilly to join the throng of children already on the playground.

Erica Doland was his partner on team-teach days, and she was almost as fun-loving as he was—though at least a decade past joining her second-graders in play. She had also been Mike’s student teacher mentor before he’d been offered a permanent position at Fox Chase.

“I don’t know where you find the energy, Mike,” she said, happily dropping onto the park bench provided for the teachers to sit. “I’m exhausted just watching you.”

Mike laughed whole-heartedly, throwing himself down on the bench beside her. “This is the fun part!”

“Where does it all come from?” Erica wondered, handing him a bottle of water.

“Must be the amphetamines,” he jested, twisting the cap off the bottle and gulping down the water.

Erica laughed, knowing Mike so well that she doesn’t even need to be told that he’s joking. They
talked for a few minutes, laughing over some of the crazy things some of their students did while commiserating over their troublemakers and the ones that were just plain troubled and hard to reach.

“If only I could understand why—“ something caught his attention in mid-sentence, and his hearing, seemingly always set to ‘worry’, kicked into ‘anxious’ setting. There was something wrong, and he couldn’t place his finger on what it was.

“Mike? What is it?” Erica asked, her voice rife with tension as though she too sensed something out of the ordinary.

He shook his head, as though shaking away the distraction of her voice. So many noises, so many heartbeats, the playground was so full of beats and voices he didn’t recognize, drowning out the ones he did—he couldn’t pinpoint which one was wrong or where it was. His instincts screamed at him to do something but gave him no target or direction.

“Mike?”

His eyes darted to the blacktop, seeing nothing but kids scrambling for a runaway kickball. His frantic vision shifted out to the basketball nets where a few of Erica’s students were playing a game of H-O-R-S-E, oblivious to any dangers.

A high-pitched scream—a shriek—the sound only a small child could render, tore his attention away from the basketball playing kids and towards the jungle gym where he heard the heavy thump of a body hitting the ground. The vibration of the shriek ringing in his ears, he recognized its sound immediately.

“Amelia?!” he shouted, running in her direction. Every honed instinct in his body screamed at him to turn on his speed, to get to her as fast as he possibly could. But to do so would reveal his secret to everyone on the playground, and second-graders were not famous for their secret-keeping skills.

If Clark had taught him a thousand things, he had taught him one, and that was to maintain his identity at all costs. In the end, it was the only way he could truly help people, and he knew beyond a doubt if the people found out he was Valor, he would never teach another day in his life. And that wasn’t something he could live with. Mike forced himself to keep his movement on the high end of human speeds.

He rounded the jungle gym to see a small crowd of children gathered around the prone body of
Amelia, his little, blonde ray of sunshine. He brushed several kids aside to make room as he dropped to his knees on the ground beside her. “Don’t touch her,” he warned the children, concerned about spinal injuries. “Don’t touch her. What happened?”

“She climbed to the top, Mr. Matthews.” Olu stood next to him, pointing to the top of the jungle gym, a decorative rocket-shaped piece that wasn’t made for climbing. “She climbed to the top, and she fell.” Olu pointed at the monkey bars. “She hit her head on the bars before she hit the ground.”

Mike’s guts clenched, but he grabbed Olu’s arm and looked her in the eye, ”Run as fast as you can to the office, and tell them what’s happened. Tell them to call 911. Can you do that for me?” he asked. Olu nodded and took off like a shot. Olu was a natural leader with an instinct for getting things done.

Erica began pulling the kids away from the gathering crowd, sending them over to sit against the outside of the building. The screaming and shouting of fun and play trickled away to heavy silence. While Erica was busy with the other kids, Mike lowered his glasses to the tip of his nose and x-rayed Amelia’s body. Her breathing was shallow and her pulse weak. Thankfully, her spine and neck were intact, but he spotted a bleed in her brain large enough to be fatal for a child her size in a matter of minutes.

She was so innocent and such a precious light, a source of joy for all who met her, and he wasn’t about to let that light be extinguished because an ambulance couldn’t get there fast enough. She needed to be on an operating table in the next few minutes, or she would never wake again. If she died…his job would be forfeit anyway, if it wasn’t already.

“Screw it,” he muttered, lifting her limp body into his arms. Holding her close to his chest, he bent his knees and prepared to take flight.

But before he could lift-off, the air around him kicked up into a vortex, and the earth shook beneath his feet as a familiar blur of red, blue, and gold dropped to the ground just a few feet in front of him, her cape fluttering around her.

Mike’s mouth dropped open and for a moment, his ability to speak abandoning him. Not so for the now raucous group of children behind him, who immediately began hollering and clapping.

“Ka-Supergirl,” he gasped, finally finding his voice. “What are you--?” He was paralyzed in the moment by her presence. By her beauty and strength, and its ability to take his breath away no less diminished by time or distance. In that instant, Mike knew that no matter how long he stayed away from her, and no matter how far he ran, Kara Zor-El was always going to be the chink in his armor,
and nothing would ever change that. For a moment he forgot about the injured child in his arms, so it was a good thing that Supergirl hadn’t.

“Give her to me,” she demanded, holding out her arms. “You can’t reveal yourself.”

“There isn’t much time,” he explained, passing Amelia’s tiny, delicate frame over to her. Mike pointed to the West. “The nearest hospital is four miles that way,” he informed her, assuming she was unfamiliar with the area. He could already hear the sound of approaching sirens. “There’s a water tower on top of the building and a helipad. You can’t miss it. She has a bleed in her brain. Tell them. Please,” he begged, a lump rising in his throat as he brushed a mess of blond ringlets from Amelia’s slackened face. She was so lifeless that a kernel of fear burrowed deep within him.

“I will,” she promised. “Will you come?”

“As soon as I can,” he replied.

Supergirl stepped back, her comet-blue eyes meeting his terrified slate-gray gaze with soft, reassuring intensity before tilting her head back and rocketing into the sky. Almost instantly, she made a sharp turn to the West, and Mike kept his eyes glued to her form until she disappeared on the horizon.

“Was that Supergirl?” Erica asked, breaking the spell Kara cast over him. “What is she doing this far away from National City?”

“I don’t know,” he lied. “Look, I have to—“

“Go,” she both interrupted and instructed. “I’ve got your kids. You need to stop by administration, and tell them what happened and then get to the hospital. Don’t worry…I’ve got this.”

Mike took off running. He had to stop by his classroom to grab his keys and phone and pick up a few other things he might need, including Amelia’s backpack with the stuffed rabbit she hid inside for when she needed a little extra emotional support. She didn’t think anybody knew about it, but she had a teacher with x-ray vision and super hearing. Mr. Snuggles, she called him; the bunny that wore a black vest and bow tie.

She was going to need Mr. Snuggles when she woke up.
TBC

TBC
Chapter 4

Superhuman or not, when the mind is in a state of panic one cannot move fast enough, think logically enough, or see clearly enough to accomplish even the simplest of tasks.

Mike had been through this a thousand times before but never with someone for whom he had truly cared on a personal level. He had ferried countless injured passengers to the nearest hospital for medical treatment, looked into the eyes of equally innumerable parents and loved ones who didn’t hesitate to beg him to save the lives so precious to them.

But looking into Kara’s eyes as he laid Amelia’s form in her arms, for the first time he knew what
those people had felt. The desperation—the brush of smoky wings from black demons coming to steal someone you love from you.

His hands shook as he attempted to slot the shaking key into the ignition of his 10-year-old Honda Civic. The administration office was contacting her mother who would meet him there as soon as he could arrive. Luckily, she worked as a nurse at the same hospital and would already be there. Amelia’s father had taken off when she was just a toddler, explaining why she had attached herself so strongly to Mike as the only available father figure currently in her life.

Trembling hands unable to get the key into the ignition of his car, Mike sat back against the seat and took a long, deep breath, clasping his hands together in an effort to cease the shaking. “You’re not in control,” he said aloud.

It was a mantra he began several years ago. When training with Clark there had been times when superpowers hadn’t been enough to save lives, and Clark had explained that if he truly wanted this life, he had to find a way to remind himself that sometimes he was just as human as everyone else. That there were no such things as infallibility or imperviousness, not really. “You are not in control. You are powerless. There is nothing you can do now. She’s in the doctor’s hands.”

He reached for Amelia’s backpack, which was tucked next to him in the passenger seat, withdrawing the tuxedoed bunny rabbit with floppy ears. Squeezing it tightly, he held it against his forehead, drawing on every ounce of strength he had to regain some measure of control. “She’s going to be okay,” he said, hoping there was one benevolent god in this whole universe that might hear his prayer. “Please let her be okay.”

In spite of the hard lump of emotion choking his throat, Mike refused to cry. Crying would be a white flag of surrender, and he was not giving up on her until he knew there was nothing more to be done. And if the worst happened, the unimaginable, he would have to be strong for her mother and for the other kids in his class, who would have trouble understanding what happened or why. Though no one could ever understand why such things happened—not even the grown-ups.

With one hand, he had gripped the steering wheel so hard he left imprints of his fingers on the polyurethane grip. “Damn it!” he shouted. He’d left National City six years ago because he wanted to make himself bulletproof, to lock away the parts of himself that could feel anything like this again. But he’d had this calling and gotten this job, and each and every one of his students had gotten past his carefully constructed shields. And he’d let them. He had let them in. How could he be the best teacher he could be if he hadn’t? And none had burrowed deeper than his rainbow-bright Amelia.

Having gathered himself enough to try again, Mike slid his key into the car ignition, cranked the engine, and pulled out of his parking spot.
Just a few miles from the hospital, it should have been a five-minute drive, but the cosmos wanted to torture him; every light turned red just before he reached it and road construction a mile from the medical center filtered all the vehicles down to one, slow-moving lane until he was ready to scream his lungs out. He could have flown and arrived in seconds, but how would he have explained leaving his car in the teachers’ lot?

He parked in the lot outside of the Emergency Room entrance and grabbed Amelia’s backpack and bunny. At the desk he wasted no time on pleasantries. “Amelia Connors?” he asked. “She was just brought in,” he babbled.

Directed to the third floor surgical waiting room, Mike found a devastated Belinda Connors dressed in pink scrubs, slumped on a couch, her head cradled in her hands. From the broken expression on her face, he couldn’t help but imagine that the worst had come to pass. “Belinda?” he worried.

Her head snapped up, tears streaming down her face and in the space of a breath she rocketed into his waiting arms. Mike held her close, stroking her back with one hand as she tucked her head into his neck. He gathered the courage to speak, uncertain if he truly wanted the answer. “Is she…?”

“In surgery,” Belinda supplied, pulling away from him but leaving her hands on his shoulders. “The doctors said a few more minutes and my baby would have been past the point of no return.”

Mike walked her back over to the couch and guided her into a sitting position—mostly because if he didn’t sit soon, his knees were going to collapse beneath the weight of his relief. Amelia was still alive, and for now, that was enough.

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She sat unnoticed in the corner of the surgical waiting room, flipping nervously through an outdated magazine before Mon-El rushed in. She moved to stand to greet him, but then the woman was in his arms, and he was soothing her like she was all he could see in the world. He was so caught up in her that he hadn’t even sensed her presence in the room.

There were multiple operating theaters on this floor, so the surgical lobby was large, and there were seven other people waiting to hear news of their loved ones. But he didn’t seem to notice any of
them, least of all her.

She didn’t turn up her hearing to listen to what they were saying, mostly because she was afraid to
know. Kara watched as he ushered the woman gently back to her seat and then reached for her
hand, their heads hovering close to one another. What remained of Kara’s heart withered inside of
her. When she’d taken the little girl in her arms, the desperate plea in his eyes had struck her like a
spike to the chest. She was special to him, and now that she’d seen Mon-El with the child’s mother,
Kara suspected that she knew why.

Clearly…she was too late.

Grabbing her purse, she stood quietly from her chair and slipped stealthily out of the room.

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It was immediately clear to anyone that saw mother and daughter together where Amelia got her
effervescent personality. Though unlike her daughter, Belinda’s hair and eyes were dark, Amelia
had clearly inherited her mother’s tiny stature and bubbly nature. In the few months since meeting
her at parent-teacher night, Mike could tell that Belinda was the kind of woman who never let
anything get her down for long. “Supergirl brought her,” Belinda told him and then dramatically
rolled her mahogany brown eyes. “Of course you would know that, you must have been there.
But…Supergirl? What was she even doing here in Philadelphia?”

“A little out of her jurisdiction,” he agreed, with a raspy chuckle, hoping to elicit a smile.

“Why her and not Valor?” Belinda wondered.

“Maybe he’s on vacation,” Mike posited, reaching to take her hand in his. She clasped his hand
back with all of her strength. “Or maybe she is. Supergirl…come to see our fair city. Maybe she
got tired of the temperate climate and constant sunshine of National City and wanted to experience
the seasons.” When Belinda side-eyed him, he defended his idea, “Hey, superheroes must need
vacations, too!”

Belinda snorted, a dimple on her cheek making a brief appearance. “I guess it doesn’t matter
anyway. I’m just glad she was there.”

“So am I,” Mike echoed, realizing for the first time it was the truth. He was glad to have Amelia’s well-being taken out of his hands, because holding that precious life was a pressure he wasn’t sure he could have done justice.

“I wish she’s stayed around long enough for me to thank her.”

Interesting, Mike thought. Kara was here just when he needed her the most and then disappeared like a wraith. That didn’t make any sense. “She’s gone?” he asked, disturbed by the sound of his own disappointment. ‘He was not disappointed!’ he lied to himself.

“They said she flew in, told them that my baby had a…bleed in her brain and that there wasn’t much time. She stayed long enough to make sure Amelia was receiving prompt care, and then she slipped away. They said one second she was there, and the next she was just…gone. They say she doesn’t like to stick around for the gratitude.”

“Who says that?” he asked, confused. That didn’t sound like the Kara he knew—the one that relished the spotlight.

“Everyone,” Belinda replied. “Don’t you read the news?”

“Only when I have to,” he answered truthfully. For the past few years, Mike had intentionally avoided news having anything to do with National City and its favorite adoptive daughter. He learned long ago that subjecting himself to that torture did nothing to help him move forward with his life. “I teach 24 second-graders,” he joked, “who’s got time for news? I barely have time for sleep.”

“Amelia loves Valor, but I want her to learn about Supergirl, too. I want her to see that a woman can be just as strong as a man, stronger even. You see?”

“Of course.”

“Her father left us when she was so young…I was so young—only twenty-three. I worked my way through school and got my nursing degree. I was proud of how strong and independent I was, but Amelia doesn’t understand any of that, at least not yet. But stopping a runaway train…that she understands.”
“Well, Supergirl is definitely strong,” Mike agreed, remembering Amelia’s drawing from that morning. “And she certainly doesn’t need anyone. That’s for sure.”

“Amelia’s going to be so mad when she wakes up and realizes that Supergirl saved her life, but she missed the whole thing.” Belinda caught sight of the backpack in Mike’s other hand. “Oh, you brought her things!”

“I thought she might need Mr. Snuggles when she wakes up.” Mike held the backpack aloft, withdrawing the tuxedoed bunny.

“You know about Mr. Snuggles, huh?”

“I have my ways.” Mike shrugged in a self-deprecating manner that won him another dimple which disappeared almost immediately as she crumbled into tears.

“She tries so hard to keep him secret,” Belinda sniffed but held herself together. “She wants so badly to be strong.”

“Someone once told me that true strength is knowing when to accept help,” he smiled, hoping his words soothed her. “Even if that help comes from a stuffed bunny,” he sighed, handing the bunny over to her. Mike reached for her hand again, this time to offer her some of his strength. “She’s plenty strong, Belinda, and she’s going to be okay. You have to believe that.”

Belinda nodded her head fervently before reaching to pull him into her arms. “She really loves you, you know,” Belinda whispered against his shirt. “Every day…you’re all she talks about if she’s not talking about Valor or Supergirl or Mr. Snuggles. You make her excited to go to school every day.”

Mike felt his cheeks flush with embarrassment as he shook his head. “I think she’d be excited about school no matter who her teacher was. She’s just that kind of kid.”

Belinda disagreed. “This is probably inappropriate to say, but…she wishes you were her dad. She doesn’t remember her father, and you’re the most important man in her life right now. Stable,” she qualified. “Caring. She’d do anything for your approval…or attention.”
Is that what she was doing on that jungle gym? Trying to get his attention? Mike felt his guilt kick up another ten notches. “I wasn’t paying attention,” he confessed. “I mean…there were so many kids on the playground, and I had stopped to talk to Erica…Mrs. Doland for a moment. She was climbing the rocket where I couldn’t see.”

“I’m not blaming you, Mike,” she hastened to say. “I can barely keep my eyes on the kid I have. I can’t imagine having to keep track of twenty-four of the little monsters. It’s a miracle this doesn’t happen more often.”

“I am so…so sorry.” His apology tumbled out, and he swiftly covered his mouth before it could become too effusive, too much for either of them to bear.

“She’s fearless when it comes to taking risks with her body. She’s not afraid of pain, and never has been,” Belinda said. “And she would have wanted you to know that. And she’s wily. There’s no way she would have risked you stopping her from climbing that jungle gym before she was good and ready for you to know. The truth is…I’m the one who raised her to be like that. She sees all the bad things happening in the world, the things that superheroes stop and the things that they can’t…I just didn’t want her to live in fear, that’s all. I’ve always tried to teach her not to be afraid.” She straightened the tuxedo jacket on Mr. Snuggles’ suit and shrugged. “It’s a work in progress, I guess.”

“A really great work in progress,” he confirmed. “Who could use a little more confidence when it comes to math.”

“I’m sure with you teaching her she’ll figure it out.”

“Look, Belinda…this could take a while. I’m going to head down to the cafeteria and get a coffee. Would you like one?”

“That would be great. I’d go myself but—“

“You should stay right where you are. I’ll take care of it. How do you take it?”

“Cream and two sugars,” she replied, hugging Mr. Snuggles tightly to her chest.

“Coming right up,” he promised.
“Thanks, Mike.”

He shook his head. “It’s the least I can do.”

Mike strolled away from her, heading to the cafeteria on the first floor. He reached into his back pocket, pulled out his cell phone and began typing a message to Erica.

‘Here with Amelia’s mom. She’s in surgery now. More later.’ He followed the message with several fingers-crossed emojis before hitting send and tucking the phone back into his pocket.

TBC

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Chapter 5

Yeah, I wanted to play tough,

Thought I could do all this on my own

But even Superwoman sometimes needed

Superman's soul

Help me out of this hell

Your love lifts me up like helium

Your love lifts me up when I'm down, down, down,

When I've hit the ground

You're all I need

--Sia – “Helium”

Chapter 5/11

Despite the dull pang spreading through her chest and extremities, Kara couldn’t bring herself to leave the hospital, not until she discovered the little girl’s ultimate fate. She kept an ear trained to the operating room, concentrating on the brain surgeon’s calm, assertive voice. The woman seemed confident and determined, allowing Kara to rest easy that the little girl was in good hands.

And she couldn’t bring herself to leave without talking to him. She needed him to know how his leaving had hurt her, needed him to know that she’d never meant the things she said in the alien bar that night, at least not in the cruel way they had come out. She needed him to understand that she’d been driven by fear. Fear of the things he could offer her and what that might mean—a future she couldn’t control.

All the words she’d wanted to say as she cried herself to sleep those first few weeks until she was all cried out. Then...when she’d realized that he wasn’t throwing a temper tantrum, wasn’t waiting for her to beg him to come home and that he really was never coming back...how the tears had started anew. Pouring her heart out in long emails that went unanswered as though they went into the ether and then down the rabbit hole.

He had moved on, but she could not – trapped in this hellish limbo where she couldn’t step forward
and couldn’t go back. Not until it was ended, one way or another. If she could finally tell him the truth—if she could find the courage to do that—and he could still walk away from her, then she would find a way to accept it. Just as he had accepted her rejection with dignity. The dignity she callously ripped away from him in the bar on the fateful night that had changed both of their lives.

His for the better, apparently.

She went down to the bustling cafeteria for coffee and discovered a treasure trove of cuisine choices. Like a food court at the mall, it had everything from Mexican food to Mediterranean. Naturally, she gravitated towards the Asian food counter.

“Can I get an order of pot stickers, please?” she asked the server. She wasn’t that hungry, rather nauseous actually, but she had flown nearly three-thousand miles this morning and needed to refuel. Besides, sometimes hungry or not, a little comfort food was in order, and if ever there was a time for that, it was now. “Make that two orders,” she corrected.

At the cash register, she paid for her coffee and comfort food and went in search of a table, preferably quiet and out of the way. Once seated, she mostly used the business end of her chopsticks to play with her food while she thumbed through a litany of unanswered text messages on her phone. She flipped through the messages and considered responding to some of them but kept returning to the text she had received that morning from a blocked number.

‘1150 Raucha Street, Philadelphia, PA. Good luck.’

Sometime during the night, Bruce Wayne had decided to take pity on her and inform her where Mon-El could be found in a manner unlikely to be traced back to him. An action which befitted the Dark Knight to a tee. Not about to look a gift horse in the mouth, she gathered a few of her things and left for Pennsylvania without bothering to even message her sister. She didn’t want her to know—any of them—if this adventure didn’t end well, she didn’t want any of them to be the wiser.

She wasn’t sure what she had expected to find when she arrived at the address provided to her. An apartment house? A pub or restaurant where he might be tending bar or maybe an office building? She could have imagined a thousand scenarios, but standing in front of Fox Chase Elementary School would have been nowhere on that list.

Confused, she’d decided to treat the situation like a story she was investigating—and proceeded to place the Fox Chase Elementary School under surveillance for the rest of the day. She jumped to the roof of a three-story apartment complex across the street, where she could have a decent view and made herself comfortable for the duration, however long that might be.
Children spilled out of the building periodically to run and play and expend pent up energy, but it wasn’t until early afternoon that she saw him, at last. He chased after them as they played, participated in a kickball game, with his hands behind his back and hopping on one foot. To her astonishment the children called him ‘Mr. Matthews’, and from all appearances they worshiped the ground he walked upon. And more importantly, he had seemed happy. Happier than she could remember ever having seen him.

She’d recalled that Mr. Wayne had told her that Mon-El connected well with children, because they didn’t judge him for his past. Kara also remembered how Bruce described Valor capturing criminals and handing them over to the police as though he were ‘sending them to the principal’s office’. Those little clues made sense to her now.

