Sheltered Town

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Chapter 1

Another story idea I never got around to exploring until now. Updates for this story will usually range from 5,000-7000 words (but sometimes a little or significantly over 7,000). This first piece is 5,129 words (according to one word counter), give or take a few and minus the summary and notes. Update: You can now find me at https://greatshow1.tumblr.com/. And I have a Ko-fi. Thanks for the compliments, artwork and videos concerning this story.

"Come on, Lena!" Kara's little feet moved swiftly across the grass, her plain blue dress not at all hindering her.

"I'm movin' as fast as I can. You're always so quick!" Lena told her, holding up her pink, frilly dress to keep from tripping.

Every morning, for the past three years, she and Kara had done this — race to their special spot in the woods, just a little outside town.

They were children. And as children did, they took part in silly things. But to Lena, this wasn't silly — chasing Kara like this. As far as she was concerned, it was her life goal — one day catching up to the blonde.

"You're weak, Lena," Kara shouted over her shoulder, hurrying to scurry up a tree in a clear spot. The tallest and thickest tree in the area, they'd long considered it theirs.

"Yeah? Well, your head is big," Lena huffed, stopping to look up at the girl. "Your lips, too. Why, I've never seen a girl with such big lips."

"And you're small for your age," Kara fired back. "If you're this small only ten years in, you can't be that much taller when you're as old as my pa." She stood on a branch, leaning against the bark. She watched as Lena's green eyes trained on her blue ones before reflecting hurt.

Frowning, Lena offered the blonde her back. "I'm normal size," she pouted. "Mother says you're only a tad bit taller." Her gaze directed over her shoulder, briefly meeting Kara's.

"If that's what makes ya feel better." Kara shrugged, moving along a few more branches. "I'm eight and I put ya to shame."

Lena grit her teeth. Yes, she was shorter. In fact, she was the shortest of all the children her age. But did Kara always have to rub it in? "You should come down and give me my morning kiss if you're going to be this mean to me for the rest of the day." She watched the athletic girl swing from branch to branch, dress flying up with each move.
"You always want the morning kiss," Kara sighed, immediately working her way down the tree. "I don't even know why we started that." She landed on her feet.

"Because," Lena said, turning to her fully, "it's how we became friends. You said we should shake on it. I said we should kiss on it." She moved forward.

Kara rolled her eyes. "I know that. But why a kiss? And why every mornin'?'"

Lena blushed, clasping her hands behind her back, eyes flashing innocently. "Because I see your mother and father do it every morning, even though they aren't supposed ta, and they seem to like it a lot." She moved closer to the girl, looking up at her. "And girls are allowed to kiss because of the no bodily-touching rule, remember?"

"Then do it already." Kara stomped her foot, practically whining. "I wanna get back ta climbing."

Lena leaned in and — as she did — Kara remembered that the brunette wasn't that much shorter than her, after all.

Their lips met, and it was pleasant. Lena held the kiss for longer than usual, playing with the simple, black and gray pebble necklace around Kara's neck as she did. But the nearby sound of crackling twigs pulled the two to a halt.

"Ooooh, I'm tellin' my papa. Bodily touching is forbidden," opined Mon-El a few feet away, holding on tightly to his britches.

The dark-haired boy was always holding up his britches.

"Girls are allowed ta kiss each other," Lena countered, sticking out her tongue for lack of anything better to add.

Kara shrugged, finally turning to the boy. "What do ya want?"

"Your ma said it's time for breakfast." Mon-El nodded earnestly.

"Well, then why are we still here?" Kara scolded them, instantly pushing past Lena and jetting ahead. "Last one there is --"

"-- We know, we know," Lena sighed.

If there's another thing Lena knew, it was that Mon-El was just as fast as Kara and always managed to come in second place, grabbing onto his britches and all. "Kara! Mon-El! Wait!" she yelled.

They entered the relatively average-sized town. The thudding concussion of the blacksmith's hammer reverberated among the half-timbered homes scattered about, bouncing off the sides before echoing back into the confines of the workshop. Birds were startled from their perches and flung themselves into flight. A gray German Shepherd, sniffing in the gutter of the dirt road, chippered up when he saw his owner emerging from the shed with firewood. He was dressed in a simple cotton shirt, trousers and boots, like most men in their town. The women, wearing long plain dresses, and mostly barefoot, tended to their daily duties; some hanging shirts, trousers and blankets on nearby clothing lines; others sat on the porch peeling potatoes or some other vegetable as children played nearby.

Two women rounded up turkeys toward the farm area, just as Kara, Mon-El and Lena came bounding up the road.

"What have we told ya three about racing through the community?" The plumper of the women,
carrying a basketful of apples, said as she had been close to being run down.  

"Sorry, Ms. Merriam," the children uttered in unison, hurrying into Kara's home a few feet ahead.  

Ms. Merriam shook her head and turned to the other woman. "It's that Lena Luthor. The girl's been a bad influence on those youngins since they befriended her."  

The other woman nodded in agreement as they stared at the home in question.  

Inside, Kara and the others gathered around the kitchen table. Kara's mother, Eliza Danvers, was busy setting down plates of porridge and bread while Kara's older sister, Alex, helped. They weren't her blood relatives, but they had taken her in at age four after her birth parents had died from pneumonia. The town doctor had said Kara was fortunate that she hadn't come down with it as well.  

In the aftermath, and to get over the pain of losing her parents, Kara had indulged in war history stories. Eliza had found them too violent and unbecoming of a lady, but Jeremiah, her husband, had encouraged them. The finality of death and that it happened to everyone helped bring Kara closure. She learned that the War of 1812 came to an end in 1815. Eventually, the United States developed a sweeping transportation system, interstate trade, and a national bank. As the economy flourished, canals, roads, cities, and industrialization expanded. The War of 1812 and England's loss also resulted in westward expansion, but at the cost of Native Americans being pushed out more rapidly.  

The only thing Kara had studied more than war was food. Because innovations in transportation had been underdeveloped in 1815, most Americans ate what they grew or hunted locally. This included bean, corn, and pork. Cows provided milk, butter, and beef, and this mainly took place in the north. In the south, cattle was harder to come by; so venison and other game was the meat mostly afforded them. Refrigeration hadn't yet become significant enough to be commonplace. Smoking, drying, or salting meat had been their means of preserving the animal flesh. Vegetables were kept in a root cellar or pickled.  

But now, in 1858, things were a lot different. Kara's interests had also drifted toward hammers and molding weapons.  

She briefly pulled out her spectacles and stared at them with a sense of loss. They had belonged to her father and they were all she had left of her birth parents. Mon-El seemed to notice her sorrow and rubbed her back, despite the fact that he was supposed to keep his hands to himself.  

"You're joining us this morning, Mon-El?" Eliza asked, ignoring the innocent contact between the children.  

"Yes, ma'am," Mon-El said, smiling up at the slender, light-haired woman. "Grandpa said it was alright. That if Lena gets to come over every morning, there's no reason that I shouldn't be able to."  

Lena smacked her teeth, flipping her long dark hair. This was supposed to be her time with Kara. It's been that way for as long as she could remember — the two of them having breakfast, dinner and just about everything else together.  

Lena's mother had died when she was two, and so all she'd had left was her father, who'd had a wife and son. They didn't know about Lena until her mother died and she was orphaned. Eventually, her father took her in. So, in some respects, she was similar to Kara. Her father was akin to the sheriff of the town, only they didn't call him that. They called him the overseer. Lena didn't know much about what he oversaw, except for the rule that boys and girls, and men and women, were not to touch each other without good reason. In this context, "good reason" usually meant to assist someone with an overwhelming plight. Married couples were allowed to touch, but only under certain
circumstances, which Lena was not privy to. She knew that kissing was off-limits. She also knew that her father didn't have the best reputation in town and that he hadn't known a thing about raising a girl or taking care of someone, least of all cooking for the person. Her stepmother usually hadn't cared to put in much effort, doting on her son instead. So, for Lena, Kara's home had become a second home of sorts. Here, Lena was treated like a member of the Danvers family. Here, she was given a second mother in Eliza and a second father in Jeremiah.

Although Lena had known Mon-El for just as long, he'd always seemed more like a guest than a brother when visiting. And with a grandfather who cooked better than most women in town, it's a wonder why he wanted to eat here at all.

"He has his own home he can go to," Lena pouted.

"So does she," Mon-El countered, biting into some bread.

"There now, you're both welcome here," Kara's father, Jeremiah, said entering the room to take a seat. Tall, dark-haired, and stern, he added, "Kara and Mon-El will be married someday, so you might as well start being nice to each other now." He proceeded to butter up his bread.

Kara took note of the assertion, but ignored it by slurping up some porridge.

Mon-El bit into his bread happily, a smug look gracing his features. But Lena was having none of it. "Eww," she groaned, shaking her head in protest. "Kara's not marrying him. Kara's marrying me."

Kara and Mon-El's eyes nearly popped out of their sockets, looking to the girl. Alex smiled.

"Don't be silly, child," Eliza said, sitting at the table, placing a cloth in her lap. "Women can't marry each other."

Kara watched Lena, and Lena watched Kara, both staring in curiosity.

Kara and Lena looked up at the ceiling of Kara's dark bedroom, lying side by side. It was nighttime and Lena was staying over again, as she often did. This night, however, both of them were finding it difficult to sleep.

"Are you really going to marry him?" Lena whispered.

"My pa says I am. So I reckon I will." Kara put an arm under her head, propping it.

Lena turned to her, hugging her close. "Please don't marry him."

Kara shrugged. "Okay... I won't."

The next time Kara and Lena saw each other, it was two weeks later. Lena's father had found a job in the city and the Luthors were moving. Kara hadn't gotten a warning. Neither had Lena. So, when Kara saw her on the horse-drawn conveyance, being pulled farther and farther away from the Luthor residence, the tears were unexpected and that much stronger.

"Kara!" Lena called out as Kara ran to keep up with the cart. It wasn't going particularly fast, but this wouldn't have stopped Kara anyhow.

"Lena," the blonde said, reaching the raven-haired girl as she jogged alongside the cart.

"Promise me you'll remember me," Lena pleaded.

"I will, I will," Kara vowed, wiping at her eyes. "Here." She took off her necklace and threw it into Lena's lap. "You remember me too."

Lena stared at her. She couldn't form any more words, and she didn't know why. She clutched the necklace tight to her chest and hoped her gratitude would be conveyed from this gesture alone.

The cart sped up and Kara slowed her pace. She watched as her childhood friend rode out of her life and toward the sunset.

Eighteen years later, in 1876, Lena Luthor had returned.

As Kara hammerd away in the blacksmith shop, she overheard the men talking. The herders, who had stopped in town for utensils, discussed the news among themselves. This made its way to the gossippers, who couldn't believe that a fancy city girl was returning to this relatively obscure town.

From what they had heard, she was a troublemaker, right along with her father. Sure, her father had been the town's overseer, but rumor had it that he'd been corrupted and never abided by the rules himself. Taking that into account, the impure city life had no doubt sent him and his family farther down the path of corruption. Newer residents, however, considered giving this Lena woman the benefit of the doubt. That she had apparently been a rambunctious child, breaking the town's codes and left and right, didn't faze them. The town's latest overseer had resigned, with a need for a new one, and if Lena was to take her father's place in this regard, they were willing to give her a chance.

One blacksmith burning charcoal to heat and soften the iron said that she was a great beauty.

"It's the great beauties one has to watch out for," Mon-El replied, tossing a grin Kara's way.

Kara rolled her eyes. She was beginning to think that working alongside Mon-El had been a misguided idea. But she'd always wanted to be a blacksmith, having loved the way the hammer struck iron or steel, the smell of the charcoal. Trade schools for her craft didn't yet exist. For a boy to learn to be a blacksmith, he worked with an experienced smith. The boys were named apprentices. While some apprentices held formal contracts with their masters, others gained their knowledge by working with their father. Jeremiah was a blacksmith; he didn't want Kara working in this field, saying that she needed to be more lady-like and settle down, but he and Eliza had reluctantly agreed to allow Kara to follow her own career path. Since they had an extra daughter, Alex would take up the traditional womanly duties. Kara essentially became the son they never had.

Kara had always felt guilty about Alex essentially having the life of a seamstress handed to her; she figured that Alex had wanted to set her own course as well. But Alex, being the doting and compassionate older sister she'd always been, had never complained.

Smithing didn't bring Kara much money. A blacksmith could expect to earn $1.00 to $1.50 per day. Some charged as little as 2¢ to make a simple small item. But a number of young blacksmiths bought land as they aged and deliberately did more farming and less smithing over the years. Kara had bought two pieces of land so far.

Eventually, Mon-El, who had been attempting to court her since they were in their mid teens, even while occasionally taking an interest in other women, had decided to work with her. Kara hadn't
protested. He wasn't very good at smithing since he had missed out on years of perfecting the craft, but she got along with him for the most part. She couldn't blame him for thinking that spending more time with her was likely to make her more receptive to his advances, but she couldn't help feeling like she was leading him on. Already they were 26, and she still hadn't gone through with marrying him like their parents had promised. Many now considered her an old maid.

There were also the rules. She had been promised to Mon-El from birth, as it was their town's custom to arrange marriages for children while in the womb. Should one of the women in the contract miscarry, the living child would be wed to the next child the other woman produced. If the other woman never produced another child, the living child would be assigned another mate. Technically, Kara hadn't broken the arranged marriage contract since she had not verbally declined to marry Mon-El, but she knew others in town likely saw her as a rule breaker the longer she held off.

Sex before marriage was entirely out of the question; so everyone knew she was a virgin as well. She and Mon-El, just like every other opposite-sex pairing, were not allowed to kiss until marriage. Once married, kissing and sex were to be restricted to the act of producing a child. The town didn't want more mouths than it could feed. And, in their view, kissing, even a peck on the cheek, and other forms of intimacy between opposite-sex pairings of reproductive age, eventually led to sex. So a "no bodily-touching rule," which mostly applied to opposite-sex pairings, had been put in place. Men could not even hug their own daughters. So Kara had never been hugged by either of her fathers. Men could not kiss men, for it was considered deviant. Women could kiss women, but it was never to be prolonged, deep, or lead to sexual touching, for such touching between women was deviant. Men and women were not to be outside past seven o'clock in the evening, for surely they were looking to be deviant with one another. Music was not to be played, for it was deviant. The Devil was in the music, the town believed. Other than a hum she remembered from her birth mother, Kara was sure she'd never heard music.

There were rules upon rules, and not all of them, especially the sexual ones, were easy to enforce. But Kara had always remembered the core ones, and abided by those and the less serious ones as best she could. The overseer not only had to enforce these rules, but the typical laws, such as the ones on murder, theft and rape, as well. Kara felt that it must be such a burden to inherit such a title. It was no wonder why the previous overseer had resigned.

"Oh?" She finally looked to Mon-El, responding to him. "I don't know enough about great beauties to have any such say on the matter." She went back to hammering, but realized that she was curious as to how Lena might have changed. What sights the raven-haired woman might have seen beyond this town. And, although she hated to ponder it, she wondered if Lena even remembered her.

How could Lena not remember her?

Mon-El had stopped hammering and was now staring her way. "You should look in the mirror sometime," he said, before putting his smithing tools down, rubbing his hands on his blacksmith apron, and exiting the blacksmith shop. He always got annoyed when she downplayed her looks. He loved to go on about how he had the most beautiful girl in town. Kara didn't have time for such ego-stroking.

She put away her utensils as well and walked to her private office in the back, closing the door and sitting at her desk to think as others continued to work. Her father owned this shop, and this was the only reason she, or Mon-El, could afford such breaks. It wasn't fair to the others, but Kara always made it up to them by working overtime.

She sat back in her chair, thinking things over. Even with Lena back, what did it matter? They hadn't seen each other since they were children, and that seemed like ages ago. They were strangers now,
and Lena had grown up in the city. It wouldn't be the same. And Kara wasn't sure that she wanted it to be. A bitterness had remained with her since that day. She knew it wasn't Lena's fault that Lena had up and left, but the resentment was still there. And it was potent.

"Ms. Danvers?"

Kara looked up to see a worker standing in her doorway. "Letter," the man said, laying it on her desk before walking out.

Kara opened it with haste; she didn't get many letters. But this wasn't a letter. It was a note, from Lena, telling Kara to meet with her in the overseer's building at four o'clock in the evening. It was two o'clock in the evening now. Sighing, Kara rubbed at her temples in annoyance. The note wasn't even polite. It was essentially an order. Was Lena so haughty that she felt she didn't need to visit Kara herself after all this time? She could simply have someone fetch her as though an owner fetching a dog? And why two hours from now? Was Lena really not that eager to see her?

Kara stood, balling the note up in her hand. She would set Lena Luthor straight. Right now.

Briefly squinting against the sun, Kara placed her spectacles on and headed on the path toward the overseer's building. She hadn't even bothered to clean up her appearance. If Lena Luthor was so determined to see her, she would see her raw.

Kara chanced a look at the women's clothing store a little to her left and scoffed. Silly frilly things. She'd never needed them.

A group of women passed her by, including Ms. Merriam, who said hello. Kara nodded, and she could hear Ms. Merriam telling the other ladies how nice and pretty Kara was, but that she wasn't very lady-like and it was a shame she hadn't found a husband yet.

Kara made it to the front door of the two-story overseer's building. Her heart was pounding a mile a minute, but she pushed onward. There wasn't anything to fear. She would see Lena, give her a piece of her mind and call it a day. Simple as that.

"Lovely day, ain't it, Kara?"

She turned to see a farmer, Mr. Ray, tipping his hat at her as he walked his horse. "It is," she replied, knowing she felt that it was anything but. As she turned back toward the door, she had to steady her shaking hand on the doorknob. It was now or never, she told herself.

She entered slowly, and as she looked around, it dawned her that she'd never been inside of the place. Neither she nor her family had ever broken the rules, other than the morning kisses shared between her parents; so she'd never needed to visit the overseer's building. She surveyed the area. A few chairs lined a wall in what appeared to be the waiting area at the right. The walls were plain white, but were covered by drawings of people who had broken a serious rule and served as an example of what not to do. Sunlight filtered in through the double windows and gave a shine to the floor's scuff marks. One large desk in the center and a smaller one to her left made the room look smaller than it was. Three doors were present at the back.

Kara moved to the side of the large desk and saw folders stacked on a table. Examining a few, it was clear that these were old and recent cases of people who had broken the rules. It appeared that Lena would be wasting no time dishing out punishments.
"Couldn't wait to see me?"

Kara jumped at the sound of the feminine voice, instinctively hiding the folders in her hand behind her back as though a child caught attempting to steal treats.

Lena stood by the front door. The woman was older now, of course, but Kara recognized those eyes. There had been no forgetting those vibrant green eyes. Or the lovely raven hair, which now sat in an elaborate bun at the back of her head. Her skin was as pale as it always had been, and was offset by dramatic red lipstick, which also seemed to somehow brighten her skin tone. She wore a black bodice over a white gown. And Kara could see that, from her vivacious feather hat set at an angle, to her high-end shoes, she was dressed to impress.

Lena stepped toward Kara, her face flashing with something recognizable and then something completely foreign. Kara hadn't realized that she was backing away until a wall pressed against her back. She expected Lena to stop advancing, but the woman didn't. Piercing green eyes flickered over Kara's face and body as though they were assessing whether or not to purchase the goods before them. The eyes hardened, then softened again. The absence of the woman's baby face made her lips appear fuller than Kara remembered. "I suppose it's too late in the day to ask for my morning kiss," Lena whispered in her ear.

Kara's ear felt like it was on fire.

Lena smiled, using a hand to slowly push away from the wall and the other to retrieve the folders from Kara's grip. She moved to walk behind the desk, immediately organizing papers.

Kara wondered if this was what it felt like to have whiplash. "Is that all you have to state to me?" she asked. "After all these years?" She could feel her anger building.

Lena put the papers down and looked at her. "Well, I would tell you that you've grown into your forehead and lips. Or suggest you bathe." She looked Kara over again, seeing the coal and soot on her face and clothing. It was even in the blonde's hair. "But that would be rude."

"So we're back to teasin' again. Is that it?" Kara pushed the spectacles back up on her face, suddenly feeling self-conscious. Spectacles were considered evidence of old age and infirmity, which is why people preferred to wear spectacles only when they were needed. This was particularly true for women, who, if they could afford them, opted to wear hand-held designs such as the lorgnette to avoid having glasses on their faces. And with how Lena had just scrutinized her, Kara was willing to bet that Lena didn't like her wearing spectacles either.

"Now, Kara," Lena said, leaning lazily against the desk, "you know as well as I that teasing is what we did best." A smirk played at her lips.

Kara took a moment to look to the floor. She removed her spectacles; she wanted Lena to see her clearly. "Don't you remember how we ended?" Tears had started to build in her eyes, and Lena's face softened.

"I do," Lena said, tossing her hat on the counter and moving to Kara. "Very much."

They stood close. So close that Kara could see that now, as adults, she was only two inches taller than the woman. She could see the blue and yellow of her eyes. She was close enough to hear the woman's breathing. Close enough to analyze the tiny scar next to her right eye. Kara's fists balled as she remembered touching that scar when they were children. Lena had gotten it after running into a stray branch. It hadn't been bad, but the brunette had needed stitches.
Kara closed her eyes. She could feel Lena's arms encircle her. Lena's scent was all around. It was a distinct combination of innocence and provocation, and it flowed through Kara in a way that made her shudder. She hadn't seen Lena in so many years. And now the woman's arms were around her, pressing their bodies impossibly close. Kara felt like she would implode if she hugged back. So, instead, she stepped away.

"Why did ya call me here?" she asked breathlessly, forcing her eyes to open.

"Why else?" Lena's brows furrowed in confusion. "We have...unfinished business."

Now it was Kara who made a confused expression.

"The promises we made to each other?" Lena clarified. "To never forget each other." She chuckled softly, but it came out more nervous-sounding than anything. "I don't know about you, but I took it as a vow to meet again someday."

Kara shook her head. "I never expected to see you again."

Lena arched a brow. "Really? Can I take this to mean that you have a husband and child stashed somewhere in town?" She sounded angry now.

Kara's head was beginning to hurt. "You are the one who left me!" she countered, her voice raising. "And why are ya making it seem like I promised you my hand in marriage? We were children!"

"My god, Kara, I didn't have a choice!" Lena moved closer. "And you told me you wouldn't marry."

"I said I wouldn't marry Mon-El."

"Did you?"

Kara stopped then, placing a hand to her head as her mind analyzed things disbelievingly. Why was she being lectured like this? And by a woman she hadn't seen in eighteen years. A woman she didn't know anymore. So many people had asked her about her failure to marry Mon-El. Had ridiculed her for it. She didn't need this from Lena as well.

"You don't get ta come back into my life after all these years and ask me personal questions," she spat, moving toward the front door and opening it.

"Kara," Lena's voice could be heard breaking.

Kara turned around to view the woman; she had one hand against the large desk, as if she were steadying herself. Her eyes locked onto Kara's, intense and pleading.

"Did you marry Mon-El?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

"I did." Kara took her leave, slamming the door behind her.
Chapter 2

Lena stared out the window in the overseer's building, a glass of water in her hand. It had only been twenty minutes or so since Kara had departed, but, to Lena, it felt like hours. She took a sip of the water, watching the occasional passerby. The town, Breighville of North Carolina, was the same.

North Carolina was given the nickname 'the Rip Van Winkle State,' in the early 1800s, due to the state’s economy being deemed to be significantly lacking when compared to the neighboring states that were bustling with production and trade. Indeed, one text described the residents as "a sleepy habitat peopled by laggards and lazylegs not unlike those in Lubberland."

This was in part because of Nathaniel Macon, whose political reputation and voting record, stained his name when he voted against significant economic legislation that would increase the national government’s power and influence in the economy. To him, state-government-sponsored roads were constitutional but federal-funded roads were unconstitutional. This resulted in North Carolina accepting only a slim percentage of federal transportation funds. There was also the belief that political views such as these set back the state’s economic progress, and that a remaining Maconite suspicion of government is what blocked some North Carolinians from considering all the benefits that the government could bestow. All in all, though some challenged the view, the state was considered to have a backward state of affairs.

And, considering the rules of this lowly town, Lena couldn't say that she entirely disagreed. It made sense that Kara would already be married. A woman staying unmarried was unacceptable. Lena remembered her father giving her a copy of an unpublished memoir by Charlotte Despard he had somehow obtained. In it, Despard wrote of her experience as a young woman in the 1850s:

   It was a strange time, unsatisfactory, full of ungratified aspirations. I longed ardently to be of some use in the world, but as we were girls with a little money and born into a particular social position, it was not thought necessary that we should do anything but amuse ourselves until the time and the opportunity of marriage came along. 'Better any marriage at all than none', a foolish old aunt used to say.

   The woman of the well-to-do classes was made to understand early that the only door open to a life at once easy and respectable was that of marriage. Therefore she had to depend upon her good looks, according to the ideals of the men of her day, her charm, her little drawing-room arts.

How right she was, Lena thought. Marriage laws had been based on the notion that women would get married and that their husbands would take care of them. Even in Britain, when a woman got married, her wealth was passed to her husband. If she worked after marriage, her earnings were also her husband's. Upper and middle class women had to stay dependent on a man, initially as a daughter and later as a wife. It wasn't much different for the poor. And a woman trying to obtain a divorce was extremely difficult. Men could divorce their wives on the grounds of adultery, but there was no vice versa when women found that their husbands had committed adultery, unless they had an additional charge. And children? They became the man's property following divorce, and he could bar the mother from seeing them.

Lena sighed, moving to the smaller desk to sit. The town was the same. But she was not. Having grown up in New York, she had seen so much, far beyond this sheltered town. The prospect of marriage had been unappealing to her for reasons her mind had previously pondered, but she had tried relationships. The first was with a man, and, following the loss of her virginity, Lena knew immediately that such a relationship would never happen again. Before that point, it took her some
time to fully realize that she had no desire for the male gender. When she finally accepted this, she explored a tentative relationship — a sexual awakening of sorts — with a woman her father had employed. That didn't work out either. She'd love to state that she hadn't been sure why, if only to spare herself from appearing pathetic for holding on to a childhood infatuation, but she knew that Kara Danvers had remained a deep-seated fixture in her heart. She knew that she had to return, like she had considered returning times before, to test how real this feeling was. Whether it was just a silly delusion.

If they were meant to only be friends, Lena would need to accept that. Either way, she needed to know.

She picked up the dip pen with gold nibs. But first, she needed to deal with this new job. It wasn't something to take on by her lonesome. She would need stewards or officers if anything was to seriously be enforced.

Kara scrubbed at her hands in the wash area of Alex's home. Her face and hair were mostly clean, but the grime on her hands, as usual, refused to come off to the point where she could call them scrubbed.

Her mind was also preoccupied with the lie she had told Lena. Lying didn't come easy to Kara. Jeremiah and Eliza had raised her to be honest. But she had been so irritated in that moment that the words just fell from her lips. She had wanted Lena to hurt the way she had been hurt by the brunette's departure all those years ago. She couldn't see why Lena would be so wounded over a broken childhood promise, but she had known it would sting, as Lena had always valued Kara's honesty and loyalty.

"I might need to see the town priest," Kara said.

Alex moved to sit on the floor. Her four-year-old son, William, tackled her by the neck, trying to wrestle her to the ground.

"Why? Because of your lie?"

"Of course." Kara sat beside Alex.

"Kara, you're making a mountain out of a molehill." Alex leaned toward her, whispering, "Do you know how many times I've lied?"

Judging by Kara's scandalized expression, she could tell the answer was no.

"Do ma and pa know about this side of you?" Kara questioned.

Alex laughed. "I'll tell you this... Father Mable is unlikely to free you of your guilt. If anything, he'll add to it."

Kara stared at her sister. The brunette was dressed in her usual, simple green dress, her long, dark hair smoothed and pulled into ringlets at the sides. Alex always made looking pretty and feminine so easy.

"Lying is a grave sin, Alex." Kara moved to pick up William, her cruddy hands staining his shirt as he made growling sounds.
"Don't muddy up my baby," Alex chided, taking William back into her own arms.

"He's four, not two," a male voice boomed behind them. They turned to see Alex's husband, Jonathan Williams, frowning their way. They'd married when Alex was 20 and he was 24. Kara had always felt it unfortunate that Alex's child was given the name 'William Williams.'

"You shouldn't be coddling him." The man walked over to where they were sitting and scooped the boy up into his arms. "I'm taking William out hunting with me. You two have plans, so it shouldn't matter." He exited the house with long, awkward strides that Kara was certain she'd never get used to.

Kara turned back to Alex. "Are thangs not fine?"

Alex shook her head, her eyes still fixated on the door. "Don't ya ever make the mistake of marrying," she whispered.

Jeremiah and Eliza sat in the dining area a little away from the kitchen, as Alex and Mon-El helped set the table. Kara was busy putting the finishing touches on the meal. It was five-thirty, and it had been their idea to treat Jeremiah and Eliza, as the two had treated them so many times in the past. An average farm day began very early. Women built the fire per scheduled meals. So even a simple meal was a time and energy-consuming chore. Although timepieces existed, and there were clocks in town, including one in the blacksmith shop Kara worked in and in Kara's home, many still lived by the sun. Some went to bed at dark and got up at daylight, timing their meals by what nature told them; in these cases, schedules were mostly by guesswork.

Preparing breakfast, dinner and supper was more than just a matter of starting a fire for cooking. Spices, particularly cinnamon and nutmeg, and seasonings, like pepper and salt, had to be ground up with mortars and pestles. Cream and butter were made from the family dairy cow. The milk usually sat out for an hour after someone brought it in. After cream separated from the milk and rose to the top, it was placed into a butter churn and beat until it hardened. The first beat was to make whip cream, and, after that, butter.

In town, every family had something to do with regard to fixing meals. As the males were outdoors most often, their duties were hunting, feeding larger livestock, and working crops in the fields. Wild game, such as deer and turkeys, were often brought back to feast on. The females were mainly regulated to feeding smaller livestock and working in the kitchen.

Although they had town butchers, families often came together with their neighbors when it was time to butcher animals. This was to share the workload and the meat. The meat staple in the Southeast was pork, as hogs proved more pliant than cows. Curing was improved because of pork. In the fall, it was not uncommon for neighbors to gather while doing work. This time would be used to share information about one another's lives, including any gossip. It was essentially a social event, which is also how it was at harvesttime. At harvesttime, neighbors joined in to supply crops. If enough time was left following the work, a celebration by way of a feast or bonfire might ensue. Dancing was also allowed, so long as no music was played and men and women did not touch one another.

The main meal, dinner, was enjoyed in the early afternoon. Supper was a smaller meal for the evening, which is what Kara was preparing now. They did not have the resources for a separate kitchen, which was a kitchen in a building separate from the house, and so the kitchen was often hot, smoky, and smelly. The hearth signaled the focus of home life and family activity. Meals were prepared on hearths of brick fireplaces, and different types of fires and flames were used to prepare
different types of food. While boiling and stewing required a smaller flame, a regulated fire was used to roast and toast. Kara was busy with roast at the moment. She was good with coal, and to maximize the fire's energy, she shoveled coal and ash underneath and onto the lid of the Dutch oven, which stood on three legs on the hearth.

Cast iron and steel stoves were noted for their difficulty. Ashes from an old fire had to be removed. After that, paper and kindling had to be set inside the stove, dampers and flues had to be carefully adjusted, and a fire lit. If cooking much, one needed to watch the stove all day long. The stove had to be continually fed with new supplies of coal or wood, which equated to an average of fifty pounds a day. The ash box had to be emptied about twice a day, which meant that one had to gather ashes and cinders in a grate and then dump them into a pan below. On average, a woman spent three to four hours every day carrying coal or wood, lighting fires, adjusting dampers, sifting ashes, and massaging the stove with thick black wax to keep it from rusting. Any time the fire slackened, Kara had to adjust a flue or add more fuel.

"Kar," she heard Mon-El say, calling her by his term of endearment, from the dining area. "You seem lost there. Supper ready?" She looked at him and he made one of his goofy faces usually meant to make her laugh. She offered a brief smile before turning back to the food. He never understood that her mind commonly deviated to thoughts of history when it came to meals, war, and technological advancements.

"It is." She stood, turning to the others.

"'Bout time," Jeremiah said as Mon-El and Alex helped Kara retrieve the roast pork and place it on two small platters for the dining table.

"Hush you," Eliza scolded him, playfully hitting him in the shoulder. This was her husband. And in her home, she would occasionally kiss him, and now touch him, even if the others saw. "The children do this for us, and all you can say is 'bout time'?

"Thank you, I mean," Jeremiah said apologetically, watching Alex place the roast on individual plates with a grin.

Kara laughed. "It's fine, ma." She readjusted her spectacles. "This is for you two, and I did take my sweet time."

Eliza nodded, a twinkle in her eye.

As the trio proceeded to take their seats, a knock came at the door. "I'll get it," Kara said, rising quickly. When she opened the door, her heart dropped. There stood Lena. The woman wore the same clothes from earlier, but the hat and fancy shoes were absent. And her hair was no longer in the elaborate bun. It fell gracefully around her shoulders, and was even longer than Kara recalled.

Lena's expression was contrite. "I'm sorry, Kara... I... I couldn't stay away." Her gaze, as usual, pinned Kara to the spot.

"Who is it?" Kara heard Jeremiah ask from the dining area.

Kara couldn't form a coherent sentence. "It's... I mean... I saw her earlier..."

"It's Lena," said Mon-El emerging behind Kara and pinning Lena with a gaze far nastier than any he'd ever given her when they were children. His light eyes somehow appeared darker now.

Lena met his glare with a defiant look of her own.
"Lena? Lena Luthor?" Eliza said joyously, moving toward the door with Jeremiah and Alex in tow. She pulled Lena into a bear hug. "We heard you were in town. But to now see you. Come in, come in, dear." Eliza pulled the brunette inside.

Kara and Mon-El were left staring from the doorway. Kara closed the door solemnly. She should have known Lena would show up here. Of course this would happen.

"Let me take a look at you," Eliza said, turning Lena around, in a full circle, until she faced her again. "My, what a sight. Right, Jeremiah?"

"You've grown into a lovely lady, Lena," Jeremiah agreed, his tone sounding fatherly. Proud almost. "But you were always lovely."

Lena smiled. She'd forgotten how wonderful it'd felt to receive appraisal from the Danvers family. She almost moved to hug Jeremiah, but remembered the no bodily-touching rule. She hugged Alex instead.

"Welcome back, Lena," Alex said.

"Alex... I've missed you," Lena replied earnestly. "I've missed all of you." Her gaze searched for Kara's, for a sliver of those blue eyes. Kara looked away.

"Somehow I doubt you were up in the city missing me," said Mon-El, moving to re-take his seat.

"Lena, join us for supper." Eliza ushered Lena toward the table. "Alex, get her a plate."

Kara and the others sat down, Kara having no choice but to sit between Lena and Mon-El, lest she take Alex's seat.

"You're too kind," Lena commented, her eyes trying to focus on Eliza, but straying toward Kara.

Alex served her some roast, then sat back down.

It was awkward for a moment. But just for a moment. Jeremiah asked everyone to bow their heads in prayer. Lena remembered that Jeremiah and Eliza would bless the food before it was put on the table. So this was different. Her beliefs were also different now, but she would concern herself with that another day.