Kara’s breath had caught in her lungs when she focused her vision to get a better look at him. She’d forgotten how handsome he was; how beautiful his smile beamed when nothing was holding him back. When she wasn’t there to judge him or yell at him or imply that he was a disappointment to her or that he would never be anything other than a hedonistic Daxamite or worse…that she couldn’t trust him.

He wore khaki slacks and a plaid button-up shirt along with a square, knit tie that was mostly just for show. His hair looked unkempt, in the way that magazine hairstylists worked hard to make it appear that way. As Valor, he needed only to slick it back to completely change the way bystanders viewed the shape of his face.

Her heart had raced inside of her chest, and her face had flooded with heat for the first time in six long years, as if she had lain dormant all this time. A mere glimpse of his face had awakened her from this interminable walking stasis. She could have sat there forever and just…looked at him. But she’d wanted more, so she’d tuned her ears to eavesdrop mode, smiling with each new tidbit her decision yielded.

He had played with them, his fun-loving side on full display, and they loved him for it. That was the part that had frustrated her the most all those years ago; his seeming inability to be serious for five minutes. How irritated she’d become whenever he’d defaulted to humor at inappropriate times. Kara now knew, after years of self-reflection, that her exasperation had been just as much about her inability to bend, as it had been about his need to cover discomfort and anxiety with jest and jibes.

But with these kids, there was no need for him to cover, he could just be himself, and Kara could see that the Mon-El she’d known had been a mask all along. He’d spent his time in National City changing his life in many ways to please her instead of discovering who he was in this world so new to him. He’d clung to her, believing her a life raft in a vast and deadly ocean, when in reality she’d been the undertow dragging him into the depths.
On the jungle gym, he had played pretend-pirate on the high seas with some guidance from several of the imaginative children. Once the game was in full swing, he had passed his imaginary sword over to one of the children and headed for the blacktop. At kickball, he had urged the better coordinated kids to play nice with the children who weren’t, and for those who struggled, he had offered much needed encouragement.

He had played as though recess was the best part of his day, as well as theirs. But when another class poured out into the playground, he took a break from entertaining his students to chat with the other teacher. He had called the woman Erica and had seemed quite comfortable with her if his off-color jokes were any barometer by which to to judge. She was older than him, in her mid-to-late forties, her skin the color of coffee mixed with cream, one hand shielding her eyes from the mid-afternoon sun as she kept an eye on the farthest afield of her students.

They had chatted like old friends until their conversation came to an abrupt halt. Mon-El seemed concerned about something but indecisive in how to deal with whatever it was. And then she’d heard the scream.

Her instinct was to fly to the defense of the injured child, but she held back, perhaps unwilling to step on Valor’s toes in his own back yard. Perhaps unwilling to reveal her presence unless she absolutely had to. Kara listened intently to the scene as it unfolded several hundred yards away. The child had fallen from a height and hit her head on the way down. Mon-El’s heart had been racing out of control, and she’d known—she’d just known—that he’d been about to make a foolhardy decision that would have resulted in an ill-timed coming out party.

She’d been in the air in less time than it took for her to draw breath and landed mere seconds after that.

When she touched down in front of him as he’d prepared to alight from the ground, the little girl’s waifish form wrapped in his arms, the emotion she saw in his eyes continued to haunt her, even now.

She didn’t know this man, and she wondered if she ever had. Over the last six years, she’d had ample opportunity to question her choices and her perceptions of him, a voice inside always reminding her of the times she’d been wrong. She’d been so hard on him—too hard—holding him to standards impossible to meet and moving the goal post so often he could never keep up.

He had been the Crown Prince of Daxam once upon a time, but destruction and circumstances forced him to put away that time and title. To fold it up like a blood-soaked garment witness to trauma and place it in the back of a closet—always there but best forgotten. He could have told her at any time, but what would that have gained him?
So early in their acquaintance she had called him ‘the worst of the worst’, not knowing his true self then. She had denigrated the memory of a supposedly dead prince with no small amount of vitriol – and she’d done it using rumor and gossip as her weapons of choice. Truthfully, she’d known nothing concrete about Daxam’s prince, nothing that hadn’t filtered through an untold number of mouths decades ago in the hazy silver of her childhood memories. She hadn’t even cared about such things then. But to the face of the man himself, she’d spoken as though her knowledge had been sacrosanct.

Watching him with the little girl’s mother had shown Kara one thing; the man she saw now was far better than any bartending refugee he likely would have been molded into under her tutelage. Clearly, it had taken escaping her for Mon-El to forge a path worthy of the hero he had eventually become, both in and out of the suit.

Had the woman in the waiting room played a role in making him into the man he now was? Had she inspired him in a way that Kara had been incapable?

What a fool she was to come here believing, for even a single second, that he might want to see her! For years she had deluded herself into thinking that if he she could just see him, just talk to him, that they could put this nonsense behind them and start building something together. They could be amazing together, she’d believed.

But it hadn’t been nonsense, had it? At least not to him. She had hurt him so badly with her thoughtlessness and, yes, selfishness, that he had fled from her to the opposite side of the country. Yet, for six years she had treated his decision like a children’s game, as though take-backs were an option on the table.

Kara cringed, the pot sticker turning to sand in her mouth. She chewed robotically and finally managed to swallow it down with a swig of equally tasteless coffee. It would be best for all if she just left. He didn’t need to see her—didn’t even want to—she finally understood.

Shoving her pot stickers to one side, Kara made a decision. She would go. As soon as the little girl was out of surgery, she would forfeit the field and go back to National City, where she belonged. For six years, she’d given them a hero with only half a heart, merely going through the motions as she wore her pain like a cilice, a garment of suffering for all to see. They deserved so much better from her, and maybe it was time she got back to giving them her best self.

She could find a way to put this long, slow heartbreak behind her. She would throw herself into her work and reinvest herself in her calling, put notions of love and partnership on the shelf for a while – which was probably where such things belonged. She would work, first, on finding her smile again.
Then, in time, maybe she’d find it within herself to open her heart up to love, to live a fearless life, in a way she had never been able to before. Maybe that can be Mon-El’s legacy to her—a legacy worth remembering.

Mind made up, Kara cradled her phone, opened a message to her sister, and responded to the text Alex sent hours ago. No doubt, by now, her sister was frantic, perhaps concerned that Kara had been sucked through a portal into some netherworld.

‘Need some time alone. I’m okay. Be back soon. Text if there’s an emergency.’ Kisses emoji.

Just as she hit the send button and heard the accompanying ‘bloop’ sound, she heard a hard clunk on the table and saw a cell phone land in front of her. Her cornflower-blue eyes widened as Mon-El pulled out the chair opposite hers and dropped into the seat, coffee in hand, as though he’d had an open invitation.

“Pot stickers in Philly not to your liking?” he asked, reaching over he grabbed a cold dumpling and popped it into his mouth.

Her mouth hung open for a moment before her jaw began working frantically, as through trying to form words. Except her lungs seemed to be all out of the requisite air needed to form spoken language. Her lips instantly dry in the face of his sudden and unexpected presence, her tongue snaked out to provide them some lubrication in hopes that her action might facilitate the ability to talk.

“Mon-El,” she managed to squeak.

Her voice charged the air between them, and he looked over her head, as though intentionally keeping his gaze from her. “I haven’t heard that name in six years,” he said, running a hand through his artfully messy hair. “That guy is dead and buried. It’s just Mike now.” He resettled his glasses on the bridge of his nose to emphasize his point.

“Mike,” she echoed, because it was all she was capable of at the moment. He was so…vivid…sitting in front of her. As though he were written in bold letters, capitalized for affect. Had he always been so vibrant?

Had he been a mere shade of himself back then? Like an outline in a coloring book without the hues
applied? Kara finally understood that Mon-El had been looking to her, counting on her, to help him color within his lines. With each action he had sought her approval, sought clues on where to step and how to behave, and the only hints she had provided him had been in her censure. She had promised him he’d never feel alone, and then she’d abandoned him while still expecting his toe-the-line admiration every day, as though she were some sort of idol to be worshipped, instead of a barely out of college kid trying to fool herself into believing she knew exactly what she was doing.

“Don’t get me wrong, Kara…I’m glad that you were there to rescue Amelia, and for that you have my gratitude, but…why are you here?”

Kara pulled her coffee close to her chest as if a medium roast could protect her from the onslaught of emotions the angry look on his face produced. A series of deep, staccato crinkles lay between the straight severe lines of his eyebrows—an expression she’d never seen him wear to her memory—and it transformed his eyes from the soft, sensitive stormy-gray she once knew to a harder and impenetrable Teflon.

“Okay,” he sighed. “I know that Clark would never break his promise to me. So…how did you find out where I was? Was it Winn? Did he track me down for you?”

Kara shook her head, still unable to process thought in any meaningful or usable manner. If she could just have a moment to gather her defenses in the face of his ambush.

“Bruce,” he realized. “It was Bruce, wasn’t it?” She thought about denying it, but something on her face gave her away. “Figures,” Mon-El cursed, his fingers fist ing together as though preparing for a punch. “That guy’s always had it out for me. I’m sure he must be laughing his head off right now.”

“That’s not true,” she said, finally finding her voice and shaking her head vehemently. “He considers you a good friend. Also…he doesn’t strike me as the type to spend much time laughing…about anything.”

Mike flinched, the sound of her voice speaking more than a few syllables hitting him like a punch in the gut. He’d heard her speak on the playground, but his adrenaline had been so peaked he’d barely taken notice. Plus, she’d been Supergirl and not Kara at the time. Here, she was Kara: vulnerable, human…heartless.

“You know what?” he said, pushing to his feet and shoving one hand in his pocket. He was thoroughly unwilling to be taken in by her again—no matter how blue her eyes were. “I don’t know why you’re here, and frankly…I don’t care. Go home, Kara.”
“I just wanted to—“

“To what? Have the last word? Why am I not surprised? Oh, I got that loud and clear with the…what was it? Twenty-four emails you sent before you finally gave up? What’s it going to take, Kara, to get you to understand that I’m not interested in what you have to say?”

“I was going to go,” she declared. Kara’s skin flushed with the embarrassment of having her foolish pursuit of him so boldly called out. “I just wanted to stay until the little girl was out of the woods.”

“And what is it exactly you think you can do here? Did you get a medical degree since the last time I saw you? Become a brain surgeon?” he jibed. “And her name is Amelia, by the way,” he corrected her, his tone dismissive and curt. “And there’s no need for you to stay. Her mother and I have got it from here.”

He was lashing out at her; Kara could see that. Like a lion with a wounded paw, he was trying to protect himself. The life of a child he cared for, a child he clearly loved, hung in the balance, and he was, therefore, incapable of calm discussion.

This was why Mike hadn’t wanted to see her after the fight with the Dominators—because he’d been afraid to discover the injury he’d thought scabbed over was still, in fact, a gaping, pulsing wound. In that moment, he was certain his heart was never going to heal. Never going to be able to leave her completely behind, and he was angry as hell at her for it. For so meticulously breaking him.

“Of course,” she demurred, as though to soothe a skittish beast. “Amelia. I can tell that she’s very special to you.”

“She’s my student…my responsibility… of course she’s special to me. They all are.” He doesn’t tell her that Amelia was different, from the first moment he heard her laugh and saw her smile and the bright, cornflower-blue of her eyes. He won’t tell her that Amelia was special because she reminded him so much of her—of her uncatchable incandescence. Mike’s eyes, so carefully prevented from looking directly at her as if she were the yellow sun, darted towards her by a will all their own. He noticed something then that…brought him up short.

She’s doesn’t burn as bright as he remembered. Mike knew that his memories, always so frustratingly resilient, weren’t wrong or overly romanticized, but her light had faded somehow in a way that he couldn’t quite quantify. Her cheeks flush, but don’t glow. Her eyes shine, but don’t sparkle. He wanted to ask her what happened, what made her this way? But he forced down the
instinct, and digging in his heels, he steadfastly refused to care. “Go home, Kara. Please,” he added involuntarily, because it hurt so much to see her, even after all this time. “Don’t come back here, unless you’re invited.”

Mon-El turned his back on her to stalk away, each step feeling like it put a thousand miles of distance between them. If she let him, he would walk right out of her life again, and this time there would be no hope. She stood at a crossroads; realizing that if she let this moment pass, she would spend the rest of her life regretting it. But if she seized the moment and told him everything in her heart, and he still walked away, then maybe she might be able to move on one day, knowing that she’d tried everything. Or maybe it might shatter what was left of her. He was so far away from her now, halfway across the bustling cafeteria, the moment for deciding slipping rapidly away.

Kara clasped her hands nervously together, took a few steps as though to follow and then shouted, “I look for your face in every crowd!”

Everyone in the cafeteria came to a dead stop, including Mon-El. The chattering in the common hall ceased, the only sounds remaining were the light scrape of silverware on plates and the sound of an oblivious, noisy kitchen in the distance. Heads turned to look at her as though they were set to swivel.

‘In for a penny….’ She decided. “Every time I go to the bar, I still expect to see you there. And when you’re not…it’s like a bullet to the chest. Every single time.” She hoped he would understand her metaphor even though what she wanted to tell him was that not seeing his face every day was like drowning in Kryptonite.

He didn’t turn around but neither did he walk away; he just stood there, his back to her. Kara took the opportunity to move a few steps closer to him.

“Those things I said that night…those horrible things…you have to know I didn’t mean them. You should know that, because I don’t want you hearing those words in your head anymore, if you still do. I was afraid. I was afraid of all the things I felt for you; the confusing, terrifying things, and so I let my fear do the talking. I’m not saying this excuses the pain I caused you, but…I was a stupid little girl dressed in a woman’s skin, who didn’t have the first clue how to tell a cute boy that she liked him. More than liked him, as it turned out.”

Mike rounded on her, heedless of the captive audience sitting at rapt attention. “But you didn’t,” he shouted back. “You didn’t like me that way. You were very clear about that. I walked away, Kara—ready to let you go—to just be friends…partners. But that wasn’t good enough for you.”
Kara’s eyes filled with tears as his angry eyebrows and tight mouth focused upon her. “I know,” she rushed, nodding. “I know. I should have just let it be. Given myself more time to sort out my feelings. I know that now.”

“I wasn’t good enough for you. That’s what you said.”

“It was just an excuse,” she confessed. “I was so scared to get close to you. To let you get close.” She held her hand up to her chest, pointing to her heart. “You were already closer than anyone had ever gotten…in here. And we were so different, I just didn’t see….”

“I never would have hurt you, Kara. I would have died first.”

The tears spilled down her cheeks, and she hastily wiped them away even though they kept coming. She angled her eyes down to his feet, unable to bear the intensity of his gaze even from the other side of the room. It might as well have been heat vision he was focusing on her. “I know that,” she nodded, feeling chastened.

In a way, it felt appropriate to be reprimanded this way in front of so many people, the way she had humiliated him at his place of employment in front of his customers. It was no less than she deserved, and despite the mortification, she felt lightheaded and floaty as though relieved of a terrible burden she’d long since grown accustomed to carrying.

“You loved me for me,” she said, her voice hoarse with emotion. “You knew…all the sides of me, even the bad parts, and you loved them anyway—maybe the first one who ever did and certainly the last,” she whispered, her throat working over the ball of emotion lodged there. “Not because you wanted anything but just because of who I was. You saw behind the masks, and I’m ashamed to say I didn’t know what to do with that.”

“What’s this?” he jeered mockingly, his voice honed to a painful edge. “The Great Kara Danvers didn’t know what to do? Stop the presses! I think we have our headline. That must have been a first!”

Kara bowed her head, pressed her glasses more tightly to the bridge of her nose, and crossed her arms over her chest. “I deserve that,” she acknowledged. “You were right all along, Mo-Mike, from the first moment we met you had me pegged. Arrogant and snobby and uptight and full of myself; I thought I was untouchable and that I could do no wrong. You were the only one who was brave enough to say that to my face.”
“When it came to you, Kara, all that courage ever did was bite me in the ass.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, biting nervously on her lower lip. “I’m sorry for making you feel like you weren’t good enough. I’m sorry for not listening when you had important things to say; for not respecting your opinion. I’m so, so sorry for being so self-absorbed I didn’t see how hard you were working to change…until it was too late.”

Silence descended over the cafeteria as though the spectators had become frozen in time, their eyes glued to the scene unfolding before them. A sense of unease climbed her spine until her scalp tingled with it. He wasn’t going to say anything, she realized. He was just going to leave her hanging on the rotting limb of her apology. Kara drew a deep breath to check the butterflies in her stomach and clasped her hands to curtail the shaking. She willed her feet to move, to leave this spotlight she had created. The spotlight was no longer a comfortable place for her and hadn’t been for a very long time.

Mike stood paralyzed as she approached, her words rolling recklessly around his head like the loose baseballs in the trunk of his car when he drives over the speed limit. Her face was splotched with tears, her posture slumped slightly as though she were protecting a wound in her chest, and it killed him to see her that way. It killed him, and at the same time it angered him that she could still so easily affect him.

After all the years of staying away from her, she could still rip his heart out and tear it to shreds with barely an effort.

When Kara stood before him, she reached a hand out to touch him but thought better of it, snatching her hand back as though he were a live wire. Inside, some sick part of him, the part that didn’t understand all the hurt she caused him, the part that found a way to rationalize it because he loved her, felt a wave of disappointment as he watched her hand slip away.

“I’ve said what I came to say,” she affirmed, her voice raspy from the salt of her tears. “I’ll go now. But I just wanted you to know that…I’m so happy for you.” She attempted a smile through blurring tears but failed spectacularly. “I am,” she insisted. “I’m happy that you found yourself…and a place to belong. And I’m just sorry that you had to escape me to find it. It seems like I was just a millstone around your neck anyway,” Kara bit her lip, wondering if she should continue and tentatively decided to press onward. “And I’m glad that you found someone to love and who’ll love you the way you deserve.” Kara swallowed, sucking down the lion’s share of her pride. “She’s really lovely, and I hope that her daughter has a quick recovery. I’m sure you’ll make a happy family.”

Satisfied with her speech, she nodded and took one last look at his handsome but angry face. She wished she could have seen him smile again, just once. Wished she could have seen those Teflon eyes soften back to a stormy-gray when he looked at her. But sometimes hope…isn’t enough.
“Good-bye, Mon-El,” she whispered, low enough so that only he could hear. Her farewell ringing with certain finality in her ears, she squared her shoulders gathering what little dignity she had left and walked away.

As he stood frozen, a murmur arose in the lunchroom as people returned to their meals, the only evidence that anything unusual happened were whispered comments about the scene they had just witnessed. The volume of the gossip rose so quickly in his sensitive ears, that he couldn’t think, couldn’t take in everything Kara had said.

She’d said she was happy for him, happy that he’d found his place this world. But a millstone around his neck? Didn’t she know how much of an inspiration she’d been to him? Why he’d struck out on his own. He may be angry with the pain she’d caused him, angry at himself for falling so deeply and irrevocably in love with her, angry that she wouldn’t let him let her go, but not for a single moment of the last six years had he ever stopped being inspired by her.

Escape her? She’d made it sound like he’d been a fox chewing off his own leg to get out of her trap and that hadn’t been one iota close to the truth. He had never, not for a heartbeat, stopped loving her or wanting the best for her. That’s what leaving her had been all about, from start to finish; giving her back the life she longed for, the life she’d had before he fell from the sky and ruined it all.

Sure, part of him wanted to separate himself from the pain of her rejection, but his decision to cut off contact had been all about giving back the months she’d been forced to waste on him. Helping her to forget about him. Why couldn’t she just forget about him? What good had he ever done for her?

She’d also said she was glad he found someone to love and who would love him as he deserved.

“Wait…what?” Mike asked flummoxed, as he woke from his trance.

Kara had spoken of this love with tears trickling down her face, as if he could ever give his heart to someone else when she already held it. He couldn’t give away what no longer belonged to him. Kara thought he and Belinda were…? She must have seen them together in the surgical waiting room and gotten confused by what she witnessed. He had just been comforting the distraught mother of an injured child. A child they both loved. But it was nothing more than that.

Mike felt the obstinate need to disabuse her of some of the notions she’d invented in that beautiful but imaginative head of hers. Maybe it was because he just couldn’t let her have the last word, or maybe it was because he couldn’t have her believing he was in love with someone else.
Mike turned to go after her, but by the time he made it to the hallway she was already gone, leaving behind no hint of the direction in which she had fled.

TBC

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Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Author’s Notes:

This story is the sequel to Bulletproof. Please read that one-shot before diving into this one.
You have no way of knowing this unless I tell you – but I AM NOT A DOCTOR!!
Having said that, I do my research and then hope I’m right on the medical stuff.
Comments are welcomed, flames are destroyed with my freeze breath.

Chapter 6/11

It took some time for Mike to gain control of his rapid breathing and racing heart. Conflict raged righteous fire inside of him. He had wanted her to leave, to go back to the life he’d wanted her to have, but at the same time he wanted to see her again. Six years with only his memories for company had done nothing to chill the heat he felt for her or the primal pull to be in her presence. Her departure was like being gutted and still being conscious enough to watch but powerless to stop it.

He paced the hallway outside the cafeteria, plotting his next move. Or rather, wondering what his next move should be. His hands shook, and an uncharacteristic sweat had broken out on his brow. He wanted to go after her, search the skies for her – all the way back to National City if he had to.

But to say…what?

To lay his heart on the line again? To rollback all the effort he’d put into getting back on his emotional feet these last six years? He’d found his self-confidence, his place in this world, and his calling – could he really place that on a chopping block based on the slim hope that he could ever be more to her than the one that got away.

And maybe that’s all this was, really. Kara didn’t like to lose, everyone knew that, and though it hadn’t been his intent at the time, his departure must have seemed to her like taking a hit. He wasn’t sure he could risk losing the ground he’d worked so hard to gain, in the hopes that it might close the gaping wound in his chest. The injury, as it stood now, he could live with, he was certain of that but
to open the opportunity to have salt poured into it was a gamble he was unsure he was willing to
take.

So he decided that chasing her down wasn’t going to be on his agenda today.

Besides, there was still a little girl in surgery to worry about and a distressed mother that needed
someone to hold her hand and get her a cup of coffee.