"So, Lena," Eliza began, once they had risen their heads and started to eat, "what is life like in the big city?"

"New York," Lena clarified. "And it's...big. And loud."

Eliza laughed.

"There is a lot of population growth there," Lena added. "The buildings are massive. Many of the rich worry about business deals, living a life of luxury, while a lot of other people, like the Italians, are left to fend for themselves. Crime is rampant, in part, because of the neglect shown toward the latter." She laced her fingers together, eyes briefly flickering from person to person. "But there is also a lot to be admired. The transportation system is very efficient. I can get to where I want to go very easily. There is pavement street after pavement street. There is a building for almost everything: Food. Wine. Theater. Cigars. Oh, and there are beaches. And amusement parks with carousels. I could tell you all about Coney Island and its splend --"

"-- Doesn't sound very exciting to me," Mon-El interrupted, shrugging as he took a bite out of his
roast.

Until that point, Kara had been engrossed. Mon-El's interruption brought her back to their less-than-engrossing reality, and she lowered her head. This didn't go unnoticed by Lena.

"He speaks of what he doesn't know," Alex chimed in, giving Mon-El a death glare.

Eliza wasn't sure what to state, lacking the knowledge or experience as well. But she knew she didn't like the sound of 'a building for almost everything.' Nor did she like the mention of cigars. "That sounds..."

"Nice," Jeremiah, finished for her.

"Yes, nice," Eliza agreed. She cleared her throat. "Lena, I also notice that your accent is, um, a bit...different."

Lena laughed softly, and Kara looked up at her. That laugh was infectious.

"Yes, Mrs. Danvers," Lena confirmed. "Because I initially grew up here, then in New York, which included me socializing with many Irish folk in addition to others of different backgrounds, my southern accent is somewhat lost. It's multifaceted, I guess you could say."

Kara studied the woman. Now that she thought about it, Lena's accent had sounded different. With the outpouring of emotions during their meeting earlier in the day, Kara had barely registered this.

"Irish folk?" Alex questioned.

"The cholera epidemics of 1849 and 1854," Lena clarified. "Cholera reached and devastated Ireland in 1849. Many of the Famine survivors, who were previously weakened by starvation and fever, lost their lives. Resident after resident sought refuge in New York."

"Oh," Alex replied, dabbing her mouth with a piece of cloth.

Kara listened as Eliza complained about iceboxes and asked Lena if there had been any advancements on the matter. Kara remembered being told that the first iceboxes were made by carpenters and were designed to take advantage of the regular household delivery of large blocks of ice. They were insulated wooden boxes lined with tin or zinc and used to hold blocks of ice to keep the food cool. A drip pan collected the melt water, and had to be emptied daily. In the 1830s, after horse drawn ice-cutters and other advances made ice harvesting and storage easier, ice became a commercial product in New York. Before that point, not many households had iceboxes. The Danvers family had acquired one as soon they had funds for it, but Eliza had never been satisfied with them; they could be quite smelly, she had said. She preferred them to root cellars, ice houses, and winter storage, but that was it.

Salting, drying, and canning eliminated any hint of freshness and required more time to prepare. Iceboxes were also beneficial for saving prepared food that would have otherwise expired after one meal. But the previous methods were still the most popular forms of freezing food.

Kara was just tuning into Lena saying that it would be some time yet until iceboxes were replaced, before she saw Mon-El snapping her way.

"Kara, you okay?" His concern annoyed her.

"You were thinking about the history of ice boxes, weren't you?" Lena asked, her face appearing to light up at the thought.
Kara blanched, then turned her head. The woman had always been able to see right through her.

"What did you do for a living?" Jeremiah decided to change the subject. One could talk about ice but for so long. "I've heard that city women have more options."

"A few more." Lena looked to him, a hint of reservation gracing her features. "For example, a device called the typewriter went on sale in 1874. It's a machine for writing characters, like letters. And my father got word that another invention, the telephone, came about earlier this year." Lena paused, seeing that what she was stating was going over everyone's head. "The latter will enable communication from long distances," she explained. "These two inventions, they aren't yet widespread, of course, but they are expected to provide more job opportunities for women."

Lena's eyes again sought Kara's. "Besides seamstress, laundry work and cleaning that all women have the option of taking up, we also have women who work in hat factories. Or those who deal with metalwares and pottery, brewing, retailing, confectionery, and so on. And we have female doctors. The first American woman to become a doctor was Elizabeth Blackwell, in 1849." Lena could see Kara's eyes widen, and she wanted to state more, but decided to focus on Jeremiah's question. She looked to him. "As for me... My father worked as a businessman for the Standard Oil Company. Because of my knowledge of industrialization, I assisted him. So did my brother. Mother didn't do much. With the money we made, she didn't have to."

Everyone seemed to be digesting what Lena was stating. Mon-El had moved closer to Kara, intermittently trying to grab her attention to make her laugh or so that he could mock Lena. But Kara lingered on Lena's every word.

"And how are Lionel, Lillian, and Lex?" Jeremiah asked.

"Mother's doing what she does best -- living the high life. Father's health is failing. Lex has taken up the mantle." Her response was curt, almost monotone.

Everyone offered their condolences with regard to Lionel's health, and silence again ensued.

"Are you married, dear?" Eliza finally asked.

Lena's eyes locked onto Kara's, holding them for seconds that seemed to drag into minutes. "No."

Kara let out a breath she didn't know she had been holding. She should have expected that question. And while it took her by surprise, she knew what to expect next, and her eyes signaled to Lena to drop it, to not push forward.

"That's too bad," Eliza replied. "You'll find someone soon, I know it."

"Speaking of," the words rolled off Lena's tongue like butter, "I hear Kara and Mon-El are married."

Mon-El's head whipped toward Lena so fast that Alex did a double take. Jeremiah and Eliza exchanged questioning glances. Alex covered her mouth as though embarrassed for Kara. Kara and Lena held glares. The awkward silence returned again, but was cut into by an eruption of laughter; Jeremiah and Eliza were apparently tickled by the question.

"No, dear," Eliza said, stifling giggles. "Kara and Mon-El have yet to marry. We laugh about it now, but that's only because we have been trying to get these two hitched since they were nineteen. I haven't a clue why they've waited, but they have. I suspect the good lord will bless them when he's ready."
Kara leaned on her elbow, raising her arm to shield her face.

"Where did you hear such a tale?" queried Eliza.

Lena kept her focus on Kara, who was peeping out at her from slits between fingers. "Idle gossip, I suppose."

Eliza noticed Kara shielding her face, and the soot still covering her hands. "Oh, child. Are you still having trouble cleaning up after work?" She turned to Lena by way of explanation: "She has an awful difficult time cleaning the filth off. We've tried everything."

Kara looked to her palms, balling them. "It's okay, ma."

"I can help with that," Lena offered.

Eliza looked thrilled; Kara shook her head in protest. "No."

"Kara, let her help," pleaded Eliza. "You two used to be so close. I'd like all three of my girls to be as thick as thieves again." She turned to Lena. "What do you need?"

Lena glanced at Eliza and then back to Kara. "Warm water, soap and white vinegar. If that's okay."

Eliza stood. "We have all of that. Kara had just heated some water on the fire for baths." Eliza moved to the tin bath container and used a cup to scoop up some of the water. She grabbed the other needed utensils as Lena and Kara continued to glare at each other. Mon-El had folded his arms across his chest and was watching Lena curiously. Alex was shrugging toward Jeremiah, who, like her, noticed the tense atmosphere.

Eliza disappeared into a room in the back, then returned. "I placed everything in Kara's old room. I figured you might want some privacy to catch up."

Kara sighed, rising to go to the room without another word. Lena swiftly followed.

When they entered the room, Lena closed the door and leaned against it.

Kara sat on the bed. The cup was on the floor, along with the soap, vinegar and a cloth. "Well?" Kara pinned the woman with a look of indifference.

Lena moved off the door. She knelt in front of Kara, briefly taking a hold of her spectacles. "These will ruin your eyes."

"I had the power removed from them," Kara said flatly, looking straight ahead.

Lena took Kara's hand into hers, and Kara froze. She watched as Lena began to clean her palms. The woman flipped her dark hair over her shoulder, as she had always done when they were little, and hummed lightly. There were beads of sweat on her forehead from the kitchen heat.

Kara felt her anger dissipate with each stroke, battered by the brunette's overwhelming presence. She wasn't scared either, what with Mon-El and her family in the other room. Her knees twitched from Lena's beauty, but only briefly, which left confusion in its place. Why did Lena tease her earlier in the day? Why did she feel so anxious around Lena? Why had she said she'd married Mon-El? Was it all about getting back at Lena?
She watched the brunette inhale and exhale deeply.

"You lied to me," Lena said softly. "In all our years together, I never knew you to lie."

Kara stilled the woman's ministrations, placing a hand on top of hers. "I'm sorry."

The door flew open. Mon-El stood there staring at them. His eyes drifted to their interlocked hands. "I just wanted to tell Kara that I'm leaving. Before the sun begins to set." His gaze lifted to meet hers, then Lena's. "You should probably leave as well, Lena. Curfew is seven in the evening, and it's not safe for a woman on the road at night."

Mon-El and Lena said their goodbyes, Eliza thanking Lena for coming up with a successful solution to Kara's soot problem. She suggested that Lena spend the night like the woman had done when just a girl. Apparently, Alex and Kara were staying the night as another gesture for making Eliza and Jeremiah feel appreciated for all they had done. Eliza loved having all of the kids under one roof. Lena had met Kara's gaze and knew Eliza's suggestion wouldn't be wise.

She and Mon-El exited the home quietly. Once they were a few feet away, heading down the road solemnly, he spoke:

"You just can't stop, can you?"

"Come again?" Lena kept her eyes focused on the path ahead of her, not particularly inclined to be subjected to any more of his venom.

"You're still trying to steal Kara's attention," he accused. "Just like when we were youngins. Only it's not so innocent this time."

"I'm not sure I understand your meaning."

"You know damn well what I mean." He moved in front of her so that her eyes met his. His nostrils flared. "The way you look at her... It's the way a man looks at a woman. I should know. I look at Kara like that every day."

Lena faltered, looking down. When had Mon-El become so perceptive? She swallowed hard, somewhat longing for the days when he was nothing but the snot-nosed boy holding up his britches.

Mon-El walked away, raking a hand through his dark hair before moving close to her again. He made sure their eyes met before he spoke: "She's mine. What you want from her, you can never have."

And with that, he made his way down the rode, leaving Lena to her own devices.

Lena didn't have to wait long for Kara to come knocking. The following morning, she could have sworn a burglar was trying to take the door down, the beating was so loud. She opened the door to find Kara staring at her, nearly out of breath. When Kara's gaze lowered, then shot back up with the roll of the eyes, she remembered she was only in her plain, white shift, which revealed far too much of her legs.
Lena folded her arms across her chest. She wouldn't apologize for only being in her shift. If Kara didn't want to see her legs, the blonde shouldn't have visited her so early in the morning. The sun had barely risen.

She didn't bother to ask how Kara had found her, not only because it was easy enough to find out from one of the town gossipers but also because this was the same house she had lived in as a child, except bigger. Turned out that Kara had expanded and preserved it.

"What's a carousel?" Kara asked.

Lena squinted, a chuckle close to escaping her lips. "You mean to tell me, you came all the way here... Ran all the way here... Because you want to know what a carousel is?"

"That, and...other stuff you may know." Kara fidgeted, pushing her spectacles back up on her face.

Lena couldn't help the humor forming in her belly. "Come on in," she said, secretly smiling to herself after Kara had entered. She then closed the door behind them.
Chapter 3

Lena moved ahead as Kara surveyed her surroundings. "I'm going to go change," Lena said. "Help yourself to whatever."

Kara watched the brunette ascend the stairs, swiftly turning her head as her eyes reached the woman's exposed legs. She moved toward the main area, looking up at the ceiling, the windows, floor, shelves. The place was bigger than the average home in their town, which Kara supposed was one reason people disliked the Luthors. It wasn't uncommon for frontier homes to be small. Many had dirt or gravel floors. If not that, they had plank flooring, like Lena's, but this was rarer. Kara was aware that many in cities and larger towns didn't even have their own homes, but rather took up residence in boarding houses or tenements. Their own town, Breighville, was mostly comprised of frontier cabins and farmhouses. Often, these cabins had one room, which was used as the main living area, the kitchen area and bedroom, but some in Breighville, like Kara's and her family's, had two to three rooms.

While the mamas and papas had their own bedroom, infants and toddlers, and older children, shared one room respectively, including the bed. If there were more siblings, they would all sleep in the same room as well. If one were a traveler, he or she would sleep in one of the cabins, boarding houses, or roadside inns. If enough guests could be accommodated, men were to sleep in one room and the women in another. The beds were typically made of straw, corn husk, cotton, or linen. Others had been made of horse hair, or were a combination of the options. Feather beds, which could take years to make due to the number of feathers needed to make even a full-size mattress, were afforded to the rich. Some of the middleclass had cast-iron bed frames with cotton-stuffed mattresses. Cotton mattresses had become significantly more popular even among the poor over the years since mattresses made from organic materials, like hay or horse hair, were prone to insect infestations, like fleas and bed bugs. Such beds had be to constantly maintained by examination. Kara was thankful that the Danvers family had specifically sought cotton beds.

Homes built on agricultural lands were called farmhouses. They were practical in style, and built to accommodate and shelter those who either owned or worked the farm. Kara reckoned that Lena's house most resembled a farmhouse. There wasn't any farm in sight, but its build wasn't quite like anything else in town. Like most farmhouses, it had a porch, which was a transitional space. Those with these houses would put their muddy boots outside so that the wooden floors inside would not get dirty. With slight variations in the case of Lena's home, the front of such houses presented as the formal area, and a large kitchen and the staircase to the bedrooms were lodged in the back.

Medieval architecture and the great cathedrals of the Gothic age led to rampant and varied designs during what Kara had heard referred to as "the Victorian era." Houses, American or otherwise, were given arches, pointed windows, and other aspects taken from the Middle Ages. While there were Victorian Gothic Revival homes that were grand stone buildings like small-scale castles, others were furnished in wood. Small wooden lodges with Gothic Revival features were named "Carpenter Gothic." Kara had been told by one of her blacksmith partners, a former traveler, that many Carpenter Gothic houses were built in Nevada in the 1860s through part of the 1870s.

Although Kara had worked out a deal with a friend to maintain and extend Lena's house, making the porch area two times bigger, it had been sometime since she'd been in it, unwilling to have her childhood memories of Lena overwhelm her; they'd spent most of their time together in and around Kara's home, and in their special wooded area outside of town, but Kara had a few memories of time
spent here as well, such as the night she accidentally knocked over one of the lamps and Lillian, Lena’s stepmother, had thrown a fit. Or the time they got so muddy from building sandcastles in the front yard that Lillian spent a good deal of time scrubbing them clean.

Lighting any home after dark was a matter of any number of methods. Candles were the most common. Lamps were second. Lard-oil lamps were widely used in the 1840s. Kerosene lamps came along after 1865 and replaced whale-oil lamps for the most part. Kerosene produced a smoky, torchlike light.

For cleanliness, residents had chamber sets that included a basin and pitcher for washing, a cup for brushing the teeth, and a chamber pot for relieving one’s self. For bathing, a round, wooden or tin tub was placed on the kitchen or bedroom floor and filled with hot water from the fireplace or stove. Given some of the heavier dresses that took two hands to lift, a few women still wore underclothes that had no crotches. Popular earlier in the century, they were leg coverings that were left split, wide and droopy, typically from the top of the pubis clear round to the top of the buttocks. They allowed girls and women to relieve themselves simply by flipping their skirts and squatting. By the mid-19th century, the crotch of drawers were largely closed and replaced by buttons for the opening.

One thing Jeremiah had always complained about, which had never failed to tickle Alex and Kara, was the lack of softer wiping options for the chamber pot. Both sexes used corncobs they had cleaned, cut, and stored, or catalogs and newspapers to wipe themselves. The catalogs and newspapers weren’t common and were rarely seen in Breighville, but they were a sanitary option because they were the thinnest and cheapest papers. Most preferred corncobs because they could be drawn in one direction, or turned on its axis, and were softer on tender areas, but they had never been soft enough for Jeremiah.

The family had been aware of Joseph Gayetty’s toilet paper for the water closet, which was sold in packages of flat sheets that were moistened and soaked with aloe, but the paper cost about 50 cents a pack, with 500 sheets in the package, and water closets were popular in wealthy residences and luxury hotels. Edward Clarence and Thomas Scott’s paper wasn’t much better, with its splinters. So continuing to use corncobs was the much better option for many. Either way, Kara figured that if newspapers were prevalent and not restricted to certain regions, she would know more about the world.

And now she was going to learn more from Lena.

Lena descended the stairs slowly. She was nervous but resolute. This would be the first time she would be alone with Kara without any bitter feelings hanging overhead or inquiring minds ready to interrupt at any given moment. At least she hoped. She was donning her red, cotton dress with blue flower patterns and fully-lined bodice. It had a button front closure, ankle-length hem, vintage collar, and light bustle. She had been told by acquaintances that it was flattering on her. And seeing as it was one of the few homesteader or farm dresses she had, she felt that it was more than adequate to ease her back into the town life.

She moved toward the kitchen, spotting Kara snacking on a green apple taken from the bowl on the counter. The blonde was clearly engrossed in her own thoughts.

"Let me guess," Lena said, "thinking about architecture?"

Kara looked up abruptly, putting the half-eaten apple back into the bowl with the fresh batch and wiping at her mouth a second later.
"Don't stop on my account." Lena moved toward her. "You always were an eater." She stopped in front of Kara with a gaze of amusement.