Mike headed back into the cafeteria, to the audibly disappointed groans of more than one lunch-
goer. He picked up another coffee for himself and one for Belinda, and grabbed her a cellophane-
wrapped sandwich as well. He didn’t think she’d be able to eat right now, but he wanted to
encourage her to keep her strength up.

Back in the surgical waiting room, he found her making phone calls on her cell, making plans for
Amelia’s grandparents to fly in from Coast City as soon as they could pack some bags and get to the
airport. Regardless of how the surgery went, Belinda was going to need her parents.

Mike handed her the coffee and the sandwich with a silent nod, unwilling to interrupt her phone call
and stepped away to offer her some privacy. On the other side of the large room there was a bay of
floor-to-ceiling windows which is where Mike retreated to stare outside at the sunny day, so contrary
to the storm clouds gathering inside his chest. Part of him searched for a streak of red and blue
across the cloudless sky.

He pulled out his cell phone and dropped into one of the chairs next to the window. Flipping
through his phone’s address book, he settled on the contact cleverly named ‘Asshat’ and pressed the
call button. It rang four times before a gruff voice answered.

“Well,” he grunted. Not even a hello. But as usual, Mike Matthews didn’t rank when it came to
getting the common courtesies.

“I’m sorry,” Mike said, without a hint of sincerity. “Am I interrupting you whaling on some poor
hapless fool who was forced, by circumstances, into a life of crime?”

“No one’s forced into a life of crime, Matthews,” the gruff voice retorted. “We all make our
choices. We should be held accountable for them.” Clearly, this was a debate they had taken part in
before.
“Says the guy who grew up with a silver spoon in his mouth,” Mike retorted.

“Didn’t you grow up with a silver spoon in your mouth?” Wayne rebounded sharply.

“I’ve since reformed.”

“Prisons are full of men who’ve said those exact words.”

“Cut the crap, Wayne. What did you think you were doing?” he accused.

“I take it from your tone that things didn’t go well.”

“You think?” he snapped.

“My mistake then.” Mike could practically hear Wayne’s smug, nonchalant shrug. “I thought you’d be ready to hear her out. I guess I was wrong.”

“Your mistake?!” Mike chuckled darkly, incredulously. “Are you kidding me right now? I made Clark promise to never tell her about me. Promise! Do you know how hard it is to get that guy to make a promise? It practically takes an Act of Congress. And then you come along and ruin all of that. You get that I didn’t run away from National City for me, right? I did that for her. It was all for her, and now it’s all for nothing.”

“I get it, Matthews. You did it all for her. Blah, blah, blah. It wasn’t working, okay? You need a new plan.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means I looked into that girl’s eyes, dumb shit, and do you know what I saw? It wasn’t the heartless, vapid bitch I was expecting to see after Clark told me what happened. It was a heartbroken little girl who knows she made the worst mistake of her life. I got to hear her side of things, kid, and I thought you should have the chance to hear it too, before you finished planning out what promises to be an unnaturally long and apparently loveless life. You’re welcome.”
Mike dropped his head into one hand, propped up on his knee, his other hand pressing his phone to his face. “You’re a dead man,” he told Wayne, his voice without heat. “I don’t know how yet, but I will find a way. I’m sure I can make it look like an accident. Big, underground cavern like that must have its fair share of sharp and slippery surfaces.”

“Alfred keeps it tidy,” Wayne quipped. “Did you at least hear her out before you broke what was left of her heart?”

“I heard her,” he answered defensively. But had he? Had he really heard everything she’d been saying, or had he closed himself off from her words and, more importantly, their deeper meaning? “A little warning would have been nice. A head’s up.”

“Where’s the fun in that?” This time Wayne chuckled, and the sound grated like a rusty pipe, as though his laugh muscles didn’t get a regular workout.

“It wasn’t great timing,” he sighed. “Or…I guess it was…in a way.”

“What the hell’s that supposed to mean?”

Mike told Bruce about the accident and how he’d just been about to reveal himself as Valor in order to save Amelia, when Supergirl arrived as though heaven-sent.

“I know what Clark would have said about revealing yourself,” Wayne said.

“I wasn’t going to let her die,” Mike insisted.

“No, of course not. You wouldn’t be who you are if you did that. But it would have meant an end to your life as Mike Matthews. You would have had to disappear for a while, change your name, and you probably never would have been able to teach again. And I hear the Fortress of Solitude gets pretty cold this…well…every time of year. So again…you’re welcome.”

“I’m grateful that she was here, for Amelia’s sake, but the drama of it all…that didn’t exactly put me in a frame of mind to hear her out properly.”
“Well the good news is, you know where she lives. And if you don’t, I can find out for you. I have people who do that.”

“You have Alfred.” Mike deadpanned.

“He does that.”

“Why am I not surprised?” Mike snorted. “I think we all know who the real hero is at the Wayne Manor.”

“Oh, I have no delusions on that score.”

There was a moment of silent and rare camaraderie over the line before Mike spoke again. “Look Bruce, I’d appreciate it if you wouldn’t involve Kara in your schemes to take the mickey out of me. I don’t care about the rest of it…just not Kara, okay?”

“I didn’t do it to take the mickey out of you, Matthews,” Wayne said.

“Then why did you?”

Silence reigned on the line, only this time it lacked the comfort that existed before. This time Mike could hear the stress of it, as though time itself was straining against its own fabric. Bruce sighed long and deep, ending the quiet before speaking. “Because I loved a woman once, Matthews. She died, and I couldn’t save her. I’d give anything for the chance you have now—the chance to put it back together. You’re an idiot if you don’t take it.”

Guiltily, Mike squeezed his eyes shut so tight they crinkled around the edges. He hadn’t known about Bruce’s loss. Of course more than once, he’d idly wondered why a man his age with endless funds and resources, wasn’t able to find a woman to marry him and have his children. The fact that he was kind of a cantankerous asshat couldn’t be the only reason why he was still single. Plenty of women out there would happily put up with Bruce’s unintentional douchebaggery and expert level crankiness for a shot at a black American Express Card and a private Gulfstream in the hangar.

Suddenly, so many things about Bruce made sense.
“You’re thinking that suddenly so many things about me make sense, aren’t you?”

Mike perked up, his gray eyes blinking as though he were staring into a blinding light. “Yep.”

“Look, kid, I know you’ve never given a single fart for what I think, but for once in your life listen to the advice of your betters—“

“I think you mean elders,” Mike wisecracked.

Bruce sighed, this time the sound of someone forced to suffer a fool. “Just...for once in your sorry life, don’t be blockheaded. Not about this. Take some time to think about it. If you believe…truly believe…that you can move on and be with someone else, then by all means…live that life. But if you can’t…if you accept you can’t…then you know what you have to do. You think you’ve been building something all these years, Matthews, but the truth is…you’ve just been playing for time. One way or another, you need to start living again.” Mike opened his mouth to say something, but Bruce steamrolled right over him, as was his way. “Because when I looked into her eyes I realized something – you’ve both just been waiting to find a way back to each other. It would be helpful if you would stop being such a dickwad about it.”

He could always count on Bruce to pull no punches. “I’ll think about it,” he said. “But right now, Amelia has to be my priority, at least until she’s out of the woods.”

“I’m sure that girl of yours would have it no other way.”

“She’s not my gi—“

“Yeah, whatever,” Bruce blew him off. “Look I’ve got to wrap this up—I’ve probably lost a hundred million dollars in the time it took to have this conversation. This global conglomerate doesn’t run itself, you know. Hey, Matthews?”

“Yes?”

“I’m really sorry to hear about your student. I hope everything works out.”
“I hope so too. Thanks.”

The other end of the line went silent without a hint of white noise, and Mike knew that Bruce had hung up. Bruce’s advice hadn’t been without merit, but Mike didn’t have time to chew on it since a second later he saw Belinda stand up in response to a surgeon entering the room and honing in on her. Mike was on his feet and by her side in a flurry of movement, to hear what the woman in dark blue scrubs had to say.

Her skin was the color of dark chocolate, and she had cheekbones that could cut glass, but her dark brown eyes exuded a warmth, which seemed reserved for Belinda, perhaps because they were acquainted with one another. Mike’s instincts said that the doctor was usually more reserved and professional with patients’ families, kept herself at a distance, but was taking pains to put Belinda at ease.

“Belinda, you daughter had an intracranial hemorrhage of the vertebral artery, which we were able to repair surgically with a craniotomy. Because your daughter suffered a traumatic brain injury we need to keep an eye on her intracranial pressure, so we’re going to maintain her intubation and keep her in a medically induced coma for the time being. This should give her brain time to recover. In the meantime, we’re treating her with corticosteroids to control the swelling in her brain, proton pump inhibitors, ACE inhibitors, as well as intravenous Fosphenytoin to prevent convulsions. The next 48 hours are critical, but there’s a lot to be hopeful for,” she said.

Much of what the doctor said may have made sense to Amelia’s mother, but it all sounded terrifying to Mike. “There is?” he queried.

“Yes. Her vitals remained stable throughout surgery and continue to do so. She’s responding to the treatment, and though unconscious, her reflexes and involuntary reactions remain intact. Unfortunately, we can’t get an accurate GCS score until after we pull her from the coma. We’ll have a better idea of a long term prognosis at that time.”

“And when will that be?” he wondered.

“I can’t be sure,” she answered, honestly. “Let’s just get through the next 48 hours, and then we’ll reassess. At any rate, she’ll be in the ICU for a few days at least, that way when she wakes up we’ll be able to monitor her for a potential re-bleed. She’s being moved to the ICU right now…you should be able to see her in an hour or so. I know you know the drill, Belinda, just remember that it looks worse than it actually is.”
“Thank you, Dr. Dagmar.”

“They’ll page me if there are any changes,” she nodded at both Belinda and Mike before turning to walk away.

Belinda let out a breath she seemed to have been holding for hours. Not the kind of breath that fuels the lungs and body, but the kind of breath that sustains the soul. She swayed on her feet as though releasing the air had caused her to deflate like a balloon. Mike reached out to steady her, anchoring her body against his, before walking her back to the sofa.

“She made it through the surgery,” Belinda said, her voice shaking. “I prayed that if she could just make it through surgery, I’d take whatever came after that. So… the next step is to get her through the next 48 hours.”

“What can I do?” he asked, taking her hand again.

“I-I don’t know,” she stammered, flustered by his offer. She hadn’t expected him to do more than stick around to make sure Amelia made it through surgery.

“If it’s okay, I’d like to stay with you until she’s settled in her room. Are they going to let you stay the night?”

“Yes,” she nodded. “I’m a NICU nurse,” she indicated her pink scrubs as an explanation. “They’ll let me stay as a courtesy. And because children always heal better when they’re surrounded by loved ones.”

“That’s good. I’ll be expected in class tomorrow, but I’ll be back as soon as school’s out. Maybe I can sit with her then… give you a break?”

“That would be great, Mike. I know she would really appreciate it. I’m certain she’ll know that you’re there. Somehow. Anyway, I’m going to make a few more calls and see if I can get my parents a room at the hotel across the street. I think that will be easier than having to go back to our apartment.”

After about half an hour they relocated to the ICU waiting room; a smaller and cozier place close enough to Amelia’s room to see nurses come in and out. He called Erica and gave her the update,
completely confident that the word would spread to all and sundry like a row of houses on fire. Like the true friend that Erica was, she showed up at the hospital, long after dinnertime, to bring him a stack of things from his desk.

“Yesterday’s homework,” she told him. “And today’s Social Studies worksheets.”

“If you really loved me, you would have graded them for me.”

She side-eyed him before handing him the black bag in her hands. “And your laptop,” she held the bag aloft.

“Bless you,” he changed his tune. With his laptop and the free hospital Wi-Fi he could keep himself busy for hours. He had a backdoor password through the firewall of the Philadelphia 911 dispatch. From his laptop he could monitor events unfolding all over the city and determine whether his presence was needed at a moment’s notice.

“How is she really?” Erica asked, concern etched deeply on her face. She looked as though she had aged a decade in the last few hours.

“Same,” he replied, with a shrug. “I’m afraid we’re in a no-news-is-goods-news situation for the next few days. If nothing changes, that’s progress, since they’re intentionally keeping her in a coma. When they decide it’s time to wake her up…that’s when we’ll really know. What were they saying at school?”

“The kids are worried about her. We spent the last hour of school making a get-well-soon card for her,” she evaded.

“I wasn’t talking about the kids,” he countered.

She placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. “Accidents happen, Mike, and sometimes they’re bad.”

“It’s my first year,” he pointed out.
“And you’re a rookie. No one is blaming you, and as long as her mother doesn’t decide to come after you, no one else is going to either. I was there, remember. I told them everything. If anything, it was my fault for distracting you.”

“Don’t do that to yourself too, Erica. We weren’t doing anything we don’t usually do.”

“They might take down the jungle gym, though. Kids aren’t going to like that.”

“Whatever keeps them safe,” Mike agreed. “I’ll find other ways to keep them occupied. Hey, do you think they’ll let us play paintball?” he joked.

Erica laughed, the first one since the accident. “Not on your life.”

“Well, I’ll figure something out.” They chatted for a few more minutes before she left, returning to her home and her waiting husband. She urged him to get some rest because his kids would offer no quarter in the morning.

After two hours of grading papers at frustratingly human speeds he made a decision and packed his things. He needed to do something. He needed to fly, to feel the wind against his face and hear the sound of it whistling through his cape. It was hard idling in a place like this without being aware that there were other people out there in need of help. He left a message with the ICU nurse on duty, to let Belinda know that he would see her tomorrow afternoon as promised but that he needed to get home.

Mike grabbed his things to take them out to the car and passed through the main lobby on his way out, just as news of a refinery explosion on the banks of the Schuylkill River came across the crawl, interrupting the regularly scheduled program.

Perfect. Just what he needed.

Something went horribly wrong at the refinery, a worn pipe in the cat-cracker led to a catastrophic failure creating an explosive gas cloud, which was then sparked by a worker banging a wrench against the pipe at an inopportune moment. The worker and three of his colleagues were dead in an instant, engulfed by a fireball that led to a secondary explosion throughout the cracker.

Plenty of fuel on hand to feed the fire, without intervention the blaze could conceivably rage for
days. Valor assessed the situation from a bird’s eye view. Clark had trained him to evacuate first and deal with the threat after everyone was clear, which was exactly the tack he chose. A Nomex-suited worker in a hard hat, his face covered in soot, waved frantically at him from atop a cooling tower. The base of the tower was ablaze, which would inevitably cause the tower to lose structural integrity and collapse.

He landed beside the man, slipping one arm around his waist, while he guided the frightened man’s arm over his shoulder. “Hang on,” he instructed, raising his voice over the sound of the fire and the scream of rending metal.

The muster point wasn’t hard to find; a safe distance from the fire, where those who got out at the first sign of danger gathered to take roll and determine who was missing. Valor was assaulted by frantic voices telling him of colleagues still missing in the facility and where they were assigned to work, giving him an idea of where to locate them. Where the workers’ instructions didn’t help, his super hearing did. He honed in on heartbeats, easier to hear in their adrenaline soaked state.

Valor moved in a blur of red, almost faster than the human eye could comprehend, tearing away the twisted detritus blocking the exit door of a control room to release the seven workers trapped inside. He instructed them to the muster point and moved on to the delayed coking unit, where three men were huddled together on a stairwell, the bottom 100 feet of which was blown away by the initial explosion. He would have to put out the fire quickly before it reached the coking unit, or the entire place would go up in a fireball, the resulting gas cloud driving people in a four mile radius out of their homes for weeks, or even months to come.

Thankfully, those three men were the last of the missing, and he finally was free to neutralize the threat. He used his arctic breath to chill the coking unit to buy himself some time while he froze chunks of the Schuylkill River to put out the fire. Heat from the fire melted the frozen sheets creating a rain that doused the fire bit by bit. He went back to the river four times until the flames were low enough to take care of the rest with his freeze breath. To be certain of the safety of the surrounding neighborhood, Valor flew in ever-expanding circles over the refinery at hypersonic speeds until the smoke and fumes dissipated enough to reach non-toxic levels.

His final task was the most sobering; cooling the smoldering shell of the cracker enough so that the HazMat crew could retrieve the remains of the four dead workers. Assuming there was anything left to retrieve.

Their thanks were profuse, and he stuck around for a few moments because Clark had taught him that sometimes people needed to show their gratitude. Sticking around to shake their hands and learn their names was something he did for them – not for himself.

Especially on a day like today.
TBC

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Author’s Notes:

This story is the sequel to Bulletproof. Please read that one-shot before diving into this one. This chapter introduces another original character that I really loved writing. I always knew that Mike was going to be stubborn and that he was going to need a lot of outside influences to help him reach his decision. He needed someone to tell him it was okay to stop thinking with his head and start thinking with his heart again. Comments are welcomed, flames are destroyed with my freeze breath.

Title: Permission to Flourish

Author: gldngrl7

Date Started: February 12, 2017

Rating: T for Teen (I know! I can’t believe it either!)

I'll close my eyes
Then I won't see
The love you don't feel
When you're holding me
Mornin' will come
And I'll do what's right
Just give me till then
To give up this fight
And I will give up this fight

--Bonnie Raitt – “I Can’t Make You Love Me”
Playing Valor left Mike stinking of fire and fumes and in desperate need of a shower. Back in his slacks and plaid shirt, he landed in a clump of trees before hopping the back fence into the yard of the house where he rented a garage apartment. It wasn’t close to work, but the undeveloped forest area behind his street made for perfect cover when he needed to slip in and out undetected.

Years ago, Elam Scheinbaum, worried about how his wife would survive without him on a fixed income, had spent a portion of their life savings converting their detached garage into a fully functional studio apartment. It was an investment in her golden years, allowing her to have a modest income from the tenant’s monthly rent payment.

Walking across the yard, he heard the back door of the main house open, just as the patio light flicked on. “Michael, is that you?” came a soft, uncertain voice.

“It’s me, Mrs. Scheinbaum,” he reassured. Even with the light on, her eyesight wasn’t the best at night.

“Oh goodness,” she gasped, her hand fluttering over her chest. “You’re home awfully late.”

“One of my students was in an accident at school. I’ve been at the hospital with her mother,” he explained, before redirecting the conversation. “You’re up awfully late.”

“Well…my hips, you know,” she referred to the pain that sometimes kept her awake at night.

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Such a sweet boy,” she gushed. Mrs. Scheinbaum was a tiny little thing, made even more diminutive by time and gravity. The top of her kerchiefed head barely came up to his chest, and there were times he was terrified that if he touched her she would shatter to pieces.

Being utterly clueless, Mike had asked about the kerchiefs once over an afternoon tea with his landlady (she loved to have him for tea on Sunday afternoons), and she explained that she and her husband Elam had worshipped in the Orthodox Jewish faith at the beginning of their marriage, and it was required for a woman to keep her hair covered for anyone other than her husband. Over the years, their religious practice had become more and more moderate as their four children entered their lives, but even with the shift in her practice, she never felt quite herself unless her head was covered. Even with her husband dead for the last decade, Mike had never seen her head uncovered.
“And I’ve been watching the coverage on the fire at the refinery. My Eli worked summers there when he was in college. Did I tell you that?”

Her eldest son, Elijah had gotten his college degree in chemical engineering more than three decades ago and moved away shortly after having found work in Louisiana. These days, he made brief visits to his mother during the holiday seasons with his wife and kids in tow. “No, Mrs. Scheinbaum, you never told me that,” he shook his head. Forgetting the reason why he had rushed home, Mike stepped closer to her.

“How many times do I have to tell you to call me Naomi?” she teased.

“Just once more, Mrs. Scheinbaum,” he teased right back, adjusting his glasses on the bridge of his nose.

“Such a good boy,” she muttered, shaking her head. Mike sometimes wondered if she felt her own sons weren’t good boys. “Your mother must have raised you right.”

Mike thought that couldn’t be further from the truth, but answered her assumption with an upwards tilt of his lips. Everything he had learned about being a good man he’d learned from Kara and Lois. And from the example set by Clark.

Her eyes squinted a little, suspiciously, as she looked at him. “Come to think of it…I didn’t hear your car in the driveway.”

“I had trouble starting my car,” he lied. “I took an Uber.”

She sniffed the air. “You need a shower, Michael,” she suggested in that way that was more of a demand.

“I was just about to….”

“Take your shower, Michael. I’ll put the kettle on. You look like you could use a nice cup of tea.”
She wasn’t wrong. The earthly beverage of hot tea had restorative properties that couldn’t be explained or quantified – at least not by someone like him. And after the day he’d had, a cup of tea sounded like just what he needed.

Mike moved to step back, but her hand reached out to grab his wrist. Her grip was tight, despite her age, the strength of a woman who had raised four strapping sons and had been given no quarter, nor had she offered any. “I may be old, Michael, but I know what’s going on. I see things. I also smell things.”

His heart skipped in his chest as he instinctually shuttered his eyes and cleared his throat. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, Mrs. Scheinbaum,” he evaded. “I was just trying to get my car started.”

She winked and gripped his wrist tighter, as if she knew he was too afraid of breaking her to pull away. “Of course you were. I just wanted you to know…that I know. You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want. That’s all right, Michael. Just know that I’m paying attention, and I’m cheering you on. And that you’ll always have a place in my home.”

“Well I…thank you,” he said, deciding to let it go. He could never convince a 90-year-old widow that she didn’t know what she thought she knew. It was a waste of time and breath.

“Go on then,” she said, releasing his hand. “The kettle won’t take long to boil, and I’ll have your cup ready for you.”

Mike nodded and slipped away, out of the circle of the porch light, until he was unlocking the door to his apartment and flipping on the lights inside. The flat was modest with a small kitchen, a bathroom with a shower, a full-sized bed in one corner and an entertainment center and sofa in another. He didn’t need much, and the apartment served his needs. The rent was cheap enough that he was able to put money in savings for a rainy day – or in the event he ever hastily needed a change of identity.

He wasn’t worried on that score when it came to Mrs. Scheinbaum. She may know what she knew, but she would never breathe a word about it to anyone, not even to her gaggle of ladies with whom she played regular games of Canasta. Mike suspected that having him here, just a few steps away from her home, made her feel safe, and if that were true, how could he take that away from her by telling her she was wrong?

Mike could have showered before the water had a chance to steam up, but instead he took a few minutes to enjoy the feeling of the day and all of its drama being rinsed from his body and circling
down the drain. It was, of course, a pipe dream (aha!), but it was a lovely notion all the same. Shower complete, he towel dried and left his hair wet and sticking out, straw-like from his head. Mike donned his steamed up glasses again, as well as a pair of cargo shorts and a tee shirt, before slipping on a cheap, worn pair of flip-flops he usually only wore when he did the yard work outside or took the trash bins to the curb on Wednesday nights.

As predicted, she was dropping his preferred three sugar cubes into a steaming teacup when he walked in the back door. He’d been here a thousand times or more, but he still waited to be invited like a little boy visiting a friend’s house. She waved a hand, offering him his usual chair at the table, which he gladly accepted.

“I’d tell you all this sugar will rot your teeth,” she smiled. “But I suppose your teeth don’t rot, do they?”

Mike opened his mouth to play off her suggestion, treat it like a funny game between them, or to once more suggest, quite unbelievably, that he didn’t know what she was talking about. But then, he thought better of it. What harm would it do to give her the confirmation she so desperately wanted? After all, he trusted her. Knew her heart and knew that she would never intentionally reveal his secret. It would be nice to have someone know – someone he could talk to face to face.

Clark had drilled into him the necessity of maintaining the mask, and Mike had listened well, soaking up the advice from the man who made being a superhero an art form. But Clark Kent had never meant this. Don’t reveal yourself before others, before people you can’t contain. On the playground today, he had come a hairsbreadth from breaking that rule and he would have, had Supergirl not shown up just in the nick of time.

But this wasn’t what Clark had meant when he’d taught Mike that rule. Decide who you can trust with your secret. Choose wisely. Buried beneath the lessons, that had been the hidden truth.

“No, they don’t rot,” he answered her query, waiting for the regret to wash over him for revealing his true self. It never came. Without a hint of flair or drama, Mike reached up and removed his glasses, setting them on the table in front of him.

Her eyebrows rose, as though she hadn’t been expecting him to crumble to her will quite so easily. She threw back her head and laughed, a soft, raspy sound he found contagious. “That must be nice,” she said, at last. “I had a full set of dentures by the time I was seventy-two. Sometimes I think we were only meant to live for as long as our teeth last. Where are you from, Michael? Krypton? Like Superman?”
Unlike with Superman and Supergirl, there hadn’t been a massive media onslaught when he’d flown onto the scene. No interviews or questions. They’d made assumptions, of course but nothing they’d bothered to attempt confirming. No one had even requested an exclusive, or if they had, he hadn’t been made aware. Alien superheroes were kind of old hat by then.

“Daxam,” he answered. Even though he didn’t need the tea to cool down to drink it, out of habit he did as humans did and blew at the steamy liquid. “It is…was…in the same solar system as Krypton. Like Supergirl, I grew up on a planet with a red sun. When my planet was being bombarded with the remains of Krypton, I managed to escape in the flight pod of a Kryptonian emissary – who was already dead, or so I was told. And that’s my story,” he said, as if it wasn’t just the tip of the iceberg.

She took a sip of her own tea, cream no sugar, staring out the kitchen nook window to the garage he called home. “It must be a lonely life.”

“There are other benefits,” he shrugged, but he couldn’t hide the desolate tone buried in his voice.

“You know…my friend, Ellen, has a single granddaughter close to your age. Lovely girl,” she announced, as though deciding to solve his loneliness problem in one night. “A handsome boy like you should really have a girl.” Then her head snapped up, tilting to one side to take a better measure of him. Her eyes twinkled in the soft glow of the kitchen light. “Or a boy,” she said, with a casual shrug as though unflustered by such things. “My friend, Marion, has a son who just broke up with his partner. They were together for fifteen years, if you can believe it. Perhaps he might be interested in a blind date.”

Mike laughed. He couldn’t help himself, because she seemed so invested in seeing him happy, and it had been a long time since anyone had cared. “I appreciate the sentiment, Mrs. Scheinbaum, but….” He trailed off. His heart panged in his chest like a hard strike to a gong that reverberated throughout his entire body. He’d actually managed to go a few hours without thinking about Kara.

“But your heart belongs to someone else,” she inferred from the look on his face.

“I’m afraid so,” he answered, without bothering to reconsider his response or to couch it in vaguer terms.

“One day, I’ll get that story out of you, Michael,” she insisted.

“One day…I’m sure you will.”
“Well, don’t wait too long,” she warned. “I’m ninety years old. I don’t have many days left.”

Mike grew sad at the thought of losing her. Humans were so delicate and their lifespans so short. For some, death couldn’t find them fast enough as far as he was concerned, but for others like Naomi Scheinbaum, death would come all too soon, taking a bright light from the world when it did. “I’m sure you’ll outlive us all,” he replied, wishful thinking.

“Nonsense,” the old woman sighed, taking a sip of her tea and looking older than he’d ever seen her. “I’ve seen too much of this world. It will be time to be reunited with my Elam soon.”

Her eyes glowed with such promise, as if the thought of dying didn’t scare her in the slightest, especially if it meant being with her lost love. Mike hoped that while he was alive, Elam Scheinbaum knew exactly how lucky he was to be loved by a woman like Naomi with her whole soul. His heart panged again at the thought, wishing hopelessly that he could have a love like that. It occurred to Mike that Mrs. Scheinbaum might be just the person to hear his story, and now might be just the time to tell it.

“I had a visit from her today,” he began, taking a sip of his tea and tasting the sweetness on his tongue.

Sharp as a tack despite her advanced age, she quickly inferred, “The girl you love?”

“Yes,” he replied. “I haven’t seen her for six years. When I landed on this planet…I disrupted her life…became a burden to her. In a way, I became her responsibility. She was beautiful and strong and so compassionate to other people and so…determined. She didn’t know how to give up – even when it would have been smarter and safer to quit. I fell in love with her because it was impossible not to…and because she was impossible.”

“She sure sounds like something special,” Mrs. Scheinbaum said, her tone gently encouraging him to continue.

“She was,” he agreed, remembering those early days before he’d screwed it up by opening his mouth – or by kissing her in the first place. He’d take it all back if he could; to return to the time when she was training him, and they were having good times and a lot of laughter. “But then I had to go and tell her how I felt.”
“She didn’t feel the same?”

Mike shook his head slowly. “I wasn’t exactly the man she deserved. I was selfish and self-centered; I wasn’t serious enough. We were so different, believed in different things. We disagreed a lot. I didn’t have the first clue what she needed or how to give it to her. Until…she came to me and said that she could never be with me. That even if she had the time or the inclination to date someone, it wouldn’t be a man like me. That’s when I knew…that the best thing I could do for her…what she needed…was for me to leave. So I did.”

“It’s what you both needed. At the time,” she suggested.

“Both needed?”

“You were like a gosling, Michael, imprinting on the first person to make a significant impact on your life after your arrival. You had no one, and everything you knew was gone. You clung to her, perhaps enough to frighten her. She became your…everything, and that’s not good when you don’t even know who you are yet. But you did the right thing, dear. You departed the nest, and in the process, learned to fly on your own. And look at you now…when you’re not using your powers to save lives, you’re a schoolteacher who molds young minds and shapes futures. For an abysmal amount of money, might I add. Tell me how that’s selfish and self-centered,” she huffed, obstinately.

“It’s like I’m still clinging to her,” Mike said. “I’ve never been able to forget her…to move on.”

“Maybe you’re not supposed to,” she suggested, pouring him a second cup of tea and sliding the sugar bowl in his direction. “What was it like to see her again?”

“It was like falling and knowing that hitting the ground is the only thing that’s going to stop you.” A feeling with which he was all too familiar, thanks to Clark’s long-suffering and increasingly enterprising attempts to teach him to fly.

“Sounds like love.” She smiled ruefully and sighed. “I miss that feeling. When just looking into his eyes is like stepping off a cliff. When it’s right…when you’re in it together it’s okay though, because you know you have a soft place to land.”

But that was exactly Mike’s problem. Kara didn’t feel like a soft place to land, she felt like a bed of jagged rocks amongst a churning, pounding surf.
“Why was she here?” Mrs. Scheinbaum asked. “Here on business?”

“You could say that. She tracked me down,” he told her. “A mutual friend told her where to find me. After six years of keeping it a secret.”

“Secret?” her thin, well-groomed eyebrows wrinkled her brow. “Now this is getting interesting. Why such secrecy, Michael?”

“I wanted her to move on with her life. I wanted it to be like I never landed in her back yard. Never screwed up her life.”

“There’s only three reasons why a woman would hunt down a man: love, greed, or revenge. Which was it?” Mrs. Scheinbaum leaned forward, teasing him in a conspiratorial whisper.

“I left without saying goodbye,” he explained. “She just wanted the last word.”

“So she just came to tell you off? She put a lot of care into not caring about you.”

“No…it wasn’t…like that…..” Mike’s mind went back to that scene in the hospital cafeteria. The tears he hadn’t wanted to see, still didn’t want to accept, and didn’t want to let in because he knew the damage they could do to the Kevlar around his heart.

“What was it then?”

“She told me she didn’t mean the things she’d said that night. That she’d been young and stupid and scared. She said that she was sorry…for all of it. That it was the biggest regret of her life. She said she liked me, but hadn’t known how to tell me or what to do about it.”

“And did she tell you she still loves you?”

“No,” he shook his head. “Why?”

“Because she does.”
“No,” he insisted, “this was just her—“

“You told me she was strong and determined and impossible,” Mrs. Scheinbaum interrupted. “A woman like that doesn’t track a man down after six years and lay her heart at his feet unless she loves him. Why is it so hard for you to believe that someone could love you, Michael?”

“I don’t know,” he mumbled. “Maybe because no one ever has.”

“You need to let yourself be loved, Michael. It’s not hard,” she promised. “You just have to…lean into it and let it sweep you away. You did it once,” she pointed out. Mrs. Scheinbaum reached out, placing a hand, gnarled with age, the skin as thin and breakable as tissue paper, over his. “Surely, it can’t be any harder than learning to fly,” she winked.

He chuckled, his voice dry and raspy despite the tea. “You’d be surprised.”

“My marriage to Elam was arranged,” she confessed, causing his eyes to widen. “Not a popular notion these days, I know,” she waved a hand. Being from Daxam, this was a concept he understood, but Naomi Scheinbaum was the first person of his earthly acquaintance who’d been in an arranged marriage. “I was born in The Netherlands in 1934. My family had been in the diamond business for four generations—it was amongst the first industries the Nazis sacked when they invaded Holland. They needed industrial grade diamonds to build weapons, you understand. Anyway, when you run a diamond business you learn quickly to be paranoid, to take security very seriously, and so my father was always prepared. The Germans had already invaded Denmark, Norway, France, and Luxembourg – he knew it was only a matter of time. So he sent us—my mother and brother—out of the country to be safe as soon as he sensed the wolves were at the gate. I arrived here when I was barely six years old, clinging so tightly to my mother’s hand when we stepped off the boat in New York. We had a suitcase each and a small bag of cut diamonds, tucked in my underpants, to start a new life. My father’s younger brother and his family arrived a month later. That is when we learned my father had died at the hands of the Nazis that ransacked his business.”

She’d been just like him once – long ago. A stranger in a strange land where nothing made sense and the road home had closed behind them. He covered her hand with his to let him know he understood – he truly did.

“After the war, there were so few of us left it seemed, the Nazis had killed so many. Elam fought in the war in his own way. Though as an Orthodox, he was a conscientious objector and wouldn’t pick up a gun, but at sixteen he had inherited his father’s printing business, and so he offered his services to the war effort that way. Printing propaganda leaflets and fliers – ‘Buy War Bonds’, ‘Loose Lips
Sink Ships’ – that sort of thing.” Mrs. Scheinbaum rolled her eyes and tilted back her head, as though recalling what a silly child she once one. “And he was ancient when we met,” she said. “Oh, Michael, he was so old! Twenty-nine,” she chuckled.

Mike laughed. “Walking with a cane, was he?”

“He might as well have been,” she insisted. “I was seventeen,” she explained. “Anyone older than the age my brother reached had one foot in the grave.”

“What happened to your brother?”

“He was twelve when we immigrated. He would have turned right back around to go fight the Nazis if he could have. After Pearl Harbor, there were lines out the door of the army recruitment centers. Nate was one of the first to sign up. He was barely nineteen years old at the time. He died in August 1944 – buried in Normandy.”

“I’m very sorry.”

“In 1951, our community was just beginning to recover from the war. So many losses. There wasn’t one among us who hadn’t lost someone. In our grief and our determination to continue on…to spit in the face of what the Nazis did to us…we banded together to renew our faith, to say…’We are still here’. We married…we had children, because we believed God demanded it of us. To be fruitful and multiply. Elam saw me one Sabbath at temple and that was all it took. I don’t know what he saw in me, but he approached my uncle to ask for intercession. My uncle encouraged the match, but didn’t force it. Elam was a good man who could make a good living and those were hard to come by after the war. I didn’t love him, but I thought, ‘I should snap this man up before someone else does.’ And so I did. I was very pragmatic for a seventeen-year-old.”

“I guess it worked out.”

“Not at first,” she said. “We were strangers who shared a bed, and then…a child and then…two. We made a life, and we lived it together, but I held myself back. To this day, I don’t know why. Maybe it was because my father never survived the Nazi invasion or because my brother died on Omaha Beach. Maybe a part of me thought I would just lose my husband, too. Elam wanted more than what we had, that was clear from day one. He wanted love, and so…that’s what he gave me. He invested his love in me, in the hopes that someday he would see a return on that investment. I struggled with my feelings every day. It wasn’t that I didn’t feel anything, you see. It’s that I didn’t want to feel anything. Part of me wanted to shove it all down into a dark hole and forget all about it.”
“So what changed?” he wondered.

“One day I realized that this was not what God intended when he made us…this building of walls around our heart. God…the Universe,” she translated for his benefit, understanding that their belief systems were not the same, “wants us together. Draws us together, like the sea to a shore. After seven years, he was my best friend, he knew everything there was to know about me – the places I liked to hide. His investment of love had quietly and artfully filled the gaps left behind by my father and my brother. One day, I looked at him, and I saw something…inescapable, but more importantly…that I didn’t want to escape it. I was exhausted from swimming against his current.”

“What did you do?”

“I leaned into it, Michael,” she smiled. “That’s all. I leaned into it, and the rest was easy.” She reached up and cupped his cheek, the tissue paper thin skin of hands softer than silk. “This girl,” she said. “You have to ask yourself…’is she inescapable?’ Do you think you can do that?”

He nodded, though he already knew the answer to the question.

“I poured a healthy dose of whiskey into my tea, and the room is spinning a bit. Do you think you could help me to my room, dear? I think I’ll be able to get some sleep now.”

“Oh, of course,” he jumped from his chair and offered an arm to help her from hers. She gripped him tightly as he walked her down the hall to her bedroom. Her sheets were already pulled back from an earlier attempt to sleep, so she slipped in easily and pulled the sheets around her. Mike flicked the switch on the lamp beside her bed and plunged the room into darkness.

“Goodnight, Spaceman,” she said, her words already slurring with sleep.

Mike chuckled. “Good night, Mrs. Scheinbaum. Sweet dreams.”

A light snore was already coming from the covers by the time he closed her bedroom door behind him. In the kitchen, he washed out their tea cups, setting them out to dry and put away the rest of the tea service, before grabbing his glasses from the table, slipping out of the back door, and over to his apartment.
Mrs. Scheinbaum had given him a lot to think about, which left him tossing and turning on his mattress, unable to sleep. Giving up on the idea of getting any sleep at all tonight, he reached for his phone on the charger on the bedside table.

He could always catch up on some email.

TBC
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Author’s Notes:

This story is the sequel to Bulletproof. Please read that one-shot before diving into this one.
Once again, just as a reminder – I AM NOT A DOCTOR!!
Comments are welcomed, flames are destroyed with my freeze breath.

Title: Permission to Flourish

Author: gldngrl7

Date Started: February 12, 2017

Rating: T for Teen (I know! I can’t believe it either!)

I was so scared to face my fears
Nobody told me that you'd be here
And I swore you moved overseas
That's what you said, when you left me
You look like a movie
You sound like a song
My God, this reminds me
Of when we were young

--Adele – “When We Were Young”

Chapter 8/11

Despite a rather intrusive dream of Kara when he finally dozed off, Mike had responsibilities he
couldn’t escape, nor did he want to. It didn’t help that the following morning at school, all the kids
could talk about was the sudden and inexplicable appearance of Supergirl.

“Did she come all the way from National City?”

“What was she doing here, Mr. Matthews?”

“How did she know Amelia needed help?”

“Did you see her at the hospital?”

“Mr. Matthews? Do you think she’ll be back?”

“She’s so pretty!”

“Did you see her fly like a rocket, Mr. Matthews? BOOM she went!”

“Do you think she might come back?”

“I’m going to ask her to take me flying if she does!”

“I want to be Supergirl for Halloween this year!”

Mike answered the questions as best he could, but they were well over an hour into the day before he could redirect their energies into the appropriate classroom material. He began by lecturing them on playground safety and setting new rules for the jungle gym.

“Is Amelia going to be okay, Mr. Matthews?”

Finally, someone asked the right question. Mike smiled gently at Kesha, who was Amelia’s closest friend in the class. He prided himself on always telling them the truth, even if it meant watering it down a little to keep from frightening them or directing their questions to their parents because it
wasn’t his place to answer. In this case, he was the only one with answers to give.

Mike leaned down next to Kesha’s desk. “Amelia was hurt pretty bad in the head. The doctors fixed what was broken in there, but they want to keep her asleep for a while longer, so it’s going to be a few more days before she wakes up and we can know if she’ll be okay. But we’re going to keep our fingers crossed, okay?”

Kesha held up crossed fingers to show him, and Mike had no doubt she would keep a set of fingers crossed at all times. “Maybe someone can kiss her?” she suggested.

“Kiss her?” he asked, pressing his sliding glasses back up the bridge of his nose.

“Like Sleeping Beauty,” she nodded, as though no further explanation should be necessary.

“Oh! Well, the doctors are using medicine to keep her asleep, so I don’t think magical kisses apply in this situation, but I’ll ask,” he winked.

“Just in case. Right, Mr. Matthews?”

“Right,” he agreed. “You never know when magic kisses might do the trick.”

His break period, while the kids were in ‘library hour’, was spent with the school administrators being questioned about the event. He expected a witch hunt when he walked in the door, but instead got sympathetic glances and softball questions. He was told that blaming himself was useless because it could happen to anyone. Each and every one of them had a monkey child or daredevil during their teaching days. It was decided that the jungle gym would stay, but the decorative rocket structure on top would be removed at the first opportunity to prevent further temptation.

He was ushered out of the room with a comforting hand on his back from Principal Edgars and sent back to his classroom. Mike didn’t feel the slightest bit less guilty for what happened to Amelia.

When the time came, at last, to shepherd the kids out to their buses or to the parental pick-up line, Mike couldn’t wrap up the day fast enough. He was anxious to get to the hospital, but there was a chemical spill on the New Jersey Turnpike that required his other services first. It was well after 5 p.m. before he was able to give Belinda a break from sitting at Amelia’s bedside.
Her tiny frame looked even smaller surrounded by wires and gizmos that read her heart rate, her oxygen saturation levels, her brain activity; tubes that delivered nutrients as well as the slow drip of medicine that kept her in the deepest levels of unconsciousness. Her beautiful, blonde ringlets had been shaved off completely, a wide patch of gauze covering the place where they cut into her skull. Mike’s breath caught in his chest at the sight of her.

Why was he so...unbreakable? Why could he be thrown through brick walls without a scratch or fall from ten thousand feet and walk away unscathed? What had he ever done in his entirely self-serving life to deserve such a boon, when this precious little girl who had never done anything but bring others joy, could be so fragile? It was utterly and obscenely unfair.

“It’s worse than it looks,” Belinda declared, noticing his obvious distress.

“She’s so…” He started, but found himself unable to finish the sentence, recalling that he was speaking to her mother.

“Her vitals have stayed within the normal ranges. They take an EEG reading every three hours and there’s enough brain wave activity, even in the coma, to give us a lot of hope. My baby’s still in there, Mike. I know it now.”

“That’s good...that’s great!” he exclaimed, reaching past the gaping hole of his despondency at the sight of her to find the hope Belinda was talking about. Mike looked around the room as though noticing it for the first time. He finds only a single reclining chair with a hospital blanket strewn across it. “Belinda, where are your parents?”

“They came by early this morning and stayed for an hour or so. This is much harder on them than they expected when they arrived. They want to stay close in case I need them, but seeing her like this….it’s not for everyone.”

Mike understood that; he didn’t like seeing her this way either, but he wasn’t about to retreat in the face of his despair. He was going to knuckle down because one of his kids needed him. “So, you haven’t had a break since this morning?”

“Since last night,” she shook her head. “My parents weren’t too keen on being left alone with her. In case something happened,” she finished, though it wasn’t really necessary.
Mike set his jaw, scratching at his cheek as he examined her tired face. “Well, I’m here now, so you can take some time to recharge.” He reached into his laptop bag and pulled out a worn copy of ‘Super Fudge’ by Judy Blume. “I brought reinforcements,” he said, waving the book in front of her face.

“I’m just going to grab something to eat from the cafeteria,” she shrugged. “Maybe take a shower in the locker room.”

“Don’t rush on my account,” he assured her. “Take your time. Take a long shower. Find an empty room and take a nap if you feel like it. I’m sensing this is going to be a marathon and not a sprint so take care of yourself whenever you can. I’m not going anywhere.” Mike gazed at Amelia’s still form for a moment before turning back to Belinda. “Super Fudge and I have got this.”

Belinda placed a hand on his arm and gently squeezed his bicep. “Thank you for this,” she said, the weariness evident in her voice. “You’ve been my hero through all of it.”

“It’s nothing,” he shook his head, dropping his head to avoid her eyes. “It’s nothing less than what Amelia deserves.”

“I’m not going to fight you on that,” she agreed. “Okay, so…back in two hours, yeah?”

“Seriously, take as much time as you need.”

Belinda nodded and went to the side of Amelia’s bed. She leaned over and placed a kiss on Amelia’s forehead, one of the few parts of her body unobstructed by wires and leads. “I won’t be long, baby girl, I promise. But don’t worry because Mr. Matthews came to read to you, and he’s going to be with you the whole time.”