Kara shrugged. "Aren't we all eaters?"

Lena laughed. "I suppose we are." She pointed to the bowl. "A warning, though, Ms. Merriam brought those by."

Kara's eyes widened. "Ms. Merriam?!" she screeched, making a futile attempt to cough up the portions of the apple she'd devoured. "You know she doesn't like ya. No tellin' what she did to those thangs."

Lena's laughed deepened. She watched Kara wipe at her mouth until the blonde began to settle down and laugh as well.

"I know green apples are your favorite apples. They're mine too, but be mindful," Kara giggled out.

That laughter — Kara's laughter — hit Lena firmly in the chest. It had always made her think of the outside, the summer breeze. She knew she shouldn't, but she imagined them in their special spot in the woods. She imagined Kara's blond hair loose around her shoulders instead of pulled back in the ponytail it was in now, her blue eyes staring down at her with devotion.

Lena shook her head, fighting the urge to become engrossed in yearnings for a more intimate relationship with Kara. There was the possibility that Kara didn't feel the same, and wouldn't reciprocate even if she did. After all, Kara had grown up in an environment where freedom barely flourished, let alone sexuality. Whatever Kara knew about sexuality, she learned from hearsay. And that wasn't much, considering the town rule to generally refrain from sex talk. Furthermore, getting to know Kara better was her top priority.

"Alex married a shoe-peg maker," Kara said, standing to her full height. "I just felt...you might want to know." She scratched her head, beside her right eye, a tell-tale sign that she was nervous. Lena found it cute. "He has this truly odd walk. Maybe that's why he took an interest in shoes. To ya know, fix his walk or somethin'."

Lena moved close to her. "And how about you, Kara?" she asked.

"I, what?" Kara watched Lena's motions carefully.

"Why haven't you married?"

Kara swallowed. A blush rose from the collar of her gray shirt up her tan throat to her cheeks. The tint only made Kara look more stunning, Lena surmised, zeroing in on her mouth. It was askew, with the bottom lip fuller than the top. She'd often teased Kara about her lips. And now she couldn't be more appreciative of the small but supple wonders. Kara smelled of some forbidden flower. With her hair out of her face, nothing hid the beauty of her skin, the earnest eyes, or her quivering mouth. Lena must have lain awake at night picturing this face, trying to envision an older version of it, a thousand times. She'd left her dying father, whom she'd never been particularly close with, just to see it.

She reached up to stroke said face, and Kara flinched, her eyes briefly following Lena's hand.

Lena controlled the hurt that would have otherwise reflected in her eyes. Naturally, Kara would flinch. Other than last night, when she'd cleaned the soot off Kara's hands, when was the last time anyone had touched Kara so gently?
Kara stepped away. "I didn't wait for you." She re-adjusted her spectacles. "We're women, so..." She
lowered her head slightly, almost apologetically.

"Of course," Lena said softly. Of course Kara hadn't waited for her. They had been children, and this
world had made it very clear that two women couldn't marry each other. Lena balled her hands into
fists so tightly, she thought she would break the skin over her knuckles. She forced herself to calm
down. They would continue as friends. She could handle it. "If we're being serious, logical, I never
expected you to wait. I didn't wait for you either."

Kara looked to her questioningly.

"No, I didn't marry," Lena clarified. "But I found someone special...for a time."

Kara's eyes lowered. Lena knew she was mulling over her words, wondering if they meant she had
committed a sin by messing around with a man before marriage. Kara was half-right.

Lena watched as Kara looked back up at her, studying her. Liking the way the woman's gaze
lingered on her face and found her mouth wasn't an option. It was like being touched by the blonde.
The steady glance, the sudden panic as she registered that she was staring. The guarded way she
looked away, only to look at her again.

Kara's actions appearing to contrast her words made Lena ponder if all hope was truly lost for a
closer relationship with her. She moved beside the blonde to lean back against the counter. Kara
followed suit so that they were shoulder to shoulder. "Do you remember the time I scraped my big
toe against the porch and you said 'That's what ya get for not wearing shoes'?" Lena asked.

Kara chuckled. "Yep." She nudged Lena with her elbow. "Ya remember when I tried to skip that
rock against the other rocks and it popped me right in the forehead?"

Lena released a belly laugh. "Yeah. You said it would be just like skipping rocks across a lake. Gave
you a scar instead."

"Boy, did I learn my lesson."

Their laughter continued on and off, synchronizing as they reminisced. Silence eventually settled
upon them.

"I want us to be like that again," Kara said, looking to Lena.

"Kara..."

"No, thank about it," Kara's tone suddenly sounded energetic, and she moved off the counter,
pinning Lena with an intense gaze. "We don't have to do all the kid stuff. We can go to our special
spot. Talk about the things we've learned and been through over the years. Get to know each other
again. We can even have sleepovers like we used to."

Lena moved off the counter, walking a little ahead of Kara to stare out the kitchen window. Kara's
southern accent, like that of additional townsfolk, was strong at some points and lighter at others, as
though she had heard or read too much about the outside world and couldn't decide if she wanted to
sound like the former or latter. It was jarring. "And I'm to give you the morning kiss as well, huh?"
Her tone came out bitter, and she immediately turned to Kara, who seemed to be two shades redder.
Lena wasn't sure if she'd upset the blonde, or...

"I just mean that there are a number of things we used to do. Doesn't seem likely that we'll continue
them all," Lena said.
Kara put her hands into her pockets. Her eyes moved about every which way, mostly avoiding Lena's. She seemed to still be thinking about mention of the kiss.

Lena walked toward her, taking her hands into her own. "Why don't we forget the kissing stuff, kay? Take things slow?" She led Kara to the main area. "Starting with you knowing everything there is to know about carousels."

Kara worked the hammer with a smile on her face. She had been late to work, which had never happened before, but it was worth it just to spend more time with Lena. They'd discussed carousels for two hours straight. There was the Flying Horses Carousel, constructed earlier in the year by Charles Dare, which consisted of panel paintings, real horsehair manes and tails, and unique objects in their glass eyes. Lena said that the main joy of the ride was to grip "the lucky brass ring." Kara didn't know what on God's green earth the ring was, but it sounded fun. All she knew was that the rider would get a prize if the ring was successfully gripped.

She ran her free hand along her ponytail, sighing when she realized she had just gotten soot in her hair. She moved to separate metal from the rock in a furnace, so that the iron could be further refined before being rolled out into bars, rods, and sheets. Her mind remained preoccupied with what Lena had told her, however. For example, the majority of carousels had seats in the shape of horses, but ones in the shapes of tigers, zebras, pigs, and other creatures also existed. Jousting was popular in 12th century Europe and Asia. During the games, glass balls filled with perfumed water between themselves would be thrown by knights who rode in circles. Knights that dropped the ball and broke it would smell like perfume and this would indicate that they were less skilled than other knights. People named the game "little battle" or "garosello" in Italian and "carosella" in Spanish, which is how the term carousel came about today. It didn't make much sense to Kara, but it was interesting.

Lena said that, back then, people or animals powered carousels, and that it wasn't until 1861 that the first steam-powered mechanical carousel came into play. It was invented by Thomas Bradshaw. Another man, Frederick Savage, produced his own line in 1870 after having studied Bradshaw's designs. His consisted of velocipedes and boats that pitched and rolled on cranks; this type of carousel was called "Sea-on-Land."

Kara's grin widened. How could the essence of the sea be captured on land?

"What's that smile for?" she heard Mon-El ask.

She turned to him, seeing that the current iron he was handling had begun to glow a dull red color. Because the color would brighten, going from shades of red to shades of orange and yellow, and finally to a dazzling white, as the temperature rose, it was paramount that the blacksmith be able to discern fine gradations of color and recall the different properties the metal had at certain temperatures. Because recognizing the colors was so crucial, the workshop was always dimly lit. Kara wanted Mon-El to pay more attention to his work than to whatever smile she might be displaying.

"It's nothin'." She shrugged, briefly looking at the other several workers tending to their tasks.

"Doesn't seem like nothin'."

"Mon-El --"

"-- Listen, Kar, I need to talk to ya after work."
Kara squinted his way. He seemed serious. "All right," she said. She had wanted to spend some time with Alex, but that could wait.

Alex waited until Jonathan thrust inside of her one last time and rolled over before she got up and began to get dressed. He used to always drop by at some random time during his work schedule for a mid-morning or noon fuck. Now the visits were less frequent and Alex couldn't be any more thankful. He was a terrible husband and an even worse lover, only caring for his needs and then going about his merrily way. All it did was get in the way of her chores, which she had more of since she no longer had a seamstress job. She'd lost that the day she married Jonathan; it became his duty to provide the family income, and she was to tend to the house and raising any children they bore.

As Jonathan began to doze off, Alex checked in on William, who was still napping in his own bedroom, before heading out back to tend to the washing and garden. Cleaning was an even more taxing exercise than preparing a meal. Because the soot and smoke from coal and stoves darkened the walls, drapes and carpets, and because lamps left behind foul-smelling soot on furniture, the floors and windows always required a good washing, and the rugs needed to be beaten. The lamps were an issue as well. Their glass chimneys required cleaning and the wicks had to be clipped or swapped.

She breathed in the fresh air as she looked at their meager garden. It was far from the best, but it was enough.

She moved to the tub of water and began the task at hand. She'd already gotten buckets of water from the town well. Just the act of transporting water into the house or backyard was draining. She had to carry water from the well several times a day. Washing, boiling and rinsing even one load of dirty clothes required at least 50 gallons of water. Getting rid of wastes, such as kitchen spills and filled chamber pots, required even more water.

She wiped her brow as she used the rough washboard to clean the laundry. She had to rub the clothes against it with soap made from lye, and her hands were not the better for it. She had soaked the clothing in tubs of warm water the night before. Now all she had to do was scrub, and put the clothes in big vats of boiling water and stir the clothes with an extended rod to keep yellow spots from forming on them. After that, she needed to take the laundry out of the vats with a washstick, rinse it at least two times, making sure that the first rinse was in plain water and the second one with bluing, then wring the clothes out and hang them on the clothes line.

"All in a day's work," she mused.

She almost formed a smile until she spotted a figure in overalls and a hat at the end of the garden picking some tomatoes. She had told Jonathan that she suspected someone was stealing from their yard. Every week or so, they had fewer carrots, tomatoes or other vegetables, and there had been no other way to explain the matter except for Jonathan's "animal must have took them" explanation.

"Eh, you!" Alex yelled, grabbing a nearby rake. How dare the fiend have the nerve to steal right in front of her? "Those are mine! Get outta my yard!"

The figure seemed unperturbed, still picking and analyzing tomatoes as though they were on display in a farmer's wagon. Only when Alex began to run toward the figure, rake in hand, did the figure begin to flee. Luckily for Alex, the offender tripped over one of her traps made especially for such an occasion. She had stretched out a wire a little before the gate, and that's where the culprit landed.
Alex caught up to the thief, pointing a rake to the person's neck. "What do you think ya doin'? Ya got a death wish?"

The thief's hat fell off as a head raised, revealing a smirking woman of ambiguous ethnicity. She was of olive skin, dark-haired and had a twinkle in her eye. "I should think not," she said. "Beautiful day out, don't cha thank?"

Alex grit her teeth. "I don't care about today's beauty, or what have ya. Why the fuck were you stealin' from my garden?"

"Such foul language." The woman sat up a bit, as much as the rake's closeness would allow. "I wasn't sure ladies from around these parts talked like that."

"That's your second mistake," Alex said, her eyes ablaze with fury. "I'm no lady."

The woman chuckled. "Me neither." She then squinted, assessing Alex further. "Anyone ever tell ya you have hints of red in your hair?"

Alex's patience was wearing thin. As she was about to ask again why her garden was being raided, the woman looked behind her. "Who's that?" she queried.

Alex looked behind her to find no one, then quickly looked back to the woman, who had now jumped the fence and was placing the previously fallen hat back on that devilish head. Alex nearly cursed herself. How could she have fallen for that?

"Would love to stay, but I got a meeting to attend ta," the woman stated. "Name's Maggie, by the way."

Alex watched as the woman ran down the road. "Kill me now," she muttered.

Lena stood in the main area of the overseer's building in front of a small group of townspeople, who had become alerted to the meeting via flyers she'd left around town. She'd had them printed before she arrived in Breighville, expecting the need for help. And until she could get outside reinforcements to ensure that the town rules would be obeyed, some of the townsfolk would do. She was not privy to how her father or others had managed all of this, but she couldn't imagine that they simply sat in the overseer's building waiting for a report and without fear that they would be retaliated against at a later point right there or in their own home. And once the report was filed, was she to personally go to the offender's home? Was she to trust any and every word of a broken rule? No, she needed to be smarter.

"I'm 'fraid I know nothin' about holding down the fort," Mr. Ray, one of the town's most prolific farmers, stated.

"So you want us to act as spies against our neighbors?" a woman asked.

Lena was somewhat familiar with the woman. She recalled, during recess when they were little, that the woman had stood with other children who taunted her for her family name or for being smaller. They'd ask if she was going to tattle tale to her father if they were to break a rule. Lena wondered how much education the woman and others had gotten since then.

They had two schools, but back when Lena was a child, they had lacked supplies. The textbooks were not consistent since a number of parents didn't have enough money for, or rejected, required
textbooks. Children arrived at school with the books that existed in their homes, which, for some, was the Bible. Classes were typically taught in 10- to 15-minute periods to each grade level, and the studies usually focused on arithmetic, history, reading, spelling, and penmanship. But the history being taught was never complete; Lena knew this now because of her far superior education after leaving Breighville. These people weren't educated on most things. In fact, some things were purposefully omitted. Learning also often focused on rote memorization, recitation, and oral drilling, and the school year had been divided into terms that were mainly based on the needs of farming families. Some children attended school for several weeks during the summer and a few weeks during the winter, so that they would be home for planting and harvesting. The other school was open for about three weeks per year.

It was no wonder that Kara hadn't had a clue what a carousel was.

"No, that's not quite what I'm saying," Lena finally answered the woman. "I'm saying to keep a closer eye on your surroundings. To use your knowledge in order to challenge any accusations that might be false."

"I can keep notes for you," a dark-haired, very well-kempt man commented. Lena had learned his name was Winn Schott, and that the tall black man beside him was James "Jimmy" Olsen. A few in the room looked at James as though he was a foreign object. He was one of the few black people in town, but, to Lena's mind, there was no need to treat him any different. She made a mental note to disregard those who did, having no room for such prejudice. The majority of free African Americans of North Carolina and Virginia arose in Virginia where they became free in the seventeenth and eighteenth century before chattel slavery and racism fully bloomed in the United States. Today, many free African American families in North Carolina and Virginia were landowners. There was no need to treat any one of them as anything but a fellow human being.

"You need guards too, I heard ya say," James spoke, his fingers running along the rim of his hat. "I can stand guard at your door while ya work. As long as you pay me."

Lena smirked. She hadn't quite figured out how she was going to get paid, or if sitting at a desk all day was truly work, but she could more than afford to pay for others. She didn't need the money.

She might have told him this had the door not flown open, with an olive-skinned, dark-haired woman standing before it, catching her breath. "I ain't late, am I?" the woman, Maggie Sawyer, asked.

Lena sighed. This was going to be a long day.

Hours later, she exited the overseer's office. The sun was already lowering behind the buildings, leaving half the road in shade. A stiff breeze tugged at the hem of her dress. If it rained, she would be soaked, but the skies were clear as they usually were on such a summer day.

Along the way, she stopped and stared at the women's clothing shop. It had been a treats shop before. She used to go there with Kara and Mon-El at times. Someone had told her that it burned down eight years ago. The new building was bigger and left no trace of what came before, but she could still remember the smell of cakes. It made her stomach grumble. She would need to stop by a bakery if she was going to eat before it got even later. She hadn't had time for supper, not knowing where to go, being busy with her new job, and not having been in the habit of cooking like townsfolk women. So, except for some bread, cheese and a banana earlier in the morning with Kara, she hadn't eaten. She knew what to do today for a meal, but how she'd figure out her meals for the rest of her time here, she didn't know. She also needed a horse or other means of transportation. Walking from destination to destination was good exercise, but it was a significant inconvenience as well. It was a good thing it didn't seem as though she could yet be late for work.
A little farther ahead stood a small brick building. The bottom floor belonged to the town doctor, the top to an attorney. As she walked by, the front door opened and a plump-sized woman stepped out, carrying a huge basket. Her muddy shoes slipped on the stone steps, and she spun in an effort to recapture her balance.

Lena ran up the steps, and grabbed the basket with one hand, but it weighed her down and landed flatly on the ground, the covering flying off and revealing a stack of potatoes. She used her body to help keep the woman upright. They almost toppled over, but the plumper woman was able to regain her footing first.

The woman clutched Lena's arms, her small blue straw-and-feather hat shaking in the evening breeze. "Thank you, ma'am. If I had fallen, I would have surely been sent home to the good Lord." She straightened up and looked at Lena. A conniving smile soon graced her features. "Lena Luthor, we meet again."

Lena suppressed the groan that wanted to escape her throat. She hadn't noticed before that it was Ms. Merriam who'd almost taken a dive. If she had known, she might have let the old hag fall. "So we do," Lena replied, plastering on the widest and fakest smile she'd ever shown in her life. "It's, late, however, so if you'll pardon me --"

"-- Now, just a minute." Ms. Merriam looked her over.

Ms. Merriam could never be reasoned with. Although she had never married herself, she wouldn't hesitate to speak of how awful it was that some young woman hadn't married yet. She had also occasionally helped Lena's stepmother, Lillian, with cooking recipes when the other woman couldn't figure out what was what. She'd never accepted any thanks or money for the easy instructions that made even Lillian seem like the town's best cook and resulted in Lena going to bed with a full, satisfied belly and forgoing eating at Kara's. It was clear that being able to demean the Luthor family as much as she did had been the price.

"You enjoyed the apples?" Ms. Merriam asked.

"I never got around to eating them, ma'am. Kara had a bite, though."

"Oh, Kara," Ms. Merriam almost squealed the blonde's name, her eyes lighting up. "Tell that wonderful girl I said hello, and I'll be sure to send some apples her way if she wants them."

"I will."

"And your overseer job? It's going well?"

Lena smiled, another fake gesture. "As well as can be. But, again, it's getting dark, Ms. Merriam. And if I'm going to be the overseer, I need to obey the rules as well. Curfew and all."

Ms. Merriam studied her, as if she was skeptical that a Luthor would be righteous in any way. "Well, then, I should let you get going."

Lena nodded, then moved to the side, intent on getting as far away from the woman as possible.

"Oh, and Ms. Luthor?" she heard the woman call out. Lena turned to her. "Sin begets sin. You make sure to keep sin outta your heart, ya hear?"

Lena nodded again and turned to leave, suddenly feeling that she'd made a big mistake coming back to this town.
Once home, Kara and Mon-El bathed in separate rooms and sat down to eat. It was her home, of course, but Mon-El insisted staying the nights with her for fear that she wasn't safe being a woman in a home alone. He was careful not to be caught since any sightings of him there with no one else accompanying him would spark rumors of impropriety. If a man and woman were unmarried and living together, it was a sin. It was also a town rule violation. Kara never considered it her violation since she had never invited Mon-El to stay with her and he'd practically broken in that first time three years ago when she had first acquired the house. She knew there were few clauses in the town rules, but she was certain that one of them was that anyone forced to break a rule or who did not agree to the rule-breaking had not broken it. She wasn't sure about any accomplice or "agreed via silence" aspect, but she was sure neither applied in this case.

Since she lived close to Alex, and told Alex everything about her life, her sister knew about Mon-El's stay-overs. Alex had also warned her about leading Mon-El on and to not give into him because she felt she had to, or even due to lust. After yesterday, it was clearer than ever that Alex regretted marrying, but Kara knew that her sister also wouldn't want her involved in a scandal for having taken a man to bed while unmarried.

Kara looked to Mon-El, who sat on the floor across from her; he'd moved his plate to the side and appeared pensive. She felt that Alex had nothing to worry about, for the most part. Although he was a good man, she had never been able to see a future with him beyond friendship. He lived with his paternal grandfather, who was an avid hunter and often provided him with meals because he didn't have a wife or the time to cook himself. It was his grandfather's hearty stew they had been eating moments ago. He wasn't an orphan, but his parents had never made much time for him; they ran a brewery on the outskirts of town. Others called it a saloon. Some called it "a brewery and saloon." Whatever it was, many of the townsfolk opposed it due to the drunkenness, fights, and alcoholism that would ensue within its walls. It was almost torn down, but town priest Father Mable, of all people, had convinced the townspeople to let it stand, arguing that there would always be sinful people in the world and they would at least be able to monitor the sinful men who visited the saloon.

And it was only men the brewery included, which is probably why it was tolerated. Women weren't allowed to behave in such a manner under any circumstance. Kara had known that Mon-El's parents were treated like a king and queen at the brewery, and that they had offered him an apprentice job, wanted him to follow in the family business, but he'd declined. It had partly been for her sake, so that she wouldn't have a husband considered deviant, but she also believed that this was because he genuinely had no interest in such a position. Whatever the case, even with the drunkenness and fights, the brewery pretty much belonged to the town and also needed to adhere to the town rules, which, to name a few, meant no sex and a strict curfew. It would close a little before seven o'clock, just like all of the other businesses.

"Kar?"

Kara looked up to see that Mon-El was staring at her. "I'm listenin'," she said.

He clasped his hands in front of him. "You know that I care about ya?"

"I know."

"I don't just care, Kara. I love ya."

Kara looked to the floor at that. It wasn't surprising that he felt this way. They had grown up together, after all, and he had made his intention to court her known. But the intensity with which he
"I want us to marry," he continued. Kara looked up enough to see his clasped hands squeezing skin. "I never pushed you before because I wanted to respect you. You've always been your own person, and it just didn't seem right to demand that we marry, and it still doesn't." He bent his head a little to catch her eyes. He was frowning as if his mind was busy trying to process his words. "But won't ya consider it? I mean truly consider it?"

Kara held his gaze, inhaling and exhaling deeply, unsure of what to say. She did need to marry. All women were supposed to. And if she didn't marry Mon-El, who else could she possibly wed?

"Don't ya ever think about me?" he asked pleadingly. "Not as a friend, but as a man? As a potential husband?" His hands unclasped as he daringly moved closer. "Don't ya ever think about me more intimately?" He stressed the latter word. "Don't you ever want to touch me? Want me to touch you?"

Kara chewed on the inside of her cheek, as Mon-El moved so close that they were only a few inches apart. She knew a little of sexual pleasure, that much could be said. When she was twelve, she remembered feeling a wonderful jolt between her legs for the first time as she bathed and dragged the towel there. It had been odd at first because she'd never felt the jolt before that point. But that day she had become lost in her thoughts, of a world she might never experience, and the pleasure had overtaken her. She remembered the spasms that came as she careened over the edge.

Afterward, she had told Alex about it and Alex had laughed, letting her know that she had done it before as well, but that it was a sin. Kara recalled vowing never to do it again. Lord knows she had been tempted to, but she'd kept her vow after all these years.

"I've yet to think about you like that, Mon-El," she breathed honestly, softly. Her mind was flashing with images of Lena, and she was feeling flustered. "I haven't thought of anyone like that." And from what she could remember, she hadn't, but her memory was fuzzy, hazy, as to what she had been thinking about when she got that release at twelve years old.

Mon-El moved away from her and stood. His eyes looked down on her with a mix of hurt and agitation. "Just try, will you?"

He began to clean up the eating area, and all Kara could think about was whether or not Lena had found a meal. Whether or not she was safe living alone in that big house of hers. Whether she was lonely.

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Lena heard the same loud knocking on the door she'd heard earlier in the day. She opened it to see Kara staring at her, some food in hand. "What in the world? Kara, it's late."

"That it is," Kara replied, entering like she owned the place. She closed the door behind them, locked it, and looked around. "Hungry? Have you eaten?" She squinted her nose. "It's so dark in here."

Lena folded her arms across her chest incredulously. "It's dark in here because it's bedtime. And, yes, I've eaten. But that's beside the point. Kara, it's at least past ten o'clock, which is way past curfew. Why would you break such an important rule?"

Kara looked at her as though the answer was obvious. "For you," she said.

The silence that engulfed them was immediate, unsettling. Lena couldn't make out the blonde's
features, but those eyes, those eyes seemed to speak volumes.

"I'll put the food in the icebox," Kara finally said. "Then we can go to bed."

"Go to bed?" Lena felt a lump rise in her throat.

"Yep. Just like we used to."

Kara didn't leave any room for objection. She headed in the direction of the icebox without looking back.

Lena and Kara entered her dimly lit bedroom. Lena moved toward the lamp in the corner, her back turned to Kara. Kara could feel Lena's hesitancy, but she wasn't sure what might be causing it. She was nervous, and she reckoned that Lena was as well, given that they hadn't done this since they were little, but they were still them.

She suddenly recognized that the lamp was illuminating Lena's shift, which appeared to be the same short one from before. It seemed that Lena didn't want to make her uncomfortable, because the woman quickly put the light out after that.

Kara sighed. Having the light there, especially in the absence of moonlight pouring in through the window, would be of great help, but she had gotten a good glimpse of the medium-sized bed and knew she could make her way to it just fine.

She heard Lena getting into the bed. Her heart felt like it was going to jump out of her chest. She waited a few moments, hoping that her eyes would adjust to the dark, but ultimately decided to forgo the uncertainty. She fumbled a bit, moving around until she found the bed. Her hands reached for the covers, but found a smooth expanse of skin instead.

Lena gasped.

Kara immediately removed the offending hand. "Sorry," she said, realizing that her fingers had glided along Lena's thigh. "I didn't mean to." She rolled over onto her side of the bed, feeling her cheeks burn to the core. She couldn't remember the last time she'd felt so embarrassed. And Lena's silence was only making it worse.

They lay there, listening to the sound of each other's breaths, their eyes adjusting to the dark. The minutes dragged on and Kara felt herself becoming drowsy. She must have been more exhausted than she thought.

Finally, she turned to Lena, her lips near the brunette's ear. "Your skin is really soft," she whispered, before turning back over and pulling the cover up toward her neck. If Lena had heard her, she didn't let on. Kara yawned, and figured it was probably for the best.
Chapter 4

Lena awoke to the sunlight shining in her face. She used one hand to shield her eyes as she yawned. Images of Kara immediately flooded back: Kara coming over. Kara sharing her bed. Kara touching her bare thigh. Her cheeks flushed at the memory, and she looked to her side in search of the blonde. She found a letter instead. Sitting up in an instant, Lena unfolded it and read it with a finger excitedly placed between her teeth:

_I don't do much writin', but I wanted to say 'good mornin.' You looked nice sleepin' there._

_Wish I could have waited till you woke up. I left you something outside, though._

~Kara~

Lena's smile widened as she headed down the stairs in anticipation. When she opened her front door, her mouth fell open. There stood a brown horse, tied to a railing near the house, chewing on a large bucketful of hay. Lena remembered the horse was named Wrangler. With that white streak in his mane, there was no mistaking him. The last time she had seen him was when he was four years old. She had been eight and Kara six. While Kara had taken a liking to a Banker horse that was deemed too wild for a young one to ride, she'd immediately taken a liking to the young pony gelding called Wrangler. He had impeccable ground manners, with an adorable personality, and had ridden over various types of trails, and had some obstacle training such as plowing through heavy flow water. He'd also had decent two-foot jumps. He was good for walking with, riding, and had gotten used to domesticated animals such as pigs and cows.

Back then, she and Kara had argued over horse terminology and whether to call Wrangler a horse or a pony. Strictly-speaking, he was a pony, just as Lena had stated as a child, and he had seemed to be nothing but bones connected by rawhide sinew. He'd also been very small, not unlike Lena herself. But when a bigger pony walked by, he would arch his skinny neck, flag his tail, and, with much effort, lift his hooves from the ground, all of which would end, if a rider was present, in a spine-snapping trot. He'd known how to put on a performance of bravado. But now, with his muscular legs, back, and decent weight, he didn't need to. He was stunningly beautiful, and Lena was astounded that Kara had found some way to keep him after all these years. At age 22, he couldn't really be categorized as young in horse years anymore. Although ponies usually lived longer than other types of horses, a domestic horse's average life expectancy was 25 to 33 years.

Lena walked to Wrangler, subconsciously reaching for a dress to hike up before remembering that she was still in her shift. She ran a hand along his beautiful mane and marveled at him. He was far too engrossed in his food, grunting intermittently, to pay her much mind, however. "You may be more like Kara with that attitude," she laughed, before spotting a piece of paper sticking out of his saddle. She grabbed it and quickly unfolded it, seeing that it was a note. In it, Kara had deduced that Lena needed an easier way to get to work and had hurried and got a hold of Wrangler from her stable early in the morning, about three hours before the sun rose.

Lena put the note to her nose. It smelled of Kara, even having been attached to Wrangler for a couple or more hours, and Lena was quickly becoming used to the outdoorsy scent of the woman. Of course, Kara had needed to get to work early, but Lena had been looking forward to waking up to those blue, probing eyes that always seemed to give away more than they intended.
She raked a hand along Wrangler's coat. She would see Kara again soon. She could wait.

Mon-El pulled on his shoes as he sat across from his grandfather, Lonnie, at the kitchen table. He hadn't been eager to get to work, what with Kara's recent overly chipper attitude seeming to have nothing to do with him. But that hadn't been why he'd stayed behind. His grandfather was having trouble performing the simplest of tasks today, complaining about stomach pains and a dry throat. So far, Mon-El had assisted the old man with mouth-cleaning, getting dressed and fixing breakfast. But he needed to get to work if he was going to continue having enough money to pay for daily necessities. He'd already told Lonnie not to worry about cooking, that he'd pick up something from the butcher and bakery and start a roast when he got home.

"Something bothering you, Lar?" he heard Lonnie ask. He looked up at the old man, watching him scratch his long, ragged beard. Mon-El hated that beard, and he hated being called 'Lar.' He'd been named after his father, but had ended up shunning the name at the age of five. 'Mon El,' his middle name, had always had a certain ring to it.

"Nothing," he said, folding his hands on the table as he looked at them. A blunt object poked him in the leg a second later. "Ow," he grunted, looking to his side to see Lonnie pulling a cane back toward the chair. He sometimes forgot about the cane. Lonnie always seemed to use it only when he wanted to whack him with it.

Lonnie let out a hoarse laugh that dragged on for half a minute. "It's you and that Kara again, ain't it? Ya love the girl. Why not tell her that, and that ya wanna marry her?"

"I did," Mon-El stated exasperatedly.

"Then what's eatin' at ya?"

Mon-El looked back to his folded hands on the table.

Lonnie stared at him with squinted eyes and gave another rub at his beard before standing and leaning heavily on his cane. He walked to Mon-El and rested a hand on his shoulder. "It'll work itself out," he said, walking off slowly toward a back room.

Mon-El frowned. He wasn't sure that it would work itself out at all. Lena desired Kara. And Kara lit up around Lena. And although Mon-El knew that the New Yorker didn't have a chance with his Kar, he felt like he was competing for the right to Kara's hand — a right promised to him at birth.

"I've always liked the way 'Lar and Kar' sounded," Lonnie said with a croaking laugh. "Ya work it out, Mon-El. Use whatever advantage you have."

Mon-El looked up at his grandfather, and Lonnie winked. "Whatever advantage," he repeated, walking into a back room with another laugh.

Mon-El remembered the "whatever advantage" saying. His father and mother had lived by it. Said it guided them. Made them winners. Mon-El sank his head into his hands, wondering if arranged marriages were always this difficult.

"Arranged marriages. What a mess," Alex said with a huff as she watched her son frown at the
young girl trying to offer him her doll. Watching the children while standing beside Eliza, they hung clothes on a line in Alex's backyard. Eliza had wanted mother-and-daughter time. Because today was one of the dates that William was meant to bond with his future bride, Alaina, as all promised pairs were meant to bond with their betrothed, they'd managed to squeeze in their needed time a little around noon.

Jonathan was inside keeping Alaina's mother company. The woman was recently widowed. Alex had a sneaking suspicion that Jonathan liked her more than an acquaintance should, but she didn't have time to concern herself with an affair. If Jonathan wanted her, he could have her.

As long as the having ain't done in my home, she mentally quipped, keeping an eye on her husband, who could be seen through the doorway conversing with the lovely blonde, while also keeping an eye on her son, who was steadily pushing away the doll Alaina was still shoving toward his face.

"They don't even like each other," Alex sighed, waving a hand toward the children.

Eliza laughed. "They're only four. Give it some time." She hung up a pair of trousers on the clothes line, crinkling her eyes in the motherly fashion Alex had become so used to. Perhaps Eliza was correct, but she felt doubt settling in again as she watched William grow ever the more frustrated.

"I don't wanna play dolls," he pouted, picking up two small sticks and handing one to Alaina. "Let's duel," he said with an energetic grin.

"Were you and pa like that?" Alex asked.

"Oh no. Jeremiah was quite the gentleman." Eliza chuckled. "But then again, he was about three years older. Much more mature."

Alex looked at the two little ones again, almost letting out a giggle when Alaina tripped William in a tantrum and threw down her stick. "Yes," Alex said, "maturity is lackin' in this union." She looked toward her garden as her mind went back to thoughts of the female thief; at least she didn't have to put up with that nonsense today.

Lena narrowed her eyes as Maggie handed her some papers with a devilish grin. "What's that smile for, Ms. Sawyer?" she asked, looking over the papers from behind her desk. For the most part, things were coming together, and Lena couldn't be more thankful. Winn was at the smaller desk to her side going over documents. He had the task of sorting out fact from fiction. Samantha "Sam" Arias, the woman who'd teased her when she was a child, was sitting in a chair by the door. Like Maggie, she acted as one who inquires, although Maggie preferred the term inquisitor. James was outside standing guard. And as for herself, she was to receive the reports, analyze them, have Winn analyze them some more, and she would decide afterward what was to be done. Depending on the severity of the broken rule, the punishments that could be doled out included paying a fine, giving up crops or livestock, lending space to a stranger in one's home, giving up a portion of one's land, or being exiled from the community. They also had a small jail attached to the overseer building, but that was for more serious crimes, like rape or murder. At the moment, they were mostly accessing old cases. The town was not populated enough for daily reports, which meant they could afford calculated days off.

"I spied some oldies doin' the deed in their backyard. Who knew they had it in 'em?" Maggie answered, moving to lift her hat off Winn's desk.

Lena arched a brow. "You aren't supposed to be spying at all. Not like that."
Maggie shrugged. "How else am I to do my job?" She plopped the hat on her head.

Lena sighed. This day wasn't going to be any simpler than the last.

"Old people are sexual beings too," Winn offered. He put his pen down and stared at Maggie as though she'd offended him.

"Those two certainly were," Maggie said, unfazed by Winn's gaze. "And we know it wasn't for babies. So either we put them down for a violation or list them as exempt since, shit, ain't no child comin' outta that cooch."

Winn pointed a finger at her. "Just wait until you're old." Maggie shrugged as he got up and moved to Lena, explaining some of his findings with gestures toward the names. "I was thinking that we could have the likely offenders come in for interrogations, in front all of us. Maggie and Sam seem like capable women, but going from door to door alone could be dangerous if the accused feels threatened enough. And at least we'd be safer in numbers if doing the interrogations as a group."