Before she left she turned back to him one more time. “I know it looks scary with all the equipment…but don’t be afraid to touch her. She needs to feel us here with her.”

“Okay,” Mike nodded.

With one last glance she left the room leaving Mike alone with her. He set his laptop next to the chair and sat down beside his star student. He couldn’t get over how different she looked buried beneath all of the leads and wires, her golden curls shorn from her head. Once seated, he took her
“Hey, Amelia,” he began. “It’s me…Mr. Matthews. I wonder if your mom’s told you about the sensation you caused at school. No? Oh…well…you’ll never believe who brought you to the hospital. It’s too bad you were unconscious and didn’t get to meet Supergirl in person. I can’t wait to see the look on your face when I tell you for real. She was…something,” he said. Mike recalled how like an oasis in an endlessly hot desert she had seemed, landing on the ground in front of him like the answer to a prayer he hadn’t known how to pray. “Anyway…maybe I can…get her to come see you when you’re better.”

He hadn’t thought about seeing her again until just that moment. Not really—or at least, not in any tangible way. But suddenly, Mike knew that he had to seek her out, if not for himself then for Amelia.

“But only if you get better,” he insisted to the motionless little girl. “You have to get better if you want to meet Supergirl in person.” He wasn’t above bribery if it meant getting her to want to wake-up as planned, and he suddenly wasn’t against the idea of seeing Kara again, even if an injured child was the reason.

But in truth, he knew it wasn’t the only reason he would be seeing Kara. He’d thought about everything Mrs. Scheinbaum said about deciding when love was inescapable, and that it served no one, least of all himself, to fight the inexorable pull of her.

It’s not that he thought they would or should end up together—not with so much painful history there—but he knew that he had to find a way to transform it into something. Something with which they could both live. Something that wasn’t a daily torment or reminder of what wasn’t meant to be. Both of them deserved better than that.

Shaking off his thoughts, Mike turns back to the girl that should be his priority right now. “So,” he said, stroking her tiny hand, “I’ve got you all to myself for a while. I wondered what I should do with you as a captive audience. At first I thought I’d help you get a jumpstart by reading you the multiplication tables in case it might sink into your subconscious. It could give you a leg up when you get to fourth grade. But then…I thought…you’ve been through enough already. You don’t need the extra torture.”

Just as he mentioned the torture, an ICU nurse walked into the room. She smiled at him, and though didn’t ask, he felt like he should get out of her way. “Should I…?”

“You’re fine,” she said, as though it was a question she was accustomed to answering. The woman
who had a lovely but distinct Asian Pacific look about her, tugged a rolling cart close to Amelia’s bedside. Using a barcode reader, she scanned the little girl’s patient bracelet, until the computer on the cart beeped and Amelia’s patient record appeared on the flat screen.

“This will just take a few moments,” she assured him. She recorded blood pressure readings and other vital signs, while waiting for the EEG to spit out an updated account of her brain activity for Dr. Dagmar’s interpretation. “Are you Dad?” she asked, just to make conversation as she worked.

“No,” he replied, shaking his head. “Her second-grade teacher. Mike Matthews.”

“Second-grade,” she echoed, enthusiastically. “Great year.”

“I thought so,” he agreed.

“What do you like about it?”

“They’re old enough to have personalities all their own; individual enough to be okay being away from their parents. They’re still filled with joy, unlike those too-mature-for-their-age fourth graders and the snotty fifth graders who think they’re better than everyone else. Big fish in a little pond,” he snorted. “They’re fearless and will try anything once. I never thought of that as a bad thing until now.”

The nurse—Melly, her nametag read—inserted a needle into the port of one of Amelia’s IV bag and pressed the plunger until the syringe was empty. She replaced the other empty IV bag with a full one and announced that she was done. She rolled the cart out into the hallway as she left.

“Looks like it’s just us again. So…where were we? Oh, yes. Multiplication tables. Like I said, you’ve been through enough. And since I know you love reading, I brought a new book for us.” He pulled his hand from hers to open the book and turn to the first page. “Super Fudge,” Mike read, placing his left hand back on her forearm. “By Judy Blume.”

Mike read to her for three hours, only removing his hand from her forearm to turn the pages, or to take a sip from a glass of water. Just as he was ready for a break, Melly returned for a vitals check, an EEG reading, and idle chit-chat (possibly flirtation).

Belinda returned half an hour after Melly departed, looking concerned, but changed into a fresh set of pink scrubs. “I’m sorry,” she said, flustered. “Was I too long? I laid down in an empty room. I
ask one of the other nurses to wake me up after an hour, but she got pulled into a Code and so my one hour nap turned into two,” she explained.

“We’re fine,” he assured her. “We’ve just been sitting here getting to know Fudge Thatcher and his baby sister, Tamara.”

“How is she doing?” Belinda inquired.

“She’s quite the conversationalist, this one,” he joked, before sobering. “You would know better than I about her vitals and other readings, but Melly didn’t seem concerned by anything she recorded,” Mike shrugged hopefully.

Belinda placed her hand on Amelia’s forehead, as though to ground herself, and Mike could practically see the sense of calm swamping her like a tsunami wave. Being away from her was harder emotionally, than staying with her was physically. She leaned down and kissed the girl’s forehead just as she’d done before leaving. “I’m back, baby. I’m sorry I was gone so long.”

“Well, I hope the sleep you did get was restful,” he said. “Don’t screw up the rest you got by being worried about me. I told you I was here as long as you needed me.”

“It’s past 10:30,” she pointed, checking her watch. “And tomorrow’s a school day.”

“It’s okay,” he told her. “I work best on little sleep anyway. I got through undergrad in three years by taking extra hours, while working as a bartender until closing. I wouldn’t know what to do with a full eight hours, to be honest.”

“Still,” she said. “You have twenty-three other students, and they deserve the very best you.”

Mike found it difficult to argue with that logic. He sneered, comically. “You use my weakness against me, dastardly villain.”

Belinda giggled, and it sounded just like Amelia when she was tickled by something. Mike sighed at the familiarity of it.
“If it helps…I was just going to turn the lights off and curl up in the chair. Try to get a few more hours of sleep.”

“Far be it from me to get between a working mother and her beauty rest.” Mike reached down and picked up his laptop bag, tucking the novel inside. “I’ll be back tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow they decide if they’re going to take her off the drip and remove her intubation.”

“I’d like to be here.”

“It could take hours for her to regain consciousness.”

“Still.”

“Okay,” she nodded. A second later she was wrapping her arms around his neck. She was on the very tips of her toes, and still he head to lean down to make the hug comfortable for her. “I’m so thankful for all that you’ve done, Mike. You’ve been a godsend.”

“Whatever you need,” he promised. “And her, too. When she’s better, I can come over and take her through her lessons one-on-one so she doesn’t fall behind. At least until she’s ready to come back to school.”

“She wouldn’t hate that,” Belinda chuckled. “Of course, she’d probably be thrilled to repeat her entire second-grade year as long as she could do it in your classroom.”

“For her sake…let’s call that the last resort.”

“Agreed.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Belinda. Sleep well.”

“See you tomorrow, Mike. Same to you.”
She was already wrapping the blanket around her and snuggling up in the chair by the time he left the room.

Mike hadn’t been lying to Belinda when he’d told her he wouldn’t know what to do with a full night’s sleep if he had it. So, instead of returning home he flew a patrol over some of the city’s hotpots, stopping a jewelry store heist and a convenience store hold-up, before calling it a night.

Dr. Dagmar decided not to attempt waking Amelia the next day or the two days after that, citing concerns over a possible re-bleed. Her consciousness, no matter how careful she was, could be dangerous to her health, and no one knew better than Belinda and Mike that it was unrealistic to ask a seven-going-on-eight-year-old to be careful and lie still for an undetermined amount of time. So… best to keep her unconscious for a few more days. The doctor did, however, decide that it was appropriate to begin weaning her from the anesthetic to make her easier to rouse when the time came.

On a logical level, Belinda understood and accepted the concerns of the doctor, but on a physical and emotional level, she was coming out of her skin. Mike spent longer hours with Amelia on the weekend, allowing Belinda to go home, pay some bills, do some laundry, and change out of scrubs and into some real clothes. She thanked him profusely when she returned six hours later, claiming to feel more ‘human’. Mike could tell that, despite her words, it still exacted a hefty toll for Belinda to be away from her.

Once the medications were down to half the dose, Amelia began reacting to certain stimuli, though still unconscious. When Mike squeezed her hand while reading ‘Little House on the Prairie’, Amelia squeezed back.

When the time came for the drip to be completely removed, they waited in her room together, another chair brought in for him. Determining that Amelia was capable of breathing on her own, Dr. Dagmar removed her intubation, and the entire room held its breath for a moment until Amelia coughed and then breathed a ragged draw of air. Subsequent breaths were, thankfully, less of a struggle and more like that of a child sleeping.

Dr. Dagmar opened one of Amelia’s eyelids with her thumb and shone a penlight into it, then repeated the action on the other eye while she spoke in a slightly raised voice. “Amelia? Can you hear me? It’s okay to wake up now. Your mommy needs you to wake up now.”

A soft groan emitted from the tiny body on the bed, and her eyelids fluttered. Mike heard Belinda emit a groan of her own in response, and her hand reached out to grasp his, her fingernails digging into his unbreakable skin. Had her nails been long enough to break, they would have snapped off with the pressure she applied. He thanked the gods that NICU nurses were required to keep their
fingernails short.

Dr. Dagmar placed Amelia’s hand in hers and then spoke again. “Can you squeeze my hand, Amelia? I need you to squeeze my hand.” Amelia’s fingers curled around the doctor’s, and she produced another moan, this one more high-pitched, like a whine. Dr. Dagmar looked at Belinda and nodded.

“Good,” Dr. Dagmar announced, more to Belinda and Mike, than to the sleeping child. “That’s very good. Pupils are equal and reactive. She has a normal response to pain stimuli, and she’s physically and verbally reacting to commands. Her GCS score is at a 12.”

“Whoop!” Belinda vocalized, bouncing on her toes. She withdrew her hand so that she could clap hers together. It was easy to see that Amelia was every inch her mother’s daughter.

“So that’s good…I take it?” Mike asked, encouraged by Belinda’s response.

“At this stage, still partially unconscious…that’s very good,” Dr. Dagmar smiled. “If I tested you, Mr. Matthews, you would score a 15.”

“What’s a one?” he asked, just out of curiosity.

“Organ donor,” she replied, without skipping a beat. “The lowest GCS score is a three. Should only be a few hours now. She’ll come out of it in her own time.”

“Just like she’s always done,” her mother said.

“I’ll continue to have vitals checked every three hours, but I shouldn’t need to see her again until she’s fully conscious.” Dr. Dagmar made some notations on her tablet, which was presumably connected to Amelia’s patient record, before nodding and leaving the room.

Belinda’s face took on a new glow, one he hadn’t seen through the entire process. Hope inhabited her, with joy just around the corner. They chatted while they waited, about what Amelia might need going forward, his plans to help her so that she doesn’t fall behind in class. He went to the cafeteria and returned with two trays of food for their dinner while they ate in companionable silence, listening to the beeping of the heart monitor, both glad to hear the soft sounds of her breath instead of the crank-whoosh of the ventilator.
“Can I ask you a personal question?” Belinda asked as she set her tray aside.

As always, here lay a minefield. Like Clark and Kara, Mike struggled with finding the balance between being the best Mike Matthews he could be, and keeping the secrets of Valor tightly locked away. Secrets did not sit easy upon him and lies even less, so when ‘personal’ questions arose, he inevitably found himself out of his comfort zone. “I guess,” he replied. It wasn’t like she was going to ask if he enjoyed superhero-ing in his spare time.

“You go to school, and you come here after, and you stay ridiculously long hours. How is it that you don’t have someone to go home to?”

Mike’s knee-jerk reaction was to joke. “I’ll have you know that Mrs. Scheinbaum looks forward to my homecoming every day. She likes to hear about the kids over a cup of tea.”

“Mrs. Scheinbaum?”

“My landlady,” he explained. “She’s a 90-year-old widow; I rent her garage apartment. She likes having me around; I’m very good about mowing the lawn on Saturdays. Usually.” This Saturday he’d spent at the hospital, reading to Amelia.

“That’s not what I mean,” she slapped at his arm with the back of her hand.

“Oh? Did you mean what’s a guy like me doing living in the garage apartment of a 90-year-old widow?”

“Something like that.”

“Well, at least it’s not a basement apartment,” he rationalized.

“That’s true.”

“Not super attractive?”
“Oh, definitely not.”

“Truth is…there was a girl…once.”

“What happened?” Belinda perked up as though sensing a grand story in the offing.

“I wanted more, and she wanted…less. So, I tried to move on. I relocated, went to school, got my degree, found a teaching job out here….”

“And?”

“And none of that made me stop loving her.”

“Oh,” she said. There was a small note of disappointment in her voice. It didn’t surprise Mike, if he was being honest. Belinda wasn’t the first mother (and one father) of one of his students to find him attractive. But it all seemed so destined to fail spectacularly. He could love these students as children in his charge, but the thought of letting himself into an open door that he knew he’d eventually have to slam, seemed like an act of cruelty for them and for him.

“The thing is…she’s recently come back into my life. She made a lot of apologies, which I’ve been avoiding considering over the last few days.”

“It was very nice of my daughter to provide something else for you to worry about,” Belinda said, her voice without bite.

“It wasn’t about that, Belinda,” he promised. “For seven hours a day Amelia is my responsibility. This happened on my watch, and nothing could keep me from being here. If Kara had come to me and said, ‘Let’s go get married in Vegas,’ I would still be sitting in this chair right now.”

“I know you would,” she conceded. “I’m sorry if I implied otherwise. I want you to know that I can’t thank you enough for everything you’ve done to be here for her…for me…during this time. You are a good man, Mike Matthews, I hope your Kara knows just how good. And if she can’t figure it out then…well…you know.”
Her implication was clear. “Yeah, I know,” he replied, his smile reserved, an unwelcomed heat rising up his neck. Mike looked at Belinda, observing her petite gentility in combination with her effervescent nature, and the steely resolve he saw in her eyes when it came to her daughter and thought, he should be able to fall in love with her. Absolutely nothing about her wasn’t beautiful or engaging or…loveable, and yet he couldn’t make himself feel anything like that.

No matter how strong or how fast he was, he was a hollow man on the inside without Kara, and he always would be. Without her, no matter how respected or revered he became as a man, as a teacher, and as a hero, he would always be a little less than what he could be with her. He had thought they were going to be partners once, which had been the plan in his head, but the deconstruction of their relationship had brought the dream to an agonizing—though thankfully swift—end.

But back then he hadn’t known the first thing about who he was in this new world or who he was meant to be. On Daxam, as a grown man, he’d been a prince who chafed against expectations and duty, who didn’t exercise true selflessness when given the slightest chance. Not because it wasn’t a quality lying dormant within him, but because the road to such things wasn’t open to him.

His father had been a tyrant, his mother no better, and while the upper classes had lived their hedonistic lifestyles of pleasure and indulgence, the lower classes and the slaves had no such luck. As a youth, he used to wonder about them, how they survived their plight in life, what strength they must have had to do so. But his father abhorred such softness in his young son and endeavored to excise the empathy growing within him, by any means necessary.

It began with physical cruelty, having his son beaten in hopes of banishing his tender feelings. That had begun when he was eleven, but it quickly became apparent that beating him wasn’t going to change the softness he felt for some of the lower members of their society.

There had been a female slave, Mer Has-Id, who had been a fixture in his life from his earliest memories. She had taught him to walk, to speak, to play, and to learn. She raised him, filling in the cavernous gaps of love left by his biological parents. She’d taught him that it was possible to think of others, to feel for others, and that he didn’t have to be his father’s son.

For this act of loving child-rearing, Mer Has-Id was brought to the throne room and tortured to death in front of the prince, who had been forced to watch as the beloved guiding star of his life was reduced to a bloodied lifeless thing right before his eyes. It had been an object lesson for the prince that hadn’t ended there.

Mer had merely been the first, as the prince’s father ordered the torture and murder of any person his
son had shown the slightest benevolence towards. Sometimes there were people he’d never met or even seen, but his father had watched victoriously as the prince had learned to stop seeing them as people and start seeing them as objects without feelings or needs or families at home that might depend upon them. When the prince finally had those parts of himself locked firmly and, it was believed, eternally away, the torture and murder had mercifully stopped. Finally.

As he had grown older he immersed himself into the lifestyle the palace offered. Copious libations to dull the sharp edges of the pain he’d trained himself not to feel, mixed with the inherent escapism that came with the physical pleasures of the body. He used people like tools or furniture, easily replaceable and not worth the effort or consequence of caring for.

In many ways, the destruction of Daxam had been his salvation.

Here, on Earth, once he’d realized that his own inborn dispositions were perfectly acceptable amongst his new companions (and that the man his father made was decidedly not), Mike had begun to claw his way back to the boy he’d once been before his father had broken him. Not fully aware of the effect the earnest application of his newfound strength could have on the human body, he’d accidentally broken the arm of a drunken college student as they arm wrestled during his first night out of the DEO.

He’d felt the twinge of it then – the remembrances of empathy and he almost slammed the lid on them out of habit, before realizing it was no longer required. His genuine regret over the incident had gone a long way towards earning the forgiveness of Kara, if not Winn, whom he had used shamelessly to gain an escort out of the DEO.

But that incident, in its small way, had been a watershed moment, kicking off an emotional renaissance not unlike a series of falling dominos, most of which had been focused on Kara. Mrs. Scheinbaum had been correct in her years of collected wisdom; he had imprinted on Kara like a lost child, clinging to her with all of his considerable might. Desiring her approval above all, the man he had been at the time struggled to find the best way to earn it. Perhaps misallocating his feelings for her in a way that, in the end, would have been unhealthy for the both of them.

Had she not rejected him six years ago, had the truth of her jumbled feelings come out instead, how would the resulting relationship have looked in the cold light of day?

It likely would have been grotesquely unequal, Mike was certain. Her willingness to tear him down, and his eagerness to capitulate in the face of her disapproval, would have likely set them up for failure in the long run, unless they had both been willing to change. As he’d been in those days, he just wouldn’t have been able to bring enough to the table. He’d needed her too desperately, and she hadn’t needed him enough for it to ever work.
It had taken leaving National City to truly place him back on the road to finding the pieces of himself his father had thought eternally exorcised.

Not long after he had begun training with Clark, Mike had an epiphany in relation to his old world versus his new. In the midst of rescuing the passengers of a sinking cruise ship in the Mediterranean he had realized that he had grown more attached to the people of Earth than he had ever been allowed to express towards the common people of Daxam. He lived and worked amongst them here, and though he intentionally kept them at a distance for the sake of maintaining his secret, he took the time to ask their names, learn about their different cultures, and soak up the history of this world like a sponge.

It wasn’t just the children that had led him to teaching. It was the learning. Like Mike, the kids he taught were just learning about the world around them; its idiosyncrasies, its vast and varied cultures, its history of strife in its darkest moments and the charity in its best. Humans of Earth were a study in contradictions, but he found that the paradoxical nature of it all was what made them worth saving.

And that had been what made leaving National City (and Kara) worth it in the end. Discovering his own reason for putting on the cape every day.

A long, sustained moan from the bed interrupted his woolgathering, and Belinda rocketed from her chair to her daughter’s side. “I’m right here, baby,” she soothed, brushing her fingers across Amelia’s forehead. “Can you open your eyes for me? Come on baby, open your eyes.”

Mike stood up and went to the other side of the little girl’s bed. He figured it couldn’t hurt to provide extra encouragement. He looked across the bed at Belinda and gave a little shrug. “Amelia,” he said, voice slightly raise as though he stood before a chalkboard. “It’s time to get your math book out. We have subtraction to do.”

“Nnnnnnnnn,” she moaned, turning her head away from him.

“You don’t want to do math?” he asked. “But math is super fun,” he reminded her.

“Nnnnnnnno,” Amelia groaned.

“That was a ‘no’,” he said, his pitch rising with excitement.
“That was definitely a ‘no’,” Belinda concurred nodding, her eyes shining with excitement.

“I’m hurt,” he said. “But I’ll definitely get over it.”

Hope transformed into a palpable thing, like an angel in the room beside them, above them and all around as Amelia become more oriented to her surroundings. Hours passed, but they continued calling out to her, seeking signs that she was intentionally answering their questions.

In the early evening, Amelia’s eyes which had been fluttering off and on, her blue eyes rolling all around unable to focus, finally opened and stayed open.

“Mommy?” she rasped, her voice holding no less gravel than Bruce Wayne’s. Belinda laughed and Mike joined in, a pure lightness spreading from his chest to his extremities, from his skin until it was bone deep, just from the sound of her underused voice.

“There you are!” Belinda whispers, wiping at the uncontrollable tears slipping down her face.

“Was I lost?” she asked her hoarse voice cracking, like a person fighting off laryngitis.

“For a little bit, baby,” Belinda replied. “But we’ve found you now.” She bent down to place an enthusiastic kiss on her daughter’s forehead.

“Ow, Mommy,” she whined. “Head hurts.”

Mike was already pouring water from a pitcher into a small glass on the rolling bed tray and dropped a straw inside, when he heard Amelia complain, “Thirsty.” He handed the glass to Belinda, who held the straw to Amelia’s lips and coaxed her to take it slow.

She drank down the entire glass and let out an adorable, “Ahhh,” when she released the straw from her lips.

“Look who’s here, baby,” Belinda said, encouraging Amelia to turn and see. Instead Mike leaned
down and placed his face right her line of sight.

Amelia blinked hard a few times, her pupils changing sizes before finally remaining static. “Mr. Matthews?” she croaked.

“Hey there, monkey,” he grinned.

“You’re all fuzzy around the edges,” she pouted.

“You hit your head pretty hard,” he nodded, using his best soothing teacher voice. There would be time later for lectures about the misadventures of climbing jungle gyms, but for now he just wanted to appreciate that she was still drawing breath and speaking in complete sentences.

“I’m sleepy,” she announced, as though giving them a heads up.

“Oh, baby, look,” Belinda said, excitedly. “Look what Mr. Matthews brought for you. She reached into her oversized bag and drew out the tuxedoed bunny holding it where Amelia would see without having to move her sore head.

“Mr. Snuggles,” she sighed happily, lifting one hand towards the stuffed animal. Belinda handed her the bunny, which Amelia immediately tucked into her chest. She closed her eyelids and sighed deeply, slipping into a restful sleep, unbothered by the struggle that comes with swimming to the surface of wakefulness.

“She’s going to be okay,” Belinda nods, confidently. “She’s experienced lucid wakefulness, answered questions with intent, and recognized other people. She’s scoring a 15, now. She just needs rest and to heal. I’m going to let the nurses know, so they can mark her chart. Then I’m going to call my parents…they’ll want to come see her once she can stay awake for more than a few moments. I think we’re out of the woods now.”

Belinda’s parents would arrive soon, ready to see her, and this room would be a place for family, an elevated tier in which he would undoubtedly feel out of place. One in which he always did. Already, Mike began to feel the wave of awkwardness bear down upon him.

Knowing when to retreat had always been Mike’s particular forte.
Since arriving on this planet he’d struggled with finding that sense of belonging. He could fake it well but still fought the voices within that told him he would never belong here – never belong anywhere or with anyone. That he would always be alone. The direction of these thoughts written clearly on his face, Belinda stalled him, “I didn’t mean…you can stay as long as you like.”

He shook his head, running a hand through his hair and stuffing the other into the front pocket of his jeans. “I’ll be back before she’s released. Maybe in two or three days after they move her to a regular room. There’s a giant get-well card signed by the whole second grade, I’ll bring it in for her. I asked…they wouldn’t allow it in the ICU. Anyway, until then, I think Amelia needs to be surrounded by her family.”

Belinda lips pursed tightly, like she was trying to corral her emotions. “I can’t,” she stopped, taking a deep shuddery breath. “I can’t thank you enough for everything you’ve done. I don’t know how I would have made it through this without you.”

“You would have made it through, Belinda. Your strength was…quite frankly…inspirational. You’re an amazing mother. If I didn’t know that already from the kind of kid you’ve raised, I would have learned it over the last few days.”

She threw her arms around his shoulders, and he was forced to lean down to accept her hug, lest her feet leave the ground in the process. She gripped at him, her fingers digging into his shirt as though attempting to transfer the full measure of her gratitude into him with her physical strength. She pivoted her head and placed a long, lingering kiss on his cheek. Mike squirmed a bit on the inside with discomfort and a little embarrassment, but accepted her show of affection anyway.

“No thanks required,” he told her, when she finally released him and stepped back. “I’m just glad she’s going to be okay.”

“You’ll be back?”

He nodded and pointed his index finger at her. “Just make sure I get to be the one to tell her about Supergirl. I can’t wait to see the look on her face.”

“Oooh. Tough call,” Belinda replied, crossing her arms over her chest, her big, blue eyes squinting tightly. “But if that’s what it takes to get you to promise you’ll be back in two days, I guess it’s the price I’ll have to pay.”
Mike grabbed his laptop bag, hoisted it over his shoulder and cast one last look at the patient. “Text me with updates?”

“Sure thing. You should get some rest,” she advised. “You’ve probably had less sleep than I have.”

“No rest for the weary,” he shrugged. “Plus, I’ve got Mrs. Scheinbaum’s lawn to mow and gutters to clean out. I’ll see you later, Belinda.”

“See you later, Mike.”

As he left, a weight he must have grown accustomed to carrying lifted from him, and he felt suddenly lighter than when he was soaring overhead. As though he were floating in zero gravity.

He yearned to feel the wind on his face.

TBC
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Author’s Notes:

This story is the sequel to Bulletproof. Please read that one-shot before diving into this one.
Comments are welcomed, flames are destroyed with my freeze breath.

Title: Permission to Flourish
Author: gldngrl7
Date Started: February 12, 2017
Rating: T for Teen (I know! I can’t believe it either!)

I don’t wanna live forever
’Cause I know I’ll be livin’ in vain
And I don’t wanna fit wherever
I just wanna keep callin’ your name
Until you come back home

--Zayn & Taylor Swift – I Don’t Wanna Live Forever

Chapter 9/11

Resolving to return to National City and recommite her time, and more importantly, her energies to saving the people in need was one thing. Actually doing it was another. Her immediate reaction to arriving back in the city was to slip into a depression unlike any she’d experienced since her initial arrival on Earth.
For six years, she’d had time to think about everything that she’d thrown away that night in the bar. Everything that she’d let go of as if it had meant nothing to her. Someone who could understand her like no one else ever would—understand her aloneness and her uniqueness. Someone she could understand. It could have been a chance to heal old wounds between their planets and respective cultures – a chance to find unity after a thousand years of strife. Even if the people of their planets could never know, Kara could have found a victory in that, and, in a way, been able to finally put Krypton to rest.

Physically, he was a match to her or at least close enough. It took two hands to count the number of broken bones she’d given to boys she’d liked and with Mon-El…Mike…she would have never had to worry about that. Genetically, they were compatible as well. Daxamites had once been Kryptonian, which meant…she might have been a mother one day.

Lois had been able to have Clark’s children, but Eliza explained that what worked in one direction would most assuredly not work for her. Cervix of Steel – not to put too fine a point on it. Over a year after Mon-El had left, when Lois found herself pregnant with Jonathan, her mother’s discovery had been like a final kick in the teeth.

When it came to finding him, for the last six years she’d had options. Emails to send, a cousin to hound, internet searches to run, and newspapers to scour for information and clues. But now…those options were spent, and there were no more roads to travel. None, but the only one open to her, and at the end of it she could see only loneliness and bitterness.

One thought kept circling around and around in her mind and all she wanted to do was escape it. ‘This is my life now.’

She went through the motions, though. Going to work, investigating and writing her stories, saving cats from trees and runaway trains from collisions. She zipped in and out, oftentimes unseen and uncelebrated, whenever remotely possible. She became a blur, which seemed somehow appropriate. Then, when she could, she retreated to her loft and crawled into her bed, pulling the covers over her head. Never even bothering to turn the lights on.

After Alex had gone six hours without communication from Kara nearly a week ago, the elder Danvers sister had gone on high alert. Upon the younger’s mysterious return, Kara had asked Alex for some space but had told her nothing more, claiming she wasn’t ready to talk about it. Alex granted her request, but as her sister, would only honor it for so damn long.

She had noticed the lack of smiles, the slump of her shoulders and that her bright, shining eyes had turned a dull shade of denim-blue. Seeking answers on her own, she’d stumbled across something during a keyword search on the internet. On Saturday morning, when Kara hadn’t shown up at the DEO at her regular time for a briefing on possible Dominator movements, Alex decided to take
Quietly, Alex let herself into Kara’s apartment, finding the place uncharacteristically messy. The fourth-floor loft apartment had always been a little cluttered, because her sister was a bit of a packrat, but this was filthy: empty takeout containers that never quite made it to the (overflowing) garbage can, several days’ worth of dirty clothes strewn about as if they had simply been dropped, and left, where she’d removed them, and cups of half-consumed coffee as far as the eye could see.

“Kara?” she called out, already sensing that this journey would lead to only one place.

A person-sized lump in the middle of the bed revealed Kara’s position. Alex could see the lump contract further into the fetal position beneath the blanket as though she were trying to disappear. Alex reached for the blanket and pulled it back. “Last time I checked, invisibility wasn’t one of your powers.”

“Go away,” Kara sighed, with no real fight in her voice, which Alex found more disturbing then the demand itself. Kara reached for the comforter and took it back, tearing it in the process. “Dammit,” came the muffled curse from beneath the goose down. Feathers flew up from the bed, slowly drifting back down on the mid-morning sunbeams streaking through the window panes.

“You know I’m not going to do that.” She grabbed at the blanket again, and this time her sister let her pull it back. “Talk to me.”

“Alex,” she whined, just as she had when she was twelve and wanted to be left alone. Alex had never been the type to leave Kara to wallow for long.

Alex sighed. She was going to use what she knew against her sister. “You found him, didn’t you?” she asked. “You found him and went to see him.”

Kara looked at Alex, rolling her eyes back in surrender with a shuddering sigh. Despite the depression and melancholy, she’d managed not to cry since leaving Mon-El in the hospital cafeteria. Kara had held it all in, and now the tiniest crack would be all it takes for her to shatter like a dam bursting. “How did you know?” she sniffed.

“Keyword search revealed unconfirmed reports of Supergirl being seen in Philadelphia. Valor operates out of Philadelphia. I put two and two together. It’s first grade math, Kara.”
And there it went. The dam. Tears flowing, face crumpling, skin reddening, snot producing sobs issued forth without the slightest sign of stopping anytime soon.

“Oh my God, Kara, what happened? What did he do to you?” Alex asked, a horrified look on her face.

“H-he t-teaches second g-grade,” she sobbed.

There’s not a box of tissues to be found because Kryptonians don’t get the sniffles, so Alex rushed to the bathroom and tore some toilet paper off the roll. Thinking better of it before leaving the restroom, she turned back and manhandled the rest of the remaining roll from the dispenser. This seemed like an entire roll situation.

Alex handed her a wad of toilet paper and set the rest on the bedside table. Kara wiped away the tears she was desperately trying to gain control of, while Alex retreated to the kitchen for a bottle of water. “Blow!” she shouted over her shoulder. “Gently.”

She heard Kara’s honking nose from the kitchen as she twisted off the cap of the water bottle. Grabbing a trash bin from beside the bed, she held it up for Kara to drop her tissue into and handed her the water. “Drink,” she said.

“Bossy,” Kara pouted.

Alex’s eyebrows went up in silent condemnation, but Kara swallowed a gulp of water without further complaint. When it seemed that Kara had control over her emotions once more, Alex sat down on the edge of the bed and bent down to unlace her boots. Taking them off, she placed them neatly side-by-side next to the bed and twisted around. “Scooch over,” she instructed. When Kara complied, Alex climbed into the bed facing her and pulled the feather-bleeding covers over both them. “Now…start from the beginning.”

Kara told her sister about Bruce Wayne’s accusation and her emotional breakdown in front of him and how that led the billionaire to take pity on her and send her Mon-El…Mike’s…location. After that, the entire story poured forth in fits and starts, Alex reaching back periodically for more tissues, the trash bin, and finally the bottle of water in turns, until the story was complete.

“Second grade, huh?” Alex marveled, unable to mask the amazement on her face.
“Right?” Kara agreed with a sniff. After some consideration she said, “It makes sense though.”

“How so?”

“He always loved having fun, and you should have seen him with those kids, Alex. He was… perfect. He wasn’t the man I thought I remembered. He was something more…something better. He found himself.” Kara sniffed again, another tear tracking down her cheek. “What does it mean, Alex?”

“What does what mean?”

“He went away and got better, and I…floundered.”

“You didn’t—“

“You don’t have to lie to make me feel better. We both know it’s true.”

“You had the burden of guilt, Kara. He didn’t. You’ve never been good with guilt, and you know it. You didn’t flounder—“

“I floundered.”

“You didn’t flounder,” Alex continued from where she was interrupted. “You continued to do your job, you became a proficient reporter, a job at which you’ve been promoted twice, and you’re still out there kicking ass and taking names every day even when you don’t want to. You didn’t flounder, Kara…you just didn’t give yourself permission to flourish.”

“And he did,” she surmised.

“I suppose he had no choice. Good for him,” Alex said, meaning it. For six years, Alex had been of two minds on the situation. She’d known Mon-El was head over heels for Kara, anyone with eyeballs could have seen it. But she’d also known that Kara had unintentionally rejected him in a way that would have given the strongest of hearts pause. She’d understood his need to flee, if for no other reason than to lick his wounds.
But he’d also gone out of his way to keep information from Kara about his whereabouts and that angered her on behalf of her hurting sister. Kara had explained that, according to Bruce, Mon-El wanted her to forget about him, put him in the past so that she could live the life she was meant to have, as if he’d never crash-landed in her city. Alex supposed that kind of thinking might make sense to someone who didn’t realize just how much they’d mattered. He’d thought himself expendable, regrettable, and forgettable, and none of that was ever the case. At least not to someone with a heart like Kara’s.

“I’ve spent so much time looking for him…I don’t know what to do now,” Kara’s denim-blue gaze was nearly overwhelmed by the crinkling of her brow.

“You get up off the mat, is what you do. It’s what we always do. You start by taking a shower. Please, for love of all that’s holy, take a shower,” she joked. Alex was rewarded with a sniff and an upturn of one side of Kara’s mouth. “Then you clean this place up, because this pig sty is not like you. You’ll feel better once you and your place are both clean.”

“Then what?”

“Keep breathing, keep moving forward. Just keep…being you. I know it’s hard, and I know you loved him and that love changed you. I think that’s how it’s supposed to be. But letting that love break you…doesn’t honor what you meant to each other. And no matter what he said or did, I don’t believe he’d want that for you…not for a single second. Give yourself permission to flourish, Kara. I don’t know what life has in store for you, honey, but I have to believe that someone with a heart as loving and as strong and as giving as yours will find happiness.”

“But I wasn’t,” she lamented. “Not with him. I wasn’t loving or giving with him. I was unloving, and I…took from him when I should have given.”

“Stop rehashing the past, Kara. You have to let it go and find a way to forgive yourself.” Alex stroked her sister’s cheek wiping away a stray tear with her thumb. “You’re going to have a long life…longer than me—“

“I don’t want—“

“Much longer than me,” Alex continued. “I know you don’t like to talk about it, but there it is. You’re going to have a long life. He’s going to have a long life. You have no idea what that life will have in store for you. Hey, you might even get a do-over one day. All you can do, Kara, is to
try and be worthy of it when it comes. To be better than you were before. Braver.”

Alex continued to stroke Kara’s cheek until her sister drifted off to sleep, exhausted from the tears and the emotional purge at her sister’s urging. Lulled by her sister’s soft breathing, Alex dozed off as well.

When Kara awoke, the sun was beginning its downward descent outside the window. Alex was gone but in her place was a note on the pillow. “Clean this mess up! Call me if you need me. I’ll check on you later. Love you!”

Kara climbed out of bed, unable to ignore the need to pee for one moment longer. Her face felt stiff from the residue of her salty tears, and her lack of hygiene made her feel as though she needed to be peeled like a banana. A long, hot shower was in order, where she cleaned every nook and cranny until she felt like a new person. Or at least, she felt better when she was clean, just as Alex promised.

After drying her hair, she changed into a ratty hooded sweatshirt and a pair of clingy yoga pants. The perfect outfit for a spring cleaning of her loft.

She began by emptying the trash, and then filling even more trash bags with empty fast food cartons, old coffee cups, both empty and still half full. And she didn’t stop there. She threw away junk mail she hadn’t had time to sift through in weeks, as well as old drafts of stories that were redlined, but never made it to Snapper’s desk because other stories took precedence. Pamphlets she’d picked up somewhere for research went into the garbage. She gathered the dirty clothes strewn throughout her apartment, separated the colors from the whites and put a load in the washing machine.

She cleaned out her refrigerator and her pantry cabinets, throwing out anything that was even remotely expired. Kara emptied all of her canned goods into a box for donating to the local soup kitchen. Starting fresh became the theme of the day and boxing up her pantry food made it easier to spray and wipe down the cabinets.

Kara rolled up her rug and tossed it on the couch, allowing her to sweep the floor and then, on her hands and knees, she worked her way across every inch of her floor with a buffer and wood polish. By the time she finished that task, she was able to change out her first load of laundry for her second, placing the first load into the dryer.

In her bedroom, she sat on the bed, stuffing down feathers back into her comforter and mending the tear in the cloth with tiny stitches until it was almost as good as new. She changed her sheets and pillowcases for fresh ones, making the bed with tight corners, even placing the throw pillows at the
head of the bed where they belonged but so rarely ended up.

The bathroom floor got the toothbrush treatment, as she cleaned every last grain of dirt from the grout of the 2-inch by 2-inch mint green tiles. Her shower was blasted with mildew cleanser whether it needed it or not, and she took her (old) toothbrush to those tiles, too. She threw out old makeup, deciding that she could use a trip to her favorite cosmetics outlet for a whole new set.

When both loads of laundry were dry, she put the living room back to rights and sat on the sofa to fold it all, just catching the beginning of an old Jerry Lewis movie on the American Classic Comedies channel. They were showing a Martin/Lewis marathon this weekend and currently airing was one of her favorites. The comedian was goofy and acted on the outside how she sometimes felt on the inside, so as a child his antics had always lifted her spirits – a quality she was in dire need of right now. Clothes quickly folded and put away, she left the television on and continued cleaning, pulling lampshades off lamps to give them each a thorough dusting. Cleaning the loft’s windows came next and before she was done her stomach let her know that it was dinnertime. Unfortunately, she’d cleaned out her fridge and boxed up her canned goods, so cooking dinner was out of the question until she could do some grocery shopping.

In the kitchen, she opened her junk drawer to retrieve a series of takeout menus for cheap and speedy delivery. After all the work she’d done, she could eat a horse, but she decided pizza was the safer choice. About the time Kara picked up her cellphone to make the call to Luigi’s for her usual order, a light knock came on the door. Ditching the menu she didn’t need, she walked across the room to the door, speed dialing Luigi’s and placing the phone up to her ear. Alex must have returned to check on her or kick her ass into gear.

“Just in time,” she said loud enough to be heard through the door. “I was just about to order dinner. Do you want any—“ She stopped short, dumbfounded, when she saw who stood on her doorstep. Kara’s breath caught in her chest, the butterflies in her stomach doing loop-de-loops like stunt planes at an air show.

“I hope you’re in the mood for pizza and pot stickers,” Mon-El said, his voice soft and maybe a little uncertain. He stood in her hallway, boxes held in front of him like a barrier between them. He was so handsome she had the blink away the emotion welling in her eyes and swallow the lump in her throat.

“You’re…” she attempted, her tongue suddenly devoid of all lubrication. “You’re here.” Her voice was hoarse and weak.

“I thought we could…have dinner.” She was an absolute mess, tendrils of hair slipping free from her ponytail to create a wispy, wild halo around her face. Her hoodie was streaked with dirt as though she’d repeatedly wiped filthy hands across it to clean them. The knees of her yoga pants were
threadbare, and she smelled a little like laundry detergent and bleach. There’s a large smudge of dust or soot on her cheek, just below her right eye.

She’s never been more beautiful.

In a nervous gesture, Kara tugged the sleeves of her hoodie down until they almost covered the tips of her fingers. She picked at a loose thread on the cuff of one sleeve, picking and picking until the cuff began to fray at the edges. Just like in the cafeteria, she didn’t know what to do in the face of his presence; what to say…where to begin.

“May I…?” he gestured to her kitchen from outside the door.

“Oh! Of course!” she exclaimed, stepping aside to make room for him to pass. She clung to the door as he passed by her, as though it anchored her to reality. “Come in,” she whispered as an afterthought, closing the door behind him. Kara glanced about at her loft, thankful he hadn’t shown up even an hour earlier.

Thankful he’d shown up at all. His presence was a gift she could not have predicted nor expected.

Placing the takeout boxes on the kitchen island, Mike turned back to her, absorbing the shell-shocked expression on her face. He felt his stomach sink inside. Maybe this was the wrong thing, his inner demon taunted. Maybe he should have left well enough alone. “Maybe I should have called first,” is what he said instead.

“It’s fine.” she breathed, still not quite believing that Mon-El was standing in her kitchen after fantasizing about it for so very long. She always dreamed that he would come home…to her. The last thing she wanted was to make him feel unwelcome. “You don’t need to call.”

“Good. Because I think we should talk.”

TBC
Once in the apartment, Mike noted the collection of cleansers on the kitchen island and the combined smell of air freshener and wood polish. “Spring cleaning?” he chuckled nervously, hoping to break the tension.
“Clearing out the cobwebs...so to speak. Not that there were actual cobwebs. They were metaphorical cobwebs. Because I would never have spiders living in my loft to begin with...or bugs in general. I am a very clean person,” she babbled. Thank goodness Alex had come over this morning and kicked her butt into high gear, Kara realized. If she hadn’t, Mon-El might have arrived to find her loft a veritable pig-sty. How humiliating would that have been? And revealing.

Mike pointed at the smudge of dirt on cheek. “You have a little something on your face...just there.” He thought about cleaning her face, the way Mrs. Scheinbaum would do for him without a second thought but decided against it. Such intimacies were too far beyond them at the moment.

Kara’s hand flew to her cheek, the wrong one, and wiped furiously.

“Wrong side,” he said, trying his damnedest not to find it humorous, and failing miserably.

Blushing furiously, she considered her escape options. “I’m just going to...back in a sec.” She super sped to the bathroom, nearly collapsing into a panic when she caught sight of her wrecked visage in the mirror. “Rao! I look horrible,” she said, fighting back her rising emotions.

Kara washed her hands thoroughly before scrubbing her face with a washcloth so hard she nearly shredded the thick, terry material. But when she was done, her skin was glowing again. Tearing her hair out of the ponytail holder, she ran a brush through it before replacing it with two small barrettes, one on each side of her head. She allowed the rest of her long-golden tresses to flow freely down to her mid-back.

She debated changing into something nicer but decided that would seem like she was trying too hard. Justified by the fact that her clothes were filthy from cleaning, she changed into another clean pair of yoga pants and a short-sleeved t-shirt with a deep v-neck. It was faded and soft and very...touchable.

Kara stepped out of the bathroom with all the nervousness of a girl about to be seen by her prom date. She clasped her hands behind her back to hide the fact that they were trembling.

‘Shiny’, was the only word his dumbstruck mind could construct as he saw her emerge from her bathroom. Her cheeks rosy pink, her skin reflecting the crude light like the pearly inside of an oyster shell. She was beautiful before, dirt and all, but now she was luminescent.

“I’m sorry I took so long,” she said. She’d been gone no more than fifteen seconds but it seemed
like hours to her and even longer to him. Referring to her new attire, “I was filthy from….”

“Cobweb cleaning?” he filled in.

“Right. So…you came here to talk…?”

“I didn’t really plan this though,” he advised her, attempting a chuckle to mask his nervousness. Even though her fifteen second disappearance into the bathroom would have been considered a blink of the eye by human standards, to them it was long enough to have second thoughts. Long enough for his inner demon of anxiety to whisper in his ear about how she would only hurt him again if he let her back in. Mike gagged the inner demon and shoved it as far to the back of his mind as it would go. Sometimes, you have to do things because you fear them, not in spite of it. “I left the hospital and just sort of…flew here.”