Lena looked up at Winn. Not only did he dress differently from the rest of the men, wearing business-like attire similar to those in New York, he didn't talk like the other townsfolk. He had a southern accent, but there was no informal tone or slang in his dialect, and he constantly thought outside of the box.

"Me and Sam could patrol together," Maggie said.

"Not good enough," Winn argued, looking at her with pensive eyes. "If a man is big enough, he could take the both of you. And what if he has a shotgun?"

"Listen, short stuff," Maggie fired back, raising her chin as though she wasn't the actual short one in the room. "There ain't a man in town who could stand my right hook."

Winn folded his arms across his chest. "Not even James?"

Maggie made a shushing gesture as she looked from Winn toward the front door. "That one could wipe the floor with us all in one fell swoop," she whispered.

Lena quietly laughed. James was rather muscular, that much was certain.

"Aren't you all forgettin' somethin'?" Sam asked, leaning forward in her chair to finally include herself in the discussion. "How do we enforce any of this? Say we want to make someone pay a fine? Or throw 'em in jail? Do we physically force 'em if they refuse?"

"If they work for someone, the fine can be taken care of by going to the person they work for and taking a cut that way," Lena replied. "As for the rest, I haven't been in town long, but last I remember, people never refuse. They care too much about their already damaged reputations and don't want any more trouble. The most that could make someone refuse is if they're about to be jailed or outcast. And in those latter cases, the townsman always rally together to help enforce the matter at hand. All of this is still true, is it not?" She looked around the room with a questioning stare, waiting for anyone to say she was wrong. When they didn't, she stood. "Well, then, let's pin a schedule and set everything on course."

She headed for the door, opening it and joining James as she stared out into the busy town. "How are things going?"

"Gettin' some odd looks now and again," James said, "but other than that...fine, ma'am."
Lena touched James on the shoulder. "No need to call me ma'am."

James nodded, a slight smile playing on his hard features. "Lena," he corrected himself.

Lena looked off in the direction of the blacksmith shop Kara worked at. One day she would need to visit the blonde and see her in action.

Kara moved beside Jeremiah in his blacksmith shop. The main blacksmith business had enough workers at this hour today and she'd been meaning to spend some time with Jeremiah in the smaller one. She watched as he rubbed his hands on his apron and shaped the metal with tongs. Seeing as he was handling hot steel, the metal was about as easy to mold as clay. But clay would break if stretched, and stretching metal wasn't as simple and took patience. Making a long, slim piece out of a short, fat one required squeezing the sides of the metal and turning. Jeremiah's pieces always came out beautifully, and Kara sometimes envied his skill.

"Pa, can I have some time off?"

Jeremiah carefully sat his tools down and looked at Kara with concerned eyes. "Time off? Ya never asked for anything like that before."

Kara shrugged sheepishly. "I know. It's just..." She fidgeted with her hands. "Lena needs a stable for the horse I gave her."

Jeremiah smiled. "Old Wrangler?"

"And I wanted to get some men together to help me build that stable," Kara continued.

"Kara, I can get ya the men," Jeremiah replied, almost exasperatedly. "You don't have to assist with that. I can get Lena a new horse too. Wrangler is darn near --"

"-- I wanna do it," Kara said, squaring her jaw. "I wanna build that stable for Lena. And I want her to have Wrangler. She's always loved him. 'Course he ain't young no more, but he ain't too old either. He's strong, loyal, and smart, and I know Lena would be most comfortable with him. I gave him to her this mornin'."

Jeremiah narrowed his eyes, surveying Kara carefully. "All of this means a lot to ya, huh?"

"It does."

Jeremiah went back to molding the metal, intermittently looking at Kara out of his peripheral vision. "The only time you get this passionate about anything is when it's food, smithing a new item, or learnin' about history."

Kara remained silent, waiting for an answer.

"I 'spose some time off will do ya some good. You work harder than anyone I know."

Kara nearly jumped with glee. A blinding smile spread across her lips.

"But that time off is comin' outta ya pay," Jeremiah warned.

"Understood."
After work and saying later to the others, Lena headed down the path behind the overseer building leading toward the church and school areas. She'd been on the path for at least ten minutes. Wrangler was alert beside her, and she'd have to thank James for keeping an eye on him and tending to his needs while she and the others had worked. But she still wasn't especially used to riding horses and had decided on a quicker path home today. She pulled Wrangler along just as she saw Kara exiting a building a good distance ahead. Lena stared after the woman, who was apparently headed home. Lena knew she should call out or move to catch up to the blonde, but she felt nervous for some reason. And although the town wasn't so big that she wouldn't find out where Kara lived, what if Kara didn't want her to know?

Lena watched carefully. From what she could discern, Kara lived near the woods. No, not just near the woods. Somewhere near their special place in the woods. If Lena hurried, she could cut through the furrow a few feet away from the church and get there before Kara.

"Come on, boy," she said to Wrangler, hurrying on top of him as Kara disappeared from sight. She rode near the church, taking a sharp turn. She almost ran into Father Mable, who was walking home. The sandy-haired man was as beady-eyed as she remembered.

"Is that Lena Luthor?" he asked with a grin, as Lena pulled on Wrangler's reins to keep him from toppling over the man. Lena saw that he had a plate of ginger snap cookies in his hand, a wooden top with see-through holes keeping the goods in place. So the church was still enticing people to attend via treats, she surmised. She didn't have time to chat.

"Hi, Father Mable. This is going to sound rude, but I promise you that there is a good explanation for it... Can I have those cookies you're carrying?"

Father Mable looked at her as though at a loss for words.

"It's for a good cause," Lena continued. "And I assure you that I will attend service as soon as I get a good chance to do so. I always did find your sermons enlightening when attending with the Danvers folk."

At that, Father Mable flashed her a blinding smile. "Well, if it's for a good cause..." He placed the plate of cookies in her hands. "Maybe we could --"

Lena didn't hesitate to move forward. She rode Wrangler on the path she had meant to take before the interruption, and moved into the trees. Keeping to a steady course, with minimal twists and turns, she would make it to her destination in no time.

When she emerged from one side of the area, she spotted a house at the top of a small climb. It was bigger than the cabins around town, and had somewhat of an elegant look to it. Southern Sugar Maple trees extended past the roof. The sun was setting and its light reflected off the windows. The porch appeared to hug the house and had one chair off to the side. There was a small barn to the right.

Lena moved off Wrangler, blinking against the memories. She couldn't count the number of times
she had traversed through this area and had stared up at the special tree she shared with Kara a mile or two from here. How many times had they taken this path? How many times had Kara climbed that tree with more agility than three boys put together? Kara had sometimes wanted to visit the lake some distance away from the tree, to skip rocks across it. And they would do that as well, especially when Kara was feeling down about the loss of her birth parents or when Lena pouted about her own parents, how inattentive they were, and that the only family she truly had at home was Lex.

The familiar ache in her chest caused her to shove the memories to the side. She shouldn't focus so much on her past with Kara. It only made her long for the woman more. And that wouldn't bode well for her life in this town, especially her new job. She'd returned for Kara, but now there was the matter of waiting to see if Kara could ever feel the same. Even if Kara never did, she'd rather be by her side.

She carefully removed the plate of cookies from where she had secured them on the saddle and walked to the front porch. After tying the rope attached to Wrangler's halter to the porch railing, she sat in the chair. Kara would be here soon. The trail Kara had taken was longer, but only by a few minutes.

When she finally heard footsteps, she looked up to see Kara standing a few feet away.

"Lena... What are y--"

"-- I followed you here," Lena admitted, rising with the plate in her hands. "I wasn't sure if you wanted me to know where you lived. But I wanted to know. So I followed you."

Kara ran a hand along her ponytail, the confusion on her face clear. "I would never not want you to know where I live, Lena. And even if I were such a fool, what would be the point? You'd find out sooner or later."

She watched the anxious way Lena stared at her, and decided to press on to break the awkwardness. "Just so ya know, I don't live here. I mean... It's mine, but I live directly within the town, closer to Alex." She paused to look around. "This is a piece of land I purchased. I come here every other day to check up on it."

"It's near our special spot," Lena whispered, taking a step closer.

Kara scratched her head, beside her right eye. "Um...yeah."

Lena walked to her. "I brought you cookies." She moved to hug Kara with one hand, sniffing in her scent. "Thank you for the horse. I've loved Wrangler since a girl." Her breath played against Kara's ear, and she felt Kara stiffen.

"You're welcome," Kara said, extracting herself from Lena's grasp. She moved toward the front door. "Wanna come inside?"

Kara didn't wait to dig into the cookies as Lena looked around. She could tell that Lena was wondering why it was practically empty. "Can't have anyone thievin' if they happen upon this place," she explained.

"Of course," Lena commented, steadily looking around. The home was basic in design, but it had a lively feel to it. Lena could easily imagine herself living in it.
Kara's eyes lingered on Lena's dress. It was even simpler than the last, but hugged her figure a lot more. Like the other dresses, it also had a collar that obscured most of her neck. Kara found herself imagining a more complete view of that neck. She recalled the mole that sat there when the brunette was little.

Lena noticed Kara's gaze, looking down at the garment and then immediately back up at the intense blue eyes. "I decided to take a cue from the other farm women. Simpler is better. Bought a few dresses this morning."

Kara nodded. "It suits you." She held the plate of cookies under her arm, against her waist, as she took a bite out of another one. "You like collars."

Lena absentmindedly dragged a hand along her collarbone. "That's... I suppose."

Kara nodded again and the silence took hold of them. She didn't know why silence always devoured them like this. Was it really that hard to communicate with Lena now that they were adults? "The cookies are good. I love ginger snap."

"I know." Lena smiled.

Kara wiped at her mouth. "I, um, I want ta build you a stable, a barn, for Wrangler. Starting tomorrow. You'll need it unless you plan to walk to my cabin every day and get him from my barn."

"Tomorrow? But what about your work?"

"Pa gave me some time off."

Lena arched a brow. "Time off?"

"As long as I need to fix up your barn."

"But, Kara --"

"-- I already worked everythang out," Kara argued. "And I won't take no for an answer. I've rounded up a few trustworthy men, and we're gonna work to give you a stable." She had her hands on her hips, a clear reach for intimidation.

Lena smirked, taking a step closer. "You're just as stubborn as ever, Kara Danvers."

"That's what Alex says."

Lena laughed. "Well, your sister and I are the same age. Maybe it's just our wiser years talking."

Kara pushed her spectacles back up on her face. "With only two years on me, you can't be that much wiser."

The smile still played at the corner of Lena's lips. "Well, considering that I have tomorrow off, I'll be there to watch your handy work."

"Lookin' forward to it."

Kara grinned as silence descended upon them again.

Lena moved to one of the windows. "Why'd you build this place? You already have a home."

"Because."
Lena turned to her, tucking away a stray hair that had fallen from her bun. "Because?" she chuckled. "That's your answer?"

Kara shrugged. "Do I need another?"

Lena worried her bottom lip, thinking the question through. "No."

They watched each other for a few more moments, Kara steadily looking Lena over before heading to the window to look out of it.

"Waiting for someone?" Lena queried.

"Mon-El. We usually go home home together, and he usually accompanies me here. Pa said he didn't show up to work today." Kara sighed. She didn't know what to make of Mon-El's absence, and it worried her. Putting the plate of cookies down on the single table in the room, she turned back around to find Lena with an equally worried expression. Kara could tell that it was more about her admittance that she and Mon-El went home together daily. It was the same look Alex had given her upon confronting her about it. "We don't do nothin'," Kara clarified. "We just bathe, eat and go to bed. I don't sleep with him."

"It wouldn't be any of my business if you did," Lena replied, her voice heavy.

"Yeah, it would. You're the overseer, aren't ya?"

At that, Lena laughed. "Yes, I am. How right you are." She walked to the front door. "In any case, I'll let you get back to your day. Tomorrow then."

"Wait, Lena... I..."

Lena paused at the door.

"You could stay," Kara suggested. "Or come to my cabin."

Lena met her gaze. "Maybe another day."

Lena used a wet, soapy rag to clean the soot off the wall behind the lamp in her bedroom. Another day had arrived and she was going to make the best of it, especially since she didn't need to report to work. She scrubbed and wiped, and wiped and scrubbed, until her hands felt weak. She was so engrossed in her cleaning that she didn't hear the knock behind her.

"Lena?"

She looked over her shoulder with a smile, watching Kara linger in the doorway. "Kara, hi. I didn't expect you to be dropping by so early. These lamps make such a terrible mess," she said by way of explanation, briefly gesturing toward the wall before putting the rag down. "It's why I prefer candles."

Kara nodded, almost to no one in particular. "You shouldn't leave the door unlocked like that," she stated, moving inside nonchalantly.

Lena noticed that the woman's eyes were everywhere but on her, and she realized that this was the first time Kara had seen her bedroom in a long time. When they'd slept in the same bed recently, it had been dark. So now Kara was taking a keen interest in the unpacked boxes that still lined corners
in her room.

The blonde walked to one, assessing its contents. "Wine?" she asked.

Lena smiled slightly. "I recognize that the stronger stuff and drunkenness are unwelcomed in town. But they can't begrudge a woman a sip of wine, can they?"

Kara stared at her as though she was stating a foreign concept. She then moved to another box, sifting through it.

Lena folded her arms across her chest. "By all means, make yourself right at home," she said with an amused grin.

Kara pulled out a bound pad, and Lena's eyes widened. "Kara... Wait... I'm not sure that's --"

It was too late. Kara was already looking through the pages, her eyes taking in the details with wonderment: A penciled image of a building. A home. A rode. "Drawings?"

"Not mine," Lena said, feeling her mouth go dry. Kara was holding her lover's sketchbook. At the time it was given to her, she had been reluctant to accept it, unsure whether it would be in bad taste or would make her regret having broken things off. But she'd relented, having needed something to hold on to from her previous life and to remind herself who she was in the case that she should ever feel pressured to bury that part of herself again. "A friend's," she added.

Kara looked up at her. "An interestin' friend," she said, looking back down at the latest page. It was a light sketch of a naked woman. The woman's facial features hadn't yet been drawn, but exquisite attention had been given to the body. Kara traced a finger along the taut stomach down to the hairs between the curved thighs. A blush rose to her cheeks.

Lena was blushing as well. With the way Kara had paused and appeared to be embarrassed, there was no doubt that she had landed on one of the more intimate images. Lena walked to her, and carefully extracted the book from her hands as Kara cleared her throat and nervously re-adjusted her spectacles. "A volunteer," she told Kara.

Kara stepped aside slowly, waving her hands about as Lena closed the book. "Volunteer? Someone volunteered to pose bare like that?"

Lena swallowed hard and put the sketchbook back in the box before turning back to Kara. Her face pulled into an expression of indifference. "Something like that."

She and Kara held gazes, and Kara cleared her throat again. "Well, it's not very ladylike."

"Or moral," Lena agreed. She subconsciously took a step forward.

"It isn't," Kara huffed and turned away from her, walking a few feet ahead. "Anyhow, I was wonderin' if you'd like to go to our special spot for a picnic. Before I get ta working on ya house."

"A picnic? Right now?"
"Yeah." Kara turned back to face her. "I cooked early -- some ham. And I got cheese, the best buttered bread, grapes, and --"

"-- Can I bring some wine?" Lena asked.

Kara stared at her, turning the idea over in her head. "Just a sip, you said?"

Lena laughed. "Yes, Kara, just a sip."

Kara shrugged. "Then I guess it's awright."

The picnic went by relatively fast. They ate and drank, Lena taking only a sip of wine as promised, and they stared. They stared at each other so much that they intermittently bristled — were visibly stirred — more than once. Lena stared at Kara's build over the rim of her cup of water. Kara stared at Lena's slender fingers, her mostly obscured neck, and her jawline. Any time they caught each other staring, they smiled softly and continued discussion.

Lena told Kara of her travels, of how she had been to a few different parts of the world, including France, and knew six different foreign languages, but had mainly made a living in New York. The trip to France hadn't went as smoothly as other trips since French railways had developed significantly slower than those in a number of other countries. This had initially been due to the French economy of 1832, which hadn't developed sufficiently to support a national railway network. But she told Kara of how it had been an interesting time nonetheless and that she and Lex had learned a lot about economic difficulties as a result.

Kara told Lena of how she and Mon-El had bonded over their blacksmith work, Mon-El's abandonment issues, which Kara related to because of the death of her parents, although it wasn't quite the same. She also spoke of how they had often pondered about the world outside of Breighville. Well, Kara had done most of the pondering. Mon-El had simply been content listening to her.

They were to discuss more, but Kara suggested that she and Lena leave something to talk about, to reveal about each other, each day. She also stressed the desire to get started on Lena's stable. Not long after making it back to Lena's home, the blonde threw herself into doing just that. She told Lena that it might be best to not have the stable be built for one horse, since Lena might need extra stalls at some point and that building a stable for one horse, even if for Wrangler, wouldn't be optimal use of time to the workers. Lena grinned when Kara said it would be fine use of her own time, though.

Kara addressed designs, including flooring, and adequate airflow. When she finally addressed plans for water and food storage, three men had already began working on the basics out front. To the left side of Lena's home, they had began building a pole barn by laying out the location of the posts on the ground that drains well and was relatively flat. Kara went out to help as Lena watched from the porch. Any time Lena offered to help, the workers, especially Kara, declined.

Lena busied herself by preparing fine treats and pouring cups of water for Kara and the workers, and even more water and fine treats when two more men arrived. The most she had to offer, other than the supper she was to make with Kara's help, was dried fruit. She wasn't a bad cook, but she wasn't the most talented either.