Sensing something she could latch onto, a neutral ground upon which they could begin negotiations as it were, Kara stepped forward eagerly and hopefully. “How is she?” Kara asked. “Amelia.”

“The injury was critical, but the surgery was a success,” he explained, happy for the neutral ground as well. “The doctor wanted to keep her in a coma for a few days to facilitate healing.”

As he spoke, she retrieved clean plates, still hot from the dishwasher, and placed them on the island, while he opened the boxes. “That doesn’t sound…good.”

“It was terrifying,” he concurred. “But they took her off sedation this morning, and she woke up about two hours ago. She’s lucid and answering questions and recognizing people. All hopeful signs.”

“Well that is good news then,” Kara replied diplomatically.

Mike cleared his throat, watching her as she hunted through kitchen drawers for napkins. He noticed that her hands were shaking slightly, and suspected she invented the task to keep them busy, which made him feel a little more confident. “I hope you understand that I needed to see Amelia through this before I could even begin to tackle the reasons why you…found me.”

“Of course,” she agreed, nodding her head. “I would never put my desires over the well-being of a child.”
Mike pursed his lips thoughtfully and replied, tactfully—formally, “Thank you for your understanding. When I saw you….” No, that wasn’t the right way to begin, he thought. “I want you to know that I heard what you said at the hospital,” he began again, “but I wasn’t in the right frame of mind to hear it. Do you understand?”

“Of course,” she nodded, her brow crinkled with concern. “I know how important she is to you. And her mother.”

“That’s another thing,” Mike asserted, shaking his head as he leaned on the counter. “I’m not sure what you think you saw, but I believe you misinterpreted whatever it was. Belinda is a very nice, very strong single mother who had something terrible happen to her daughter on my watch. I was there to help support her through a difficult time. Nothing more.”

Kara had a hard time assimilating his words. She wanted to believe them but was afraid her ears were playing tricks on her or that her mind was interpreting what she wanted to hear. “But I saw—“

“I think your mind was afraid of seeing something, so that’s what it showed you. You were wrong. She’s a beautiful woman, but I don’t have those kinds of feelings for her. I’ve never been able to have those kinds of feelings for anyone…but you.”

Food forgotten, Kara’s head snapped up, her eyes drawn inexorably to his. “Really?” she asked, her voice a prayer.

“Not for lack of trying,” he answered, a hint of bitterness in his tone. “I’m still angry, Kara. Sometimes it…fuels me…the anger I feel inside. I’m man enough to admit that part of me is…afraid of letting go of that anger, because…I’m not sure who I am without it. It’s been a part of who I am for so long. Look…I’m not sure what I ever did to deserve the things you said to me that night in the bar. Except to love you. I know I wasn’t good at it or that I could ever deserve you. I knew all of that then, which is why I tried to keep it from you. It was a burden that didn’t need sharing.”

“But I forced you…manipulated you,” she acknowledged, guiltily, her lips forming into a self-contemptuous twist. “I made you feel like you had no choice because I said I couldn’t trust you.”

“Yes.”

“I wanted information, and I didn’t even know what to do with it once I got it. So stupid,” she
“Sharing that information…my feelings for you…screwed everything up, and we can never get that back.”

It was everything she didn’t want to hear, wrapped up in a single, soul-shattering sentence.

“Being around me afterwards was clearly so awkward and painful for you. I know it was painful for me. I just wanted to give some sense of normalcy back to you by leaving. You were supposed to forget about me.”

“That was never going to happen, Mon—Mike,” she stumbled over his name again. “Forgetting you was impossible. You meant…mean…too much to me.”

“You need to understand…that’s not how it felt.” Mike stuffed his hands into the front pocket of his jeans, attempting to fight off the dark feelings that welled within him when he thought of those lonely days. It was important, he knew, that they were speaking these truths to one another, opening themselves up but that made it no less painful.

“I know,” she replied, her voice thick with emotion. “That’s on me, and I’m so, so sorry.”

“That’s not why I’m here,” Mike said, shaking his head with a sigh. “Apologies. I’ve heard enough of them from you to last a lifetime. And read them. I read your emails the other night, after you took off from the hospital,” he confessed. “I guess something inside me…needed to know.”

“You never read them,” she surmised. All the time she spent composing her apologies and exposing her vulnerabilities in writing, and he’d never even read them. All this time, she’d thought he’d simply been unmoved.

“I didn’t have the will, I guess. I figured if I read them, they’d make me want to come crawling back. And I couldn’t have that.”

“I meant them,” she confessed, a blush rising up her neck. “Every word.”
After a moment of silence between them, he continued. “They were beautiful, Kara, and they confirmed what I think I’ve just come to realize – what I wasn’t ready to see back then. That for you, loving someone means having one more thing to lose. And I was right…they would have made me want to return to National City, to you, but…then nothing would have changed. For either of us. I look back now, with the life I’ve made for myself…the life I’ve earned for myself…and think, ‘that was no life for me.’”

“You’ve done very well,” she agreed, wishing she could tell him how proud she was of him but knowing how inappropriately proprietary that would sound. She’d had nothing to do with creating the man that stood before her now, and could say nothing that implied otherwise. So instead she said, “You’ve become a man to be proud of. Being with me only held you back. Leaving was the right thing.” Her throat tightened as she said the words, as though her body was fighting the truth. “I see that now.”

“Do you?”

“Yes,” she nodded, her eyes welling with tears. “I failed you in every way. Broke every promise I ever made to you.”

“Some of the promises you made, weren’t yours to fulfill, Kara. And you didn’t fail me in every way. You were the first to believe in me,” he reminded her, with gratitude. “The first to give me a chance. You inspired me with your goodness and your empathy for others. I hadn’t seen much of that in my life, quite frankly. All I had ever known was that caring about people had consequences. Deadly ones. Usually for the very people I cared about. You gave me a glimpse at another way, and for that I’ll always be thankful.”

“I never really knew you, did I?” she pondered, intrigued by the mentions of his past. A past that sounded traumatic and not at all like the privileged life she had imagined a prince might lead. “Part of me was afraid to ask because I didn’t want to remind you of everything you’d lost. But that was just an excuse. The truth is, I wanted to take what I saw at face value. I didn’t want to look too deeply. It wasn’t until you left, I realized it was another way that I failed you.”

“How mad were you when they told you who I really was?” he inquired. Mike couldn’t help but wonder how that had all played out. Turned out that she’d never mentioned it in her emails. “Did they…even tell you?”

Kara nodded. “I wasn’t angry. I was never angry, Mon-Mike,” she reassured him. “You would have told me the truth if I hadn’t made it impossible for you to do so. I believe that. You were in distress, remember? And I had some pretty scathing opinions on the Prince of Daxam. I’m glad I know the truth now.”
“That I was the Prince of Daxam,” he said, saying it aloud for the first time since the day he left National City. The words formed clumsily around his tongue as though they were a foreign language to him.

“That the Prince of Daxam wasn’t who they said he was. That he was a good man,” she corrected. “That’s the truth I’m glad I know.”

“He wasn’t a good man,” Mike contended. “Maybe once, he could’ve been, but the boy’s father made certain that wouldn’t happen. It wasn’t until meeting you that he found that part of himself again. The part that his father stole from him.”

Kara knew then that she wanted to know every last thing there was to know about the man standing before her. Not just Mike Matthews, but Mon-El of Daxam as well. It was an opportunity she took for granted from the moment he woke from that stasis sleep after his crash-landing. She had once vowed that if given the chance she would ask, she would delve beneath the surface she hadn’t bothered to scratch the first time around.

“I don’t know about any of that,” she said, reaching out to take his hand, before thinking better of it and pulling hers back. “About your past on Daxam, I mean. But I want to. I want to know everything, if you’ll let me.” She wanted to learn him inside and out – wanted that so desperately. She wanted the chance to do that so desperately.

“After reading your emails the other night I finally accepted something I’d been fighting for a long time.”

“What was that?”

“That you’re inescapable,” he confessed with a shrug, his hands shoved deeply into his pockets. “That you have me trapped, Kara Zor-El, like the moon orbits the Earth, and I will never get out of your gravity no matter how far I run. That I don’t even want to. I figure the sooner I accept that… the better off I’ll be.”

Kara’s heart took flight, but she yanked it back to her side with ruthless efficiency before it could get too far. Was he saying what she thought he was saying? “I’m not…sure what that means,” she confessed, honestly. “I know what I want it to mean, but I’m…afraid to hope for more.”
“I’m not sure what it means either, to be honest. I just know that trying to pretend you don’t exist isn’t working. Trying to make you believe I never existed clearly isn’t working. Maybe what it should mean is that we…try again.”

“Try again?” she asked, the hope in her voice painfully evident.

“There would have to be rules,” he insisted. “I need to be certain that we’re not going to repeat the same mistakes we made the first time around.”

No amount of rules could prevent her from taking a chance at having him back in her life again. “Yeah, you’re definitely a grade school teacher…with the rules,” she said, game for whatever would bring this six-year long nightmare to an end. “Name them.”

“I’ve been doing my own superhero thing for a while now, Kara, and I’ve been trained by the best. All of the best. I’m not a newbie anymore. I need you to recognize that.”

“I do,” she nodded enthusiastically. Like a fangirl, Kara had two scrapbook clippings full of articles of him doing his ‘superhero thing’.

“I’m going to need you to listen to me now,” he said. “I have opinions and thoughts and experiences that are different from yours. Those experiences have no less merit than yours and should be treated accordingly. I can help you, Kara, but only if you let me.”

Kara nodded. His demands were no less than the kind of respect he should have been afforded in the first place. But she’d been too bossy and too flush with the power of mentorship to notice the damage she was doing to the person she was supposed to be guiding. “I understand,” she agreed.

“We need to find a way to get past this, Kara. We can’t be friends if we’re constantly reminding each other of where it all went wrong. Can you understand that?”

Her sister’s words from earlier in the day when they’d been curled up under the goose down together came back to her in a rush. “We need a do-over!” she exclaimed.

“A…do-over.”
“Yeah, it’s when you want—“

“I teach second grade,” he reminded her. “I’m familiar with the concept of a ‘do-over’. It’s like rule #4 in playground etiquette.”

“Oh, right.”

“But grown-ups don’t get do-overs,” he announced. Then, with a tilt of his head asked, “Do they?”

“Why shouldn’t they?” Kara asked, her hands raised palms up. “Who says we can’t?”

“Right,” Mike nodded, as though conspiring with her. “Who says we can’t? It’s not like there’s a ‘Do-over Council’.”

“Definitely not,” she confirmed, her eyes finally sparkling again.

“Okay…just so we’re clear. A do-over means no throwing our past back in each other’s faces. No matter how mad we get about something.”

“No using the differences in our experience level against one another,” she added with a nod, her fingers twisting nervously around each other.

“No…ignoring my perfectly valid opinions because you think you know better.” Mike’s eyes squinted suspiciously as he watched her absorb that one. It was, in his judgement, perhaps the most important of all his conditions.

Kara only nodded in agreement. There was nothing she could say to his statement. All in all, the implication had been nothing but truth, and in some ways it was a microcosm of how their entire relationship had played out. “Again, I am so—“

“And no more apologies,” he finished, succinctly. “They’re just a reminder, and we don’t need any more of those.”
When they’d first met all those years ago, after he’d landed on this planet, he’d been a person who had taken few things seriously. With the exception of her health and well-being, Mon-El had seen little in the world worth fighting for or protecting. A single glance into his eyes told her that was no longer the case. She no longer knew who this man was, but she was excited about the prospect of finding out. The bones were still there to be sure—the DNA—but so many deviations had seeped in and filled the cracks her negligence had left behind.

“No more apologies,” she echoed on a whisper.

Mike swallowed heavily. “So…that’s that, I guess. A fresh start.”

“Not quite,” Kara shook her head. “Just one more thing.” She held out her hand to Mike and said, “Hi. My name is Kara Zor-El. I’m from Krypton and like you…I’m a refugee on this planet.”

A wide grin split his face, like the sun breaking through thick cloud cover, and he responded by grasping her offered hand. “Lar Gand, Prince of Daxam,” he replied. “But my friends call me Mon-El. Or just…Mike. I’m not particular.”

“Lar Gand,” she repeated, her brow crinkling between her eyebrows.

“Only my parents called me that. And then only during formal occasions,” he confessed.

“There’s so much I don’t know about you,” she said, sadness in her tone. “That I never knew.”

“The good news is…now there’s time to learn,” he reminded her.

“Do you…do you have to go soon?” she asked, hesitantly. She wanted him to stay for days, weeks…forever. Casting about for an excuse to get him to stay, something to ease into their new agreement, she struck upon an idea.

“I can stay for a while.”

“Do you like ‘Exploration Force’?” she inquired, hopefully.
“Man, I love that show!” he replied. “I missed the last episode because of the Dominators though.”

Like a switch had been flipped, her energy level surged and then peaked. “I know, I know. Me, too! Thank goodness for whoever invented the DVR. Do you want to…?” She gestured towards her television set, still set to pause from the earlier movie.

“That would be great,” he rejoined. “I’ll warm up the pizza.”

“I’ll get the plates. Red wine?”

“Sounds good.”

It didn’t take long for them to curl up on the sofa, not entirely like old friends but near enough. Kara keyed the remote until their show was playing, and together they discussed the characters and plotlines they loved about a show they both enjoyed but had never before watched together.

It wasn’t without awkward moments—at first—but those eased away over the next two hours, as the missed episode slid seamlessly into the most recent offering. Kara wasn’t truly interested in the show; she could watch it later when she was alone, as she usually did, but rather the man sitting next to her on the couch. Having him there, near enough to smell his cologne was something she’d dreamed of for a very long time, and she didn’t want to take a single moment of it for granted.

Similarly, he too was distracted by her presence, by the way her skin glowed, the way her tiny barrettes could barely contain her luscious hair, and by the way the deep V-neck of her t-shirt gave him a tantalizing glimpse of her cleavage. His fingers itched to tug the barrettes from her hair and card recklessly through her silky locks, kissing her until her mouth moaned into his, hot breath mingling as their tongues tangled together.

For the first time since—he can’t remember when—he felt his blood heat and his body stir with long-lost urgency. It was a relief to know they still could.

When the show ended, another similarly themed program began, but neither of them cared nor paid attention. Instead, they left the television running for background noise as they chatted and sipped on their wine, nursing the bottle, because they both knew the night would be over when they reached the bottom.
“Will you…tell me about Daxam?” she asked.

After a moment’s pause he launched into his life story, explaining his birthright and the merciless manner of his upbringing. He had never been comfortable in that life, wearing it like an ill-fitting suit that was too tight in unpleasant places. Perhaps the discontentment of it explained his relatively rapid adjustment to a new life on Earth. Or perhaps, in part, the credit could partially be laid at her feet. She suggested that it would not have been a leap to conclude that both reasons might have played a part in his desire to quickly acclimate to this planet.

While his body felt as though it was awakening from a six-year hibernation, by contrast her body felt as though it hadn’t slept in years, not since his departure. And now that he was here again, once more in her life where he belonged, her body let down all of its protective wards, the compounded weariness of the last few years catching quickly up to her. As the minutes stretched into hours, it became increasingly difficult to keep her eyes open, despite her curiosity in the things he said.

Kara fought the sleepiness until it overtook her. She fell asleep on the sofa, facing him, her knees pulled up to her chest, her head leaning against the back of the couch. Mike kept talking, even after he knew she was down for the count, unwilling to admit that the night had come to an end.

Kara sat right in front of him, sleeping as though not even an alien invasion on the street below could wake her. He wondered if she was a light sleeper. Allowing her to slumber, Mike cleaned their mess, throwing out the pizza and pot sticker boxes as well as rinsing their wine glasses and setting them out to dry. Throughout his movements, she stirred not one iota. Mike switched off the kitchen and living room lights, leaving a small light on over the stove as a night light. Even turning off the television and plunging the room into sudden silence did nothing to disturb her.

Despite their solar-provided abilities, sleeping in that position would leave her with a stiff neck in the morning, and undoubtedly cursing his name for not waking her.

In her bedroom, Mike pulled back the covers of her bed and tossed the throw pillows onto a chair in the corner where, he suspected, they spent much of their time anyway. Kara didn’t struggle in the slightest when he slipped one arm under her knees and the other around her back. In fact, she snuggled right into his chest, as if she belonged there (and part of him thought she did).

“Mon-El,” she mumbled, grabbing tightly to his flannel shirt with one hand. He could hear the flannel fabric straining to withstand her grip.
“I’ve got you,” he replied, placing a kiss on her forehead. Her fingers loosened slightly at the contact of her lips against her skin. His lips hovering against the soft skin of her temple, he breathed in her scent before gently laying her on the bed and pulling the sheets over her to tuck her in. He unclipped her barrettes and gave in to the wish fulfillment of running his fingers through her hair. Two years of working with small children had taught him the way around little girls’ hair accoutrements. He’d long ago lost count of how many barrettes he’d replaced or how many braids he’d re-plaited. Setting the clips on the bedside table, Mike reached up to flip the switch on the lamp.

“No,” she mumbled, reaching for his arm. Her strength tugged him down until he was forced to take a seat on the edge of the mattress.

“What?” he asked. “What is it?”

“Afraid,” she moaned, still more than half-asleep.

“Afraid of what, Kara?” he inquired, sweeping a lock of hair from her forehead.

“Dreaming?” Kara lifted her head, her eyes blinking several times to clear the cobwebs. “Stay?” she asked. She didn’t want the night to end any more than he did, and by maintaining contact she could keep it going for a while longer. Maybe even until morning. “Stay with me?” she asked again, this time begging.

Mike was no fool. He knew that crawling under the covers with Kara, waking up with her, would be a bad idea. An idea that would likely end some place for which they might not be ready—at least not while she was half-asleep. In the end, he made a decision he thought they’d both be able to live with in the morning and beyond.

“I’ll sleep on the couch,” he told her. “I’ll be here when you wake up in the morning.”

“Promise?”

“I promise,” he echoed. “I’ll even make breakfast.”

“Mmmmm…pancakes,” she sighed, happily, her fear melting away.
Her fingers loosened the grasp they had on his shirt and released him so that he could finished 
tucking her in. With a final glance at her face in the soft light, Mike twisted the switch on the lamp 
and plunged the room in darkness.

In the living room, Mike kicked off his boots and unfurled the throw blanket hanging over the back 
of the sofa. He didn’t want to face a long flight home without the prospect of seeing her again first 
thing in the morning, any more than she wanted to stare into the abyss of a solid eight hours without 
knowing it hadn’t all been a dream. He understood her and was feeling exactly what she was 
feeling.

At home in his own bed, he would have tossed and turned all night thinking of her, of being here 
with her. Instead, crammed onto a sofa with his feet dangling off the end, a throw pillow tucked 
under his head, he drifted off to sleep in the space of few breaths.

For the first time in six years, Mike Matthews slept the sleep of the innocent the whole night through.

TBC
Chapter Notes

Author’s Notes:

This story is the sequel to Bulletproof. Please read that one-shot before diving into this one.
FINAL CHAPTER!!! Looks like we made it.
I’m toying with the idea of writing some one-shot “interludes” of stories that took place during the missing six years. Because I definitely thought there was going to be more Clark in this story. There just didn’t seem to be much room for him with everything going on. If those plot bunnies are still in my head after I finish the next HOLG story then I might. On the other hand, it’s highly likely that new show canon could kick off the need to write something else. I JUST DON’T KNOW!!
Comments are welcomed, flames are destroyed with my freeze breath.

Title: Permission to Flourish
Author: gldngrl7
Date Started: February 12, 2017
Rating: T for Teen (I know! I can’t believe it either!)

I’m so in love with you
And I hope you know
Darling your love is more than worth its weight in gold
We’ve come so far my dear
Look how we’ve grown
And I wanna stay with you until we’re grey and old
Just say you won’t let go

--James Arthur – “Say You Won’t Let Go”
Messages from Belinda informed him that Amelia was improving by the hour and had even been moved to a private room. She’d texted ‘PRIVATE ROOM!!!!’ in all caps with what seemed to Mike like a preponderance of exclamation points.

He’d planned to visit his star student as soon as school let out Monday, so after speed-grading their verb-tense homework, he rushed over there (by car), exchanging yet another light-hearted text with Kara before leaving the school. They’d been texting like teenagers in love since he’d had to peel himself away from her on Sunday night and fly back to Philadelphia.

“But this is good,” he said aloud, to the solitude of his Honda Civic. “We’re getting to know each other again, without all that pesky physical attraction constantly distracting us.” Physical attraction which, as it turned out, was not-unexpectedly explosive…and dangerous to furniture.

Sunday morning had dawned like his entire life had decided to turn over a new leaf. He’d opened his eyes to find Kara leaning over him, brushing a lock of hair from his forehead, as she gazed down at him wistfully. She hadn’t expected him to wake, and yanked her hand away like a child caught elbow-deep in a cookie jar. “I’m sorry,” she’d rushed, her blood lighting a fire beneath her cheeks.

“I’m a much lighter sleeper than you are,” he had yawned.

“I see that now.”

Mike had reached for her hand and taken hold of it. “And I thought we said no more apologies.”

“About old stuff,” she’d nodded, as he tossed off the blanket and stood up. That close to her, he could smell the minty-fresh flavor of her toothpaste. He’d salivated at the thought of tasting her. “Not about new stuff.”

It had been on the tip of his tongue to compliment her on her apologizing skill, apparently honed to a razor sharp edge in the six years they were parted. But needling her about her stubborn inability to apologize in their previous acquaintance fell into a gray area of the ‘no reminders’ policy. “Just out of curiosity,” he’d said instead, “were you sorry about touching me or sorry about getting caught? Because those are two very different things.”

Squinting her eyes Kara had smiled slyly. “Sorry about waking you up,” she’d said, choosing option ‘C’.
Mike had laughed at her diplomatic answer. Diplomacy must have been a recently gained trait as well. The Kara he remembered had barreled through people without bothering to see whose feelings she was stepping on, especially if she thought a cause was just. “Is your curiosity assuaged?” he asked. “That I’m real, and not some figment conjured by a dream?”

Her eyes had widened to huge, blue pools he could happily swim in, as though he had plucked the thoughts directly from her mind. “How did you know?”

Mike had smiled in a way he hoped came off as enigmatic. “I believe I promised you breakfast?” he tested.

“You did?”