She was heating some water when Kara stormed in wincing, holding her arm. The sleeve was stained with blood. "Kara! What happened?" Lena rushed to her.
"I scraped my shoulder against the sharp end of a pole," Kara said through gritted teeth.

Lena helped her to a chair in the living area. "And your friends? They didn't see fit to tend to you?"

"I told them to continue on," Kara replied, taking off her spectacles to place them on the table next to her.

"Kara..." Lena's tone was admonishing, but she focused on grabbing a fresh rag and bowl of cool water. She returned to Kara to rip at the sleeve, exposing the marred flesh, and faltered. The wound was small, but it wasn't what held Lena's attention.

Kara looked up at her to question her paused expression and then followed her line of vision back to the toned bicep. "Oh that," Kara said with a shrug. "Yeah, because of my smithing work, I've built up a little muscle on my arms. Disgustin', huh?"

Lena's mouth opened and closed. And she fought against the pink tint threatening to rise up her neck to her face. It was true that it was unusual to see a woman with such well-toned arms. Not just unusual. Practically unheard of. But disgusting was the last word that had come to Lena's mind. If anything, the muscles made Kara even more desirable. They were beautiful. "Not disgusting at all," she said softly, cleaning the wound as best she could. Against her better judgment, she gently caressed the bicep, and Kara looked up at her questioningly. "I... I'll go get you some ointment. It's upstairs." Lena excused herself, quickly extracting herself from Kara's orbit. She needed space, and she needed it now. She hurried out of the room without another word.

By the time she returned, Mon-El was there, his arms wrapped around Kara and his voiced pained. From what Lena could discern from the tail end of the conversation, the man's grandfather had died and he was telling Kara that he didn't know what to do. Lena herself didn't know what to do either. So she stood there at the end of the stairway, watching Kara, whose back was to her, consoling their childhood friend. Mon-El fell to his knees, his arms steadily around Kara's waist as Kara's fingers slipped into his hair.

And then his eyes — teary and challenging — locked onto Lena's. Those eyes told her everything he was thinking: Kara was his. And he needed her more than ever. Lena wouldn't dare disrupt that.

And so Lena didn't. She raised her chin to convey that she understood and silently went back upstairs.
The necklace part... As is indicated by the first chapter, I had been planning that before
the show did their necklace version. I just wasn't planning on revealing it this early on in
the story.

Lena, James and Maggie rode toward the Gand Brew & Stew business on the outskirts of town. It
belonged to Lar Gand and his wife, Rhea, otherwise known to Lena as the absentee parents who had
failed Mon-El. It had been two days since she'd last seen Kara. And although she desperately wanted
to hear from her, she knew that the blonde had her hands full with Mon-El. Lena's visit to his parents
not only concerned her duty to keep every aspect of the community, including the brewery and
saloon, under control, but word of Lonnie's death in case they had not yet heard. She knew that
Mon-El wasn't particularly close to them, and she honestly wasn't sure if he'd even be up to
informing them of this morbid news.

Winn and Sam had stayed behind to tend to the office work. Sam opined that she felt a scandal
coming their way by being in contact with the Gand family and preferred to stay out of it, that they
had enough scandal with the overseer work.

Lena felt that she might be on the verge of a scandal herself, if the way some of the townspeople had
been looking at her lately was any indication. She'd only realized her error a day later. She'd touched
James in front of the overseer building and some had witnessed it. She hadn't been thinking because
she was so used to touching people. That would have to stop, she told herself. She would need to be
more careful, or no one would take her seriously. She couldn't hold up the rules or laws if she
couldn't follow them herself. At least James hadn't seemed to make a big deal out of it.

They arrived outside the brewery and saloon. Outside wasn't much to look at it, but inside was a
marvel of beauty. It was spectacularly lighted with oversized lamps and candles. The sideboards
were stacked with food, the chairs and wood expertly crafted and polished, and furnished with
reading matter and writing materials for its patrons. The ceiling was made of intricate zigzag designs,
and the floor was carpeted with wool. She saw men sitting about, briefly looking at her and her
employees before going back to drinking or gambling.

Lena knew that the types of saloons varied, depending upon the town they served. Larger, wealthier
towns usually had sophisticated social clubs, but also enough dance halls and hole-in-the-wall areas.
Smaller, remote towns commonly had a few basic saloons, and some doubled as a greeting area.
Although women in small towns could enter saloons without sullying their reputations, this was non-
standard. And Breighville, which shunned the Gand Brew & Stew business, wouldn't think of
tolerating women in such a place.

Or at least that's what Lena thought until she saw a blonde in her mid or late 20s in a suit throwing
back drinks at a table. The woman, who had her hair pulled back in a ponytail and wore a big,
floppy hat, might be mistaken for a man at first, but Lena's eyes were too sharp to be fooled. The blonde eyed Lena and grinned before walking to her.

She bowed drunkenly. "Ladies, gentleman. How can I help you?" Her eyes remained glued to Lena.

Lena was struck by the woman's lack of a southern accent. To a degree, she was like Winn.

"I thought women weren't allowed in here," James said.

The woman's eyes drifted to him before settling on her nails. She blew on them as though bored. "In here, I don't present as a woman." She cleared her throat and straightened her suit. Her chin rose proudly, and Lena noticed that it was dimpled. "In here, I'm a man."

Maggie's eyebrows arched. "Are ya now?"

The blonde shot the olive-skinned woman a stern look. "As long as I get my fill, you can call me anything you want." She looked Maggie over, seeing the overalls the woman donned. "Something tells me you'd prefer to present as a man too."

Maggie almost took a step forward, but Lena's hand on her arm halted her.

"And what do we call you?" Lena gently asked the blonde.

The woman was reluctant to remove her gaze from Maggie, their eyes locked in a temporary staring contest. But when she finally did, she flashed Lena her best smile. "Sara Lance." She moved in close, and a pout formed on her lips. "But you can call me sweetheart, if it suits you."

Lena was tickled. The woman wasn't like Winn at all.

"Awright, Awright," Maggie said, stepping in between Lena and Sara. "Instead of bein' sweet on my boss, how about ya tell us where to find the owners of this place?"

Sara rolled her eyes. "They're usually over there." She pointed to two large-sized, almost throne-like chairs at the front of the room.

Lena's eyes narrowed. So the rumors of Lar and Rhea being treated like royalty were true. She supposed that she shouldn't be surprised, not with all of the other odd things this society offered. But there was a slight point to Lar and Rhea holding themselves in high esteem: In any other town, being a saloon owner or bartender was quite respectable. It was the cheapest and easiest way to become an influential man and to be admired. Men loved their whiskey and they loved men who owned businesses. They also loved when powerful men listened to their troubles. Lena had learned all of this when working with Lionel.

"And just so we're clear," Sara said, "this isn't really 'in town'." She moved backward, winking at Lena. "I'll go get the bosses for you."

Maggie turned to Lena. "She was flirtin' with ya."

"Surely sweet on ya," James echoed.

Lena laughed. "Yes, I gathered that." Lena actually found it refreshing to see someone like her and so open with their sexuality. But she knew if the town got wind of this, they'd likely have collective brain failure. James and Maggie didn't seem distressed by it, though, and Lena also found this refreshing.
"Lena Luthor, what an honor," a man's voice boomed from across the room.

Lena looked up to see Lar and Rhea headed toward them. The two were dressed as finely as Sara, with Lar in a suit and Rhea in a V-cut, red gown with a light bustle. They were an attractive pair and had aged well. From what Lena made of Lar's tone, they'd also lost their southern accents. Or they were simply good at hiding them.

"So nice to see you, dear," Rhea said, hugging her lightly and offering a small kiss to her cheek. She assessed her fully a second later. "I see Sara was right. You've grown into quite the lovely woman."

Lena saw Sara take a seat at a table from across the room, raising a glass before downing it.

"I heard that you're unmarried, though. I could arrange for you to marry Mon-El, if you like. The Danvers girl has dragged him around long enough. He could do well with a strong woman like yourself."

"That's quite all right," Lena assured. "I don't need a husband."

Rhea laughed in a pitying way. "Oh, honey. Everyone woman needs a husband." She looked across the room to Sara. "Except for our lovely Sara, of course."

Lena arched an eyebrow. "Your lovely Sara?"

"Sara works for us," Lar clarified.

Lena mulled the revelation over in her head. "Well, you must forgive me for saying so, but women are expressly forbidden from being in the brewery."

"Women," Lar stressed. "Sara is one woman. And in here, she --"

"-- Presents as a man?" Maggie questioned flatly.

"The poor girl needed a job and wasn't good at anything else except selling alcohol and making the most unusual drinks," Rhea said. "Having her not be thought of as a woman while in here was the best solution we could come up with. That, of course, meant dressing her like a man as well, so as to not tempt the male customers."

Lena held her mouth open in slight shock. "You can't hide her beauty with a hat and trousers," she said.

Rhea smiled. "We can try. Now tell us... What brings you to our business? Would you like a drink?"

"I think ya know why we're here, ma'am," James interjected.

Rhea's eyes flashed to the large man. "My, my. What a tall drink of water."

Maggie huffed. "Does everyone in here flirt?"

"I'm here," Lena said, "to make sure things are in order...as the overseer."

"And are they?" Lar questioned, his steely blue gaze challenging Lena's.

"Other than Sara's presence, I suppose that --"

"-- The rules mainly focus on sex," Lar stated, folding his arms across his chest. "And as you can see, there's no sex being had in here."
"At first glance anyway," Maggie quipped.

"We have our own rules in the brewery," Lar continued. "And Sara is following one of them. So unless you intend to shut down the place because of --"

"-- Lonnie's dead," Lena said. Quibbling over Sara wasn't going anywhere, she could see that. Better to get to the point, and do a thorough check of the place afterward.

Lar and Rhea exchanged glances, and Lar looked down for a moment before once again meeting Lena's gaze. "I see. I'd hoped it was just a vile rumor meant to hurt us." He nodded behind him. "Shall we discuss in the back?"

The funeral was standard as far as funerals went. Kara had helped Mon-El with his suit and she'd selected a standard black dress with Alex and Eliza's help. Once a person had died, women of the household would wash, dress, and prepare the body for burial. The men of the household had the duty of making a plain wood coffin or purchasing it from the local carpenter. The male members dug the grave and sometimes carved the grave stone. Since Mon-El was the only male family member available, this fell on his shoulders. But he did have help from some of the local men. Jeremiah was the first to volunteer. And one of Kara and Mon-El's oldest acquaintances, Winn, helped as well. So did Mr. Ray and a few others. The wake had been held at Lonnie's home, and this was followed by a committal service at grave-side.

A day later, they arrived at the church early to prepare seats and to help Ms. Merriam and her ladies prepare food and other refreshments. It was near noon when people made their way inside the church to pay their respects to Lonnie Gand. Father Mable, Kara and Mon-El greeted people at the doorway. More than they could accompany had wanted to attend. And so they had set up chairs outside of the church for those who couldn't get a seat inside. It turned out that Lonnie was quite loved, especially for his hunting and cooking. And that is mainly what Father Mable's words had focused on, as people cried, laughed, and later made their way to his open coffin. He'd been sixty-seven, far exceeding the average life expectancy, and had apparently died of old age. The coroner had found no signs of disease or other illness.

Although funerals and burials were handled by the immediate family and neighbors, Mon-El's parents hadn't helped with any of it. They'd shown up briefly, as other attendees watched them with judging and scornful eyes. After stopping at the coffin, they'd left as quickly they'd arrived. Mon-El hadn't said a word to them. Kara hadn't expected him to.

She'd caught a glimpse of Lena, who had offered her condolences to Mon-El as well, but they hadn't talked other than a brief "hi" before taking seats. Kara had also seen Lena's other employees attend, sitting out front while Lena and Winn had been offered a seat inside, but she hadn't had time for formal introductions. She needed to focus on Mon-El. And that's what she did.

Lena arranged chairs in her small foyer when she caught a glimpse of a figure through her side window. She would have been alarmed if she had not instantly recognized the build and blond hair. She hadn't seen Kara in days, and it'd rained almost non-stop during that time. "Kara," she said, opening the door to find the woman standing several feet away, back turned to her and looking up at the sky as the rain poured down hard. "Kara, what are you doing?! Come inside!"
Either the woman hadn't heard her or she didn't care. She stayed where she was, steadily looking up at the gloomy sky.

Lena mumbled curses under her breath, hurrying outside and not even bothering to grab something to shield herself against the relentless downpour. She honestly didn't know what Kara was thinking, but she'd be damned if she was going to do nothing about it. She reached the blonde in no time. "Kara." She grabbed the woman by the arm, and Kara turned to her, teary-eyed. Kara had been crying. It might have been raining, but the water did nothing to hide the reddened eyes behind the foggy spectacles before her.

Kara stared at her, bewildered, strands of hair splayed against a crinkled forehead as she sputtered drops of water from her mouth. Lena blinked against the rain, moving wet wisps of her dark hair to the side. She watched Kara curiously, unsure of what to think. "Come on, let's get you inside," she said, pulling the blonde along.

Once they reached the living area, Lena told Kara to wait while she changed, ran a towel across her hair, and grabbed Kara some clothes. Looking through her wardrobe, all she had were dresses, shifts, elastic corsets for more comfort than traditional corsets, stockings, and garters, which she had acquired earlier in the year when they went on the French market. She grabbed a towel and one of her shifts, the longest one there, although it wasn't very long at all. It stopped just a little over the knee, which, she figured for Kara, was better than her above-knee ones. She put on the second longest one and headed back downstairs.

She spotted Kara standing near the lit fireplace/stove, which was situated between the kitchen and living area, seamlessly joining the two. Kara watched her skittishly. "Here," she said, handing the items and her spectacles down on a nearby chair and proceeding to change.

"Hold on...you -- you can't just change right here," Lena croaked, feeling panic bloom in her chest. "Why not?" Kara asked softly, staring at her with confusion. Fingers halted their goal to unbutton the cotton shirt.

Why not? was a good question, one Lena didn't have an answer for. They were both women, after all, and it was not uncommon for women to undress in front of each other. Lena sighed and turned her back to Kara. "Just tell me when you're done changing."

Lena waited anxiously as she heard Kara disrobe. She fought against the images of a naked Kara standing before her, innocent and welcoming. She berated herself for considering Kara's innocence so attractive, but the thought of an inexperienced Kara offering herself to her was undoubtedly alluring.

She heard a clearing of a voice, Kara's signal that she was done changing. Lena took in a deep breath and turned to her. The shift didn't fit the woman as expected. Lena had forgotten that Kara was two inches taller, which was easily overlooked whenever Lena wore shoes that gave her a heel advantage. The shift that stopped a little over the knee on her stopped a little above the knee on Kara. The blonde's legs were feminine yet athletic, the feet adorable yet rough. Lena marveled at the blend.

"Don't look that bad, do it?" Kara asked, insecurity clear in her body language and tone.
Lena quickly pulled her gaze away from Kara's figure and met the blue, questioning eyes. "Of course not." She straightened her posture and took a step closer. "Now... Are you going to tell me why you were standing out in the rain, in the middle of my residence?"

Kara started to tear up again, placing a hand to her forehead as she looked to the floor. "It's Mon-El. The pain he's in, it's... And I don't know how best to comfort him. There's the rule forbidin' us from touchin', but he touches me lately because he needs ta. And I can't very well not reciprocate, but I'm not good at reciprocating." She frustratedly ran the towel across her hair. "Don't know why he wants a partner as lousy as me, but he does. The way he was lookin' at me was too much, and I knew I needed some fresh air, but I didn't know where to go. Wound up here."

Lena watched the woman carefully, the way she squeezed the towel, the way she kept her gaze lowered. "It's because you are never touched," she finally said.

Kara let the towel rest across her neck and looked up at Lena questioningly.

"The no-touching rule. You're not used to being touched, especially by men, and so it makes you feel uneasy," Lena clarified. "But I don't believe it makes you a sorry partner."

Kara furrowed her brow, her eyes relaying her perturbed state.

Lena walked to her and sat down on the floor in front of the fireplace, looking up at Kara and holding arms open as an invite. "I don't think that Mon-El should be touching you at all, but I can make it so that it doesn't feel so scary."

Kara stared at her for a moment before lowering herself into Lena's lap. She settled between the brunette's hips and rested her head back against a cozy shoulder. "A fire?"

"I've been stoking it to heat water and cook," Lena said. "So much work involved with these stoves. Who would have guessed?" a hint of mirth laced her tone. She raised her hands slowly and hovered them over Kara's arms. "Is this okay?" She lowered them to softly envelop Kara, resting them against the woman's waist as she clasped her fingers.

"Yeah," Kara replied, looking down at Lena's clasped hands. "Sorry I haven't been here to help build your barn."

Lena breathed in Kara's scent and watched the fire. "Nothing to apologize for. Like you said, Mon-El needs you."

"Ya ain't gonna punish him for touchin'?"

"No." Lena narrowed her eyes. "The rule does say one should not be touched without good reason and stresses 'overwhelming plight.' I'd say that comforting someone after losing a family member or other loved one falls under 'good reason' and 'overwhelming plight.' Lena knew that being able to touch Kara while Mon-El couldn't might be termed an advantage on her part, but Kara was not some prize to be won or an object to be weighted for leverage. She was Kara, her childhood friend and the woman she cherished.

"All of this must be hard for you, huh? Cookin', cleanin', and everythang else that comes with livin' here? We gonna have to figure out how to get you meals and your clothes washed while you work."

Lena chuckled. "I've had maids, yes, but I'm not a complete stranger to preparing my own meals or cleaning up after myself. Don't make me sound so helpless or haughty."

Kara shrugged. "Sorry."
"You're not entirely wrong. I have an icebox and can work the stove decently, but I won't have as much time to devote to preparing food and washing clothes as the other womenfolk do. But at least there are shops and farmer trucks around. And I won't have to scrub the walls and furniture. I mean, as long as I keep using candles instead of those abominable lamps."