She’d remembered nothing about being put to bed the night before. “Uh-huh. When I tucked you in and you asked me stay.”

“I did?” His words had stoked the fire in her cheeks to a high burn, and she’d covered her flaming cheeks with both hands. He’d been slammed with the need to kiss away the deep crinkle between her eyebrows.

“You were afraid you’d wake up to find it had all been a dream.”

“I said that?”

“More or less.” In a moment of courage he can only blame on sleepiness and a head full of romantic movies, he had grabbed her hand and placed it on his chest, slightly to the right of center, over his rapidly beating heart. “So tell me…can you feel this? Does this feel real to you?”

She’d gulped visibly and he’d heard her own heart’s rhythm kick into high gear, which in turn had his stomach flip-flopping like an Olympic gymnast on steroids. “Y-yes,” she’s stuttered, before biting her juicy red lip to stop it from trembling.

Mike, still holding her hand over his heart, had wrapped his other hand around her waist and tugged her hips flush against his. “And that?” he’d asked. “Does that feel real to you?” His body had
stirred even before he woke this morning, and her presence above him had served only to enflame him further.

“Yes,” she’d breathed, nodding vigorously, her pelvis settling deeper into his as though hoping they could merge. “Mon-El?” she asked, using his true name. He hadn’t corrected her but felt a thrill go through him at his name on her lips. Though he’d been Mike Matthews for a long time now—had finally made his peace with the concept of becoming Mike Matthews—he could be Mon-El for her. For her and no one else.

“Yes?” he’d responded, his tongue snaking out to lick his lips.

“I’m not afraid anymore.” Her courage had taken over then as she’d seen within her grasp the culmination of six years of agonizing fantasy a heart’s beat from fulfillment. She had reached up with her free hand and cupped the back of his neck pulling his mouth down to hers, making her declaration on where she’d wanted their actions to lead. If he could have taken a breath in that moment, he would have breathed a sigh of relief, because he hadn’t been sure if he was pushing too far, too fast. If the actions of her tongue had been anything to guess by, he hadn’t been moving fast enough.

When he’d pulled away, he’d rested his forehead against hers, their heavy breathing mingling together. “Definitely, not a dream,” he’d pronounced.

“Definitely not,” she’d agreed, her breath coming in ragged gasps, as her arms wrapped securely around his neck.

What had followed had been a flurry of clothing removal, of heated couplings that splintered furniture, knocked pictures from walls, shattered shower tiles and had more than one neighbor concerned for the safety of sweet, innocent neighborly neighbor, Kara Danvers. And once started, it was like they couldn’t stop, their bodies drawn together like magnets—magnets all the more heated for having been kept apart for so long.

But for all of its urgency and passion, it had still been at its heart…lovemaking…soul-binding and heart-affirming lovemaking. Even though neither had yet to find the courage to actually say the words, it had been clear as the diamonds sparkling in her comet-like eyes. And he had never in his life worshipped someone with his touch the way he had Kara. It was seared into his brain like a brand to the skin, and he had replayed it all over and over since leaving her naked, on the remains of her mattress, less than twenty-four hours ago.
As he traversed the hallways of the hospital, he juggled his phone, laptop bag, and the giant get-well soon card made from poster board by the entire second grade roster of classes, until he found the elevator that would take him to the 7th floor, where Amelia was now located. Stepping inside the elevator with a crowd of other people all headed to different floors, Mike shot another text to her.

“Just leave the mattress on the floor. Safer maybe?” He hit send after navigating to and choosing the deep thought emoji.

“Safer for who?” she shot back.

“Whom,” he corrected, adding a wink emoji.

“Grammar Nazi!” she accused, frowny face emoji.

“Teacher,” he replied, shrug emoji.

“Safer for WHOM?” she asked again.

“For the people in the apartment below you. Whatever. If you do decide to get a new bed, steel reinforced…?”

“It would have to be custom built…”

“Get an estimate. I’ll pay half.”

“Bet your rock-hard ass you will,” she replied, blush emoji.

He laughed out loud, happier than he’d been in…ever, well aware that the people getting on the elevator were staring as he exited at the top floor. Mike checked his direction, looking for the yellow line on the wall that would lead him to “Yellow Station” and to Amelia’s room. He wondered if there would be a wizard at the end of this yellow brick road. He wondered if Frank Baum was appropriate reading material at story time for second graders.
Tucking his phone into the back pocket of his slacks as he neared Amelia’s room, he came perilously close to running into a man in a dark suit exiting the room. The man held up a brown leather briefcase to ward off Mike’s near collision.

“Excuse me,” they said in unison. The man in the suit nodded courteously before walking away.

“Knock, knock,” Mike announced as he entered the room.

Pink roses.

They were everywhere. On every flat surface, in every type of arrangement, in every shape of vase imaginable, pink roses had taken over the room. The smell, though pleasant, was unmistakable.

“Mr. Matthews!” he heard a recognizable shout. It was music to his ears, but still he held his finger up to his lips in their customary sign language for her to lower her voice. Obeying his command, she lowered her volume to library voice. “Mr. Matthews!” Yet, she still managed to imbue his name with the exact amount of enthusiasm, despite the lowered volume.

“I thought you were supposed to be trying to be quiet, per the doctor’s orders.” Mike took note of Belinda in a corner, reading something, her eyes widening, a freshly torn open envelope in her other hand. He thought now might be the time for him to distract Amelia while Belinda finished doing whatever it was she was doing.

“It’s so hard,” she whined.

“I know,” he chuckled.

“Aren’t they pretty, Mr. Matthews?” she asked, referring to the sea of pink roses.

“Yes, they are,” he agreed. “Where did they come from?”

Amelia shrugged. “Mommy says they are from someone named Amomynissly. That’s a silly
“I think what Mommy means is that you have a secret admirer.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“What’s that?” she inquired, pointing to the poster board in his hand.

“Well, this is a card signed by the whole second grade,” he informed her. “Everyone wants you to get well fast, so you can come back to school.”

“Did Ricky Prescott sign it?” she asked, her eyes squinting suspiciously. She and Ricky were not exactly bosom buddies.

“I don’t know,” Mike responded. “Maybe you’d like to read it and find out.” He relinquished the handmade card to her grasping right hand, noticing that her left hand had very little to do with the process. “While you do that, I’m going to see what’s got your mother’s attention.”

Whatever it was, Mike couldn’t tell if it was good news or bad news based simply on her facial expression. Even after six years, he could still read every one of Kara’s ‘crinkles’, but Belinda’s micro-expressions were a mystery to him. “Everything all right, Belinda?” he asked, tilting his head a little to see if he could get her to look up at him. “What is it?”

Belinda lifted her eyes to meet his, confusion in their depths. “That man who just left…he’s a lawyer for something called The Fairchild Foundation. He had some papers for me to sign and gave me this letter.”

“What does it say?” he wondered. Something about the name Fairchild Foundation sounded familiar, but he couldn’t place it.

“Here,” she replied, handing him the letter. “It seems so impossible, I still can’t believe what it says, even after reading it a dozen times. At least.”
Mike read through the letter. The wording was clear and concise, like his college acceptance letter. “It says here that an application for financial assistance has been accepted on your behalf with The Fairchild Foundation and that all of Amelia’s medical expenses both present and future until she reaches the age of 26 will be paid in full.”

“I don’t know how this…what application? What’s The Fairchild Foundation? Do you know anything about this?”

“I don’t know anything about an application. Maybe someone from the hospital submitted it? A doctor or co-worker? Five days in ICU,” he suggested. “That can’t be cheap.”

“It’s not,” she confirmed. “We have insurance—decent insurance—but I would have been paying down the out-of-pocket for those five days for the rest of my life. I was trying not to think about it, but I would be lying if I said I couldn’t hear the bills piling up.”

“Looks like you can put those thoughts to rest and just worry about that miracle in the bed over there.”

“Yeah,” she nodded, looking around the room at the sea of pink blooms. “I guess so. And then there’s these flowers….”

“Belinda,” he interrupted before she could get too far with her concerns. “Someone wanted to help you out, maybe in the only way they knew how or the only way they could. Sometimes accepting their gift is the best way to say ‘thank you’.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

Mike watched Amelia scouring the get well card for messages from friends and other names she recognized. Mr. Snuggles was stuffed unceremoniously under her left arm. “What’s that about?” Mike asked, worried.

“She has some left side paralysis,” Belinda nodded. “She came out of the coma mentally intact, for which I am very thankful, but the injury wasn’t without consequences.”
“What does the doctor say?”

“Dr. Dagmar doesn’t see any reason why, without physical therapy she can’t regain full mobility. But it’s going to take time and effort on her part. I’m going to have to find a way to keep her motivated.”

Mike’s phone ‘blooped’, and he tugged it out of his pants, shooting off a quick response to the equally quick message he received. “I might have a few ideas about how to do that.”

“Well, I’m all ears.”

“I have a little surprise I know she’s going to like.”

“What is it?”

“Well it’s kind of a surprise for you, too. Won’t be long now.”

“I don’t know if I can handle any more surprises today,” Belinda cringed. “I’m expecting to wake up any minute now and find that I’m still sitting in that uncomfortable chair in the ICU.”

Mike nodded in understanding. “I’ve had a similar experience myself recently. I found that sometimes it pays off to let yourself believe that good things can happen.” Leaving it at that, Mike sat down on the end of Amelia’s bed and asked her if she liked the card. She nodded a resounding yes.

“So…do you remember what happened, Amelia? Why you ended up in the hospital?”

Amelia’s smile slipped, and she shook her head. “Mommy says I fell.”

“You were climbing on the jungle gym,” he reminded her. “Way higher than you were supposed to go. And when you fell, you hit your head on the monkey bars on the way down.”

“I did?”
“You did,” he confirmed. Mike chucked her on the chin with his finger. “How about you don’t do that again, huh?”

Amelia nodded. “I’m sorry.”

“I know. But there’s a good part of this story, too.”

“There is?”

“You were hurt pretty badly, and we needed to get you to the doctors fast. Faster than the ambulances can go. And just when we thought that wasn’t going to happen, guess who showed up?”

“Who?”

Mike leaned forward and whispered conspiratorially, “Supergirl.”

Amelia gasped, her eyes widening to a nearly impossible size, her tiny body practically seizing with excitement. “Supergirl?!”

“Supergirl,” he confirmed with a grin. The expression on her face was every bit as awestruck as he had imagined it would be. “She scooped you up in her arms and flew you all the way here in about two seconds.”

“I flew with Supergirl?” Check that. Her eyes could in fact widen further.

“You did.”

Her face fell, the beautiful sun-struck smile melting from her face which seemed to literally dim the room. “But I don’t remember.”
“I know,” he pulled a frown as though commiserating with her. “But I made a few inquiries, worked a little of my ‘magic’, called in a few favors, and guess what?”

“What?” Amelia asked, her excitement rebuilding.

At her cue, Supergirl stepped into the room, arms akimbo in her trademark stance and asked, “And how is the patient today?”

Mike kept his eyes on Amelia the whole time as her entire being lit up like a tiny atomic bomb had detonated inside of her. She gasped, almost choking on her excitement, nearly coming apart at the seams in the face of her fangirl bliss. Mike held his finger up to his lips. “Remember you’re supposed to be quiet. Whispers only. Can you do it?”

He would not have thought it possible that someone could scream and whisper with the same breath, but apparently it was Amelia’s superpower. “Supergirl!” she vocalized, every muscle in her body seizing with joy.

Neither was Belinda immune to the presence of Supergirl. “Oh my gosh!” she gasped, barely able to gather the air in her lungs to do so. Unable to properly express the full breadth of her feelings in words, she threw her arms around Supergirl’s neck and proceeded to babble. “Thank you, thank you, thank you so much. You saved my baby’s life.”

“Oh, okay,” Supergirl chuckled, accepting Belinda’s attack-hug, and gently, if a little awkwardly, returning it. When Belinda tore herself away from the superhero, embarrassed by her outburst, Supergirl said, “I was just the ambulance service; the doctors saved her life. I’m just glad I was in the right place at the right time.”

“Why were you there?” Belinda wondered, covering her embarrassment over getting a little too familiar with a perfect stranger. Even if that perfect stranger saved her daughter’s life.

“Visiting an old friend,” she replied without hesitating.

“I can’t thank you enough,” Belinda said, tears spilling down her cheeks.

“You just did,” Supergirl assured, her empathy on full display as she stroked the other woman’s upper back to soothe her. “But I thought I’d come and hang out for a while. Maybe get to know
Amelia while she’s awake.”

“I don’t know if you noticed…but I think she’d be okay with that.” Both Supergirl and Belinda turned to Amelia who sat on her knees on the bed, right hand clutching Mr. Snuggles for dear life, practically panting at the opportunity to hang out with her idol.

Mike grasped Supergirl’s forearm before she could get to the bed and whispered, “How long were you in the hallway?”


He threw her a wink and she responded in kind. It felt so good to be partners again. Real partners this time, on equal footing. "Okay," he said, “I need to step outside for a few minutes and make a phone call.”

But before he could do that, Belinda grabbed his arm, preventing him from leaving. “How?” she asked. “How did you pull this off? This was the surprise you were talking about, right?”

“It was more her, really,” he downplayed his involvement, unable to clarify how the entire surprise really came into being. How could he explain that he and Supergirl had concocted the whole plan while taking a shower together after sweating up the sheets of the latter’s demolished bed? “She tracked me down. She has her ways. After that…it was just about figuring out the timing. She wanted to see for herself how Amelia was doing.”

“Thank you,” she said.

“It really was all her.” Mike spared a glance for the alter ego of the woman he loved, finding that she had climbed aboard the bed with Amelia. Supergirl lay back on one elbow, her legs crossed at the ankles, and her cape wrapped around the little girl like a blanket, while the two chatted like they were old friends. With a smile and a nod at Belinda, he excused himself from the room.

Out in the corridor, he scanned through the contacts on his phone until he located the one he sought. Surprisingly, the phone only rang twice this time before he picked up on the other end – as if he’d been waiting.

“Wayne.” His gravel voice was like a command, as though ‘Wayne’ was a verb, and he fully
expected Mike to perform it. But Mike didn’t play that game, and he wasn’t intimidated by the
billionaire.

“Pink roses?” he asked.

“It seemed the right choice for an eight-year-old girl.”

“Seven-going-on-eight,” he replied automatically.

“I stand corrected. Did she like them?”

“Oh, of course,” Mike chuckled. “Her room is filled with pink flowers from a secret admirer. She feels
very special. I assume you’re responsible for the private room as well?”

“How else was there going to be space enough for 1,200 pink roses?” he asked, as if this should be
obvious. “About the roses…I paid extra for the baby’s breath. Was there plenty of baby’s breath?”

“I don’t know what that is.”

“Dilettante,” Wayne shot back. “I’m told she’s doing well. We’re setting her up with a private
physical therapist. She’ll get her left side back in no time.”

“How can you know that?”

“Wayne Enterprises has access to her medical records now.”

“So that was you?” he confirmed. Mike had suspected as much, but wasn’t certain. “I knew I’d
heard of The Fairchild Foundation, but I couldn’t remember where.”

“You must have seen some paperwork in the Manor when you were training with me.”
“Must have.”

“At any rate, Ms. Connor’s signature give us access to Amelia’s medical records until she’s eighteen, and she can decide for herself if she wants to continue the program. We’ll be collecting data on her head injury, as well as any medications and treatments she’s subjected to. The hope is that the medical R&D arm of Wayne Enterprises can find a way to completely reverse Traumatic Brain Injury or mitigate its damage. The fact that she’s a child is an important part of why she’s needed in this study. Sadly, few children her age survive a trauma like that or come out of it with so few ill effects. Had it not been for the quick actions of you and Supergirl, they’d likely be taking her off the ventilator right about now and donating her organs. She’s going to help save the world, Matthews.”

Mike shuddered at the thought of Amelia’s situation turning out any other way than it had. “Careful, Wayne…your empathy is showing.”

“You’re right. I should go hit something,” he deadpanned.

“Well, they don’t know who to thank, but I do. So…thank you, Bruce.”

“It was my pleasure,” Bruce groused, clearly uncomfortable with receiving thanks either for heroic deeds or acts of charity. “So…if that’s all…”

“Actually, there’s one more thing. I wanted to say…about that other thing…”

“The thing you were so mad at me about?”

“That’s the one. I wanted to say thanks for that, too.”

“So everything worked out after all?”

“You could say that. I flew to National City, and we talked things out. And then we worked through it in ways that didn’t involve talking.”

“Okay, we’ll keep that between us. You don’t want that getting back to Clark. Or maybe I do….could be fun.”
“I know where you live, you overgrown bat,” he threw out the empty threat as though he’d used it a hundred times.

“How’s this going to work between you?” Wayne wondered. “A bi-coastal life?”

“It’s a 31 minute commute at hypersonic speed from Philadelphia to National City. Slightly less than the average rush hour commute in Philly. And there’s always weekends and summer break.” They’d discussed the matter between them during one of their few breaks from Sunday lovemaking, recognizing that they could not be parted for long.

Inescapable.

“Just be careful,” Wayne cautioned.

“Careful about what?”

“Hashtag SupergirlInPhilly is already trending on Twitter. That’s twice in less than two weeks. If ValorInNC starts trending…how long do you think it’s going to take the tabloids to crunch those numbers? Or CatCo? Or the Daily Planet! Lois might put it on the front page just for giggles.”

“I’ll be careful,” he chuckled, seeing Wayne’s point.

“Don’t screw this up, Matthews,” Wayne grumbled. “I might not be on your side next time.”

“This was you being on my side? You sold me out, as I recall!!”

“I was giving you what you needed. I was tired of looking at your sad sack face. It doesn’t become you. I’m supposed to be the tortured one.”

“Yes, I suppose ‘sad sack’ looks much better on you.”
“Watch it, Matthews,” he warned, his voice deepening ever lower than its usual gravel baritone.

“You walked right into that one.”

“You were more fun when you didn’t sass me.”

“I bet I was.”

“This girl of yours gives you spirit.”

“That’s one way of putting it.”

“Don’t lose her,” Wayne said, a distinct tinge of sadness in his tone. “Don’t let anything happen to her.”

“I don’t know if you noticed, but my girl is pretty good at taking care of herself. But don’t worry, I’ll always have her back.”

Mike ended the call a moment later when he heard the door open and saw Supergirl slip out, turning back for one last wave to the little girl in the room. She wore a crown woven from pink roses on her head.

“How did it go in there?” he asked, reaching up to touch her flower crown.

“I promised her I’d take her flying when she gets her left side working.”

“That should do the trick.” It was no less than what he expected from her.

“Were you talking about me?” she whispered and nods, motioning to his phone.

“Among other things,” he teased, the dimples on his cheeks deepening. He adjusted his glasses, like
they were the touchstone that reminded him that this was his life now.

“Was that Clark?”

“Uh…Bruce, actually. I called him to thank him for the…” Mike waved his hand to indicate the room.

“He did all that?” she asked, incredulously. Her brow furrowed. “He doesn’t seem like the type.”

“Still waters run deep with that guy. He has his moments…apparently.” Mike wanted to reach out and touch her, but even in this private wing of the hospital there were still people to see. He stuffed his hands into his pockets, and she mirrored him by clasping her hands behind her back. “I…uh…also called him to uh….” He cleared his throat, “to thank him for giving you my location.”

“You did?” she grinned, swaying back and forth so her cape spun gently around the back of her legs.

“I did. Credit where credit is due, I guess.”

She pinned him with a sultry gaze he was beginning to recognize. “I want to get out of here. Can we get out of here?”

“I thought you’d never ask.”

He said his goodbyes to Belinda and Amelia, promising to see them soon, and bring her homework next time (much to Amelia’s chagrin) before grabbing his things. Mike and Kara separated at the elevator, and he made his way out to the car, while she ducked into a supply room and changed back into Kara Danvers. She met him in the parking lot and slipped into the passenger side of his Civic, pouting that it would be much faster to fly.

He drove her home to his garage apartment, holding her hand the entire way. Mike introduced her to the indomitable Mrs. Scheinbaum, who took one look at her and knew instantly who Kara was, as if seeing beyond masks was her superpower. To her credit, she said nothing, only revealing her knowledge with a sly wink in his direction. The three of them shared a pot of tea before Mike and Kara retreated to his apartment.
They spent the night there, managing not to break a single piece of furniture or wake a single neighbor. Although, to be fair, Mrs. Scheinbaum had made quite a lot of noise about taking her hearing aids out before going to bed. Sometimes she didn’t like to do that.

The next morning, Supergirl made a “surprise” visit to Fox Chase Elementary, where she shook hands and answered questions, accepted innumerable kisses on the cheek (some more sloppy than others) and gave a firm, but good-natured lecture on playing it safe around playground equipment as well as the importance of following the rules set forth by adults.

Every few minutes, she glanced up to find Mon-El gazing at her, his eyes sparkling, his lips quirked up on one side as he watched her with a mixture of pride and joy. They were here together, and he was hers at last, after years of unanswered yearning. Together they had laid out a plan (because Mon-El was a big fan of plans and strategies) on how they would make this work.

He wasn’t ready to leave Philadelphia. It was his city and more his home than National City or Metropolis ever had been. Citizens embraced him here, proud to have a superhero of their very own. The city limits even had signs that proudly proclaimed, ‘Welcome to Philadelphia: City of Brotherly Love and Home to Valor.’ They’d added that last bit just a few months ago.

And likewise, National City was Kara’s home, where her sister and sister-in-law lived, where her work was headquartered, her contacts, her cultivated sources, and her growing reputation as a hard-hitting crime journalist. Though she’d confessed to him while lying curled together atop a dangerously cracked kitchen table that she had once applied for a job with the Philadelphia Inquirer, he had quickly declared that he didn’t want that for her. He didn’t want her to give up her hard-earned reputation just so they could be closer to one another. They could make it work this way—at least for now.

And there was an unspoken truth there as well. Their lives would be long; longer than the human existence by several centuries if Dr. Danvers’ estimates were to be believed. There was no reason to rush this towards some undetermined finish line, whatever that was. Because for them, there would be no finish until, one day in the far distant future, death would part them. For now, by mutual decree, they would enjoy each other to the fullest as well as this second chance they had resolved to take for themselves.

Only one thing was for certain; with transgressions forgiven, and hearts on the mend, the future before them held endless possibilities.

THE END.
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