"I could help," Kara said, turning her head a bit toward Lena.

"That won't be necessary. I'll have more days off than work days. The reports aren't that frequent."

"I reckon you're right." Kara placed her hands atop Lena's and stared into the fire.

Lena raised her hands to slide them along Kara's sleeved arms. "Is this okay?"

Kara answered by intertwining their hands. "They're so soft."

"Hmm?"

"Your hands," Kara clarified. "Compared to my rough ones, yours are like... Like a baby's bottom."

Lena laughed. "Touched many babies' bottoms, have you?"

Kara giggled. "Just William's. I had to help Alex change his drawers sometimes. And she had this scented oil she would apply afterward. Made sure to lecture me about applying it too. But as for the softness, it was all of his skin, really -- his arms, his belly, his cheeks when we kissed him on the face." Kara ran a single finger along the back of Lena's right hand. "I guess most city women have skin like yours."

Lena shivered. "I..."

"Your thigh was just as soft."

Lena chewed on her bottom lip. Did Kara honestly not understand the weight of some of her words? "Well," Lena said, using her palms to grasp one of Kara's hands, and desperate to take the attention off herself, "I happen to like the texture of your skin. I can only judge your hands at the moment, but they have a story to them -- one full of challenges and triumphs. Much better than my boring digits." She examined Kara's fingers for longer than she knew she should, dragging hers along the blonde's and flushing at their length.

Kara snorted. "Yeah, well, I have rough feet too."

Lena's eyes drifted to Kara's adorable toes outstretched in front of her. "Easily cured by soaking your feet in milk. Besides, given that your job requirements include standing most of the time, moving back and forth as you do, you can hardly be blamed for --"

"-- The hell I can," Kara countered, settling their intertwined hands into her lap. "I didn't have to become a blacksmith. I sought it out."

"You chased your dreams, just like I did." Lena tucked a strand of Kara's hair behind her ear. "It's something to be admired. I admire that about you, she heard her inner voice say, but didn't dare share it aloud.

"What were your dreams?" Kara queried, leaning back against Lena's shoulder once more.

"Hmm, initially being better at transporting, refining, and marketing oil than my father and brother,"
Lena said with a smile. "You see, although Lex, mother and I lived in New York, father took up residence in Cleveland, Ohio a few years after getting us situated. That's where the Standard Oil company was founded. There had been talk of headquartering the company in New York. And so, for a time, father worked as an associate procuring information and sealing deals. In 1868, when the company was still in its infancy, he was part of the deal that saw to it that New York Central's Lake Shore Railroad gave them a going rate of one cent a gallon, which equated to a 71% discount from its listed rates in return. The company wanted to ship at least 60 carloads of oil daily. And they did. Before that point, father had worked his way up the ranks for different companies of fledgling power. When it was clear that Standard Oil would be staying put, at least for now, he was brought on board as one of the main players."

Kara drew small circles on Lena's wrist. "And so he would visit ya in New York?"

Lena inhaled sharply. "He would. And he would make the most of said visits -- sometimes teaching us things we didn't learn from the tutors he'd given us, and sometimes taking us out for extravagant dinners, or having us travel with him. Such things were nice, they were, and I appreciated the educational books and memoirs he would toss my way, but I soon took an interest in medicine. He didn't like it at first, of course, but he saw to it that I got the education I so desired. Studying medicine, law, and business, I wasn't quite sure what I'd do with myself, but I eventually came to the conclusion that running a business suited my personality the best. As father's health declined, he encouraged us to see to what we wanted now, while he was still alive. He wanted us to ensure his legacy. Lex was becoming more controlling of father's assets and finances, and I noted that there was one part of father's legacy that needed polishing."

"His work as an overseer," Kara surmised, now drawing circles on Lena's arm.

"Correct."

"So that's why you're back."

"Well," Lena said, stilling the blonde's hands and causing the woman look up at her, "that's not the only reason."

They stared at each other, gazes searching for answers to questions long guarded and long buried. Kara moved away then, lowering her eyes and fidgeting. "Mind if I take a quick nap?" She rolled the semi-wet towel into a pillow.

"Not at all." Lena looked away, believing that her feelings may get the better of her if she kept staring. At times, she felt like she knew what Kara was thinking. And other times, she hadn't a clue. It was too confusing, and far too stressful. She truly couldn't dwell on such things. "You could sleep in my bed," she offered. "Or one of the others."

"No thanks." Kara lied down, parallel to Lena. "Floor's fine. Just need a little shut-eye."

Lena wanted to suggest at least getting the woman a blanket, but she knew how stubborn Kara could be. She would let her get some shut-eye. And in the meantime, she would make a much needed visit.
fondly and placed the clothing down on the table to move toward the door. That smile disappeared when he saw Lena standing before him.

"Mon-El," she said, simply pushing past him and looking around as though she owned the place.

Mon-El closed the door with a clenched jaw. "Ya have some nerve, woman. Where's Kara?"

"At my home resting." Lena picked up a book on a stand to the side. It was the Bible. "And you have quite the nerve yourself," she challenged, flipping through the pages.

Mon-El moved to stop in front of her. "What ya goin' on about?"

"Leviticus 25:17. Do not take advantage of each other, but fear your God. I am the LORD your God." She turned to another page. "Romans 16:18. Such people are not serving Christ our Lord; they are serving their own personal interests. By smooth talk and glowing words they deceive innocent people."

Mon-El frowned.

Lena closed the book and glared at him. "Such powerful words, those of the good book," she said. "I take it you still believe in them?"

"Darn right, I do."

Lena slammed the book down on the stand. "Then why are you taking advantage of Kara?"

"Takin' advantage?"

"Using your grandfather's death to touch her as you like, to encourage her to touch you?"

Mon-El folded his arms across his chest. "Has it occurred to you, woman, that I might actually need to touch Kara now -- to feel her touch me in turn -- just to get through the pain?"

Lena raised her chin. "It has. But I also know you, Mon-El. Better than you think I do." She looked him over. "You may be in pain, I'll give you that, but you've always used whatever excuse there was to touch Kara."

Mon-El laughed then. He laughed so hard and for so long that he could see Lena beginning to feel uncomfortable. "Ain't that rich. The girl who stole all of Kara's time when we were little, the girl who touched Kara at every turn, accusing me of using whatever excuse."

"I never needed an excuse." Lena took a step forward.

"Yeah, yeah, you were allowed to touch. I remember." Mon-El narrowed his eyes. "But did you have ta touch her so often? Kinda makes me wonder if you were even all that innocent back then."

"You dirty-minded scoundrel. Are you implying that there was a sexual element to my relationship with Kara?"

Mon-El shrugged. He liked getting under Lena's skin. "With the way you look at Kara, I'm the dirty-minded one?"

Lena squared her jaw.

"All's I'm sayin' is that some part of you knew you liked Kara in a more profound way than friendship. Remember you blurting out that ya would marry her?"
Lena blushed.

"But since we're bein' so candid, I'll have ya know a part of me harbored profound feelings for Kara too. It's why you and I clashed so much. Took me years -- until I was fourteen -- to realize it, but when I did..." He sighed, looking to the floor. When he looked up again, he saw that the truth of his words had registered with Lena. "When did you realize it?"

"It took me much longer, I'm afraid," Lena said softly.

Mon-El crossed the room and sat at the table, running a hand along his patched up clothing. "Wanna sit?"

"I'd rather stand."

Mon-El shrugged. "Suit yerself." He cleared his throat. "So ya plannin' to report me for misconduct?"

"No," Lena swallowed. "Like I told Kara, you're exempt in this case. But you already knew that, didn't you?"

Mon-El picked up his sewing utensils and started to stitch up a rip in one of his shirts. "Kara told me that you met with my folks to relay the news of grandpa's death. Guess I should thank ya since I didn't want to do it." He looked to Lena. "Thanks." His eyes went back to his clothing as he stitched away.

Lena watched him; he could feel those unrelenting eyes bearing down on him. "It's my turn, Lena."

"Kara isn't a ride you can just claim."

"She is to be my wife!" His angry eyes met hers. "I've waited years for her. Years! Never touchin' another woman. Never even touchin' Kara. Do ya know how frustratin' that is? Not only as a man, but as someone who loves a woman so deeply that he feels his heart will burst? You've only recently had to feel the ache of wanting Kara while in her presence!" he nearly spat. He watched as Lena seemed to acknowledge his pain. "What can two women even do together? Hmm?"

Lena smirked, whatever sympathy she'd felt for the man instantly replaced with disdain. "Wouldn't you like to know."

"Can you give her children?" He grinned when he saw Lena's face fall. "No? Because I can. And Kara loves children. You should see her with William. Or with some of the other youngins in town."

Mon-El stood, his fists resting against the wood. "I will marry Kara Danvers, just like I've always been meant ta. I will give her children. And you will mind ya own business, lest you want her to know all about your deviant nature."

He sat back down and went back to work. "Now lest you have somethin' else ta state...."

He let the implication hang in the air and didn't look up again until Lena had gone. The door slammed after her. He stared at it with a sigh. Maybe things would be different if he and Lena had actually liked each other when they were little. Or maybe it would've been much more difficult.

For the next few weeks, Lena couldn't decide if she was in heaven or hell. Her work life had been
going relatively smoothly, with few reports of impropriety and the team's interrogations, all of which had taken place in the overseer's building, always worked in their favor. But her personal life was a different matter entirely. Kara had made a point to come around every day in the morning or after work. She was still helping with building Lena's stable, and just that alone would have been fine. But Kara wanted to touch her. She touched Lena incessantly now, and Lena wasn't sure what to make of it. If she had to describe it, it was akin to a smitten, pubescent boy doting on the girl he'd taken a liking to. Kara would hug her first thing in the morning, sometimes lie next to her in bed just as she was waking, place a hand at the small of her back at the most unexpected of times, and insist on cuddling when Lena had returned home from work, often right after she had bathed and was wearing nothing but a shift. She also threw wide grins Lena's way.

When they weren't cuddling or otherwise touching each other, they were eating. Kara would bring treats by and cook for her. Other times she would teach Lena how to cook. They additionally strode around town, Kara attempting to hold her hand before being interrupted by a seller or thinking better of it, and Lena seeing markets and businesses she hadn't had the time to see earlier during her stay. The town was certainly bigger than the one street she often regulated herself to when working at the overseer building. She imagined if she looked at the town from overhead, she would see an intersection of streets, some of which were lined with nothing but fruit markets or some other product. The town had undoubtedly expanded during the years she had been away.

And then there was the lake she'd never been able to forget. Kara liked to visit their special spot, where they had more picnics and shared more about each other, but the lake a little ways away had become just as favored, if not more so.

They rested there now, Lena on her belly, a blanket beneath her as she used a hand to move back and forth along the water's edge. And Kara on her back, using her left fingers to trace small circles on Lena's shoulder blade.

To Lena's mind, she was being courted. But she knew that, to Kara, all of this was innocent. Kara had never been used to touch and now she was reveling in it. It was a torture of sorts for Lena, whose muscles would tense or relax depending on how Kara's hand would make contact, but she couldn't truly complain.

"Mon-El hasn't touched me in weeks," Kara said. "But if he does it again, I reckon it'll be a breeze." She ceased her ministrations on Lena's back and raised her hand toward the blue sky, looking at how the sun's rays reflected off of it.

Lena thought about that. Had something she said to Mon-El caused him to stop being overly affectionate with Kara? What was he up to?

"Lena?"

"Hmm?"

"Should I start kissin' you?"

"What?!!" Lena screeched, sitting up in an instant.

Kara laughed. "What ya screechin' for? I mean on the cheek. I only ask 'cause Mon-El started kissin' me on the cheek, before he stopped touchin' me altogether. I tried ta kiss him back, but it was... I don't know."

Lena looked at the blonde cautiously. "And so you figure kissing me will make you feel less anxious about kissing Mon-El?"
Kara scratched at her forehead. "I don't know. It's not really an anxious feelin'. I just..."

Lena looked to the water, suddenly feeling a pang in her chest. "You shouldn't kiss me, Kara. On the cheek or otherwise."

"Why?"

"Because I'll kiss you back."

"So?"

Lena looked to her, then to the ground. "You don't understand."

Silence fell upon them, but it didn't last for long. In the next moment, Lena felt strong arms lift her off the ground and throw her into the lake.

She spluttered about, wiping at her face as she heard Kara belly laugh. With each chuckle, Lena felt her ire rise. "Why, you..."

"I don't like it when your face gets all contorted like that. Seemed to me you needed a swim."

"Kara, I swear -- you. You...."

Kara laughed harder. "You what? You have ta catch me first."

Lena moved her hair out of her face. "Turn around," she ordered.

"Why should I?"

"Because my white cotton dress is clinging to me and I'd rather not subject you to the pink tint of my nipples? That good enough for you?"

Kara blushed, but offered her back as demanded.

Lena didn't get out of the lake immediately, though. She pulled the blonde in with her. Kara flailed and hit the water back first just as Lena stepped onto the grass. Lena quickly reached for the blanket to wrap it around herself. She turned to Kara and grinned. "Guess I didn't have to catch you, now did I?"

Kara spat out some water, and frowned.

It was three days later when Mon-El attempted to touch her and then refrained. They were preparing supper, which had taken two hours out of Kara's day so far. She liked Mon-El's company, she did, but his state of mind had seemed to be improving, which meant he needed her less. He'd even be returning to his smithing work tomorrow. Kara knew it wouldn't be long before she returned to hers as well. Jeremiah had been lenient with them, first understanding Lena's need for a stable and later Mon-El's need for time to grieve and that Kara would obviously be at his side during it all. But they needed to work for a living. Mon-El had insisted that he hadn't needed so much time off. And, indeed, he had continued working on the odd day. Earlier, he'd said he was ready to return full-time, but seeing him retract his hand and go about stirring the soup gave Kara pause.

"Mon-El," she said, placing a hand over his. He ceased his stirring. "Let's sit for a bit."
She led Mon-El to a spot a feet away on the floor and made it so that she sat against him like she'd sat with Lena on that rainy day. "Ya can touch me. It's fine."

He hesitantly moved his hands along Kara's arms.

"Why'd ya ever stop? I wanted ta be here for you."

"I thought you didn't like it, that you were afraid," he said.

"I'm not afraid," Kara honestly replied, unsure of why touching Mon-El didn't bother her in the least. She would attribute it to the fact that she'd gotten used to Lena's touch, but touching Lena and Lena touching her always affected her. It always stirred something in her.

"I'm scared," Mon-El admitted. "Of how I feel when I touch ya, Kara." He took her hand into his own. "It feels so good to touch ya. The softness of your skin."

Kara smirked. If he thought she was soft, he'd obviously never touched a woman as soft as Lena.

"And I don't mean ta offend ya, but as long we're unmarried, touchin' ya pains me." He moved away from her and came to his feet. "That first day, after grandpa died, I needed ya arms around me, I did. But now...the need is different."

Kara looked up at him, seeing the familiar look of longing. It was the same look he'd given her when asking if she would consider marrying him soon and to try to envision him as a husband, as a lover. She had the impulse to bang her head against a wall. She had once again neglected the fact that Mon-El was a man, 'with desires,' as Alex had once told her.

She stood and pushed the spectacles back up on her face. "I'm sorry."

"I don't want your pity, Kara."

Kara squirmed at that. Mon-El returned to the soup he had been attending to.

"What made ya think that I was scared?" Kara dared to ask.

Mon-El lowered his head and then met her gaze head on, his eyes blazing with emotion. "Your funny friend...Lena."

Lena saw the door to the overseer's building fly open, James offering an apologetic smile. Winn's eyes nearly bugged out. And Maggie and Sam moved to block the angry figure descending upon them.

"It's all right," Lena said, leaning back in her chair and holding a pen under her chin out of curiosity. "Let her through." Lena didn't know why Kara was huffing and puffing, but she was fairly certain that Maggie and Sam would be no match for her if she wanted access to the target.

"How dare ya interfere?!" Kara moved to Lena, slamming her hands down on the desk. "Mon-El was in pain. He needed me ta be there for him."

"Yes, because I'm sure your warm hands would have cheered him right up," the cynical reply left Lena's lips before she could think about it.

"You..." Kara pointed a finger at her. "Ya had no right."
Winn quickly made his way to the blonde's side. "Kara."

She turned her finger on him. "Stay outta this, Winn." Her eyes darted back to Lena. "You're a selfish woman, Lena Luthor. Either that -- ya did what you did 'cause you hate Mon-El -- or ya didn't think I could handle thangs myself. Ya didn't trust me ta be able to care for him without worry."

Kara headed back toward the door, casting a scathing look Lena's way. "I'm disappointed in ya."

"You're disappointed in me?!!" Lena shot back, her fingers tightening around the pen. She moved from behind the desk, watching Kara's retreating back. Briefly looking to her crew, she offered a tight, apologetic smile. "It's near closing time. I trust that you all will be able to close out the day without me."

Lena moved outside just in time to see Kara mounting a brilliant black stallion. So that was one of the two horses Kara used at times to get around town.

Lena quickly made her way onto Wrangler and sped after the blonde, both headed toward their special spot in the woods.

Kara waited until Lena entered. For whatever reason, the brunette seemed to be taking her sweet time. Perhaps it was to create tension. She'd seen the fury in the woman's eyes moments ago when she charged that Lena hadn't trusted her to handle things. Well, the tension was already present. Lena certainly didn't need to help it along.

Once the brunette was inside, Kara slammed the door and moved toward the window overlooking the yard. Although she had built the house a little outside of town, that hadn't been enough. She'd also ensured that it was opposite where all the new homes and businesses had sprung up. She'd bought the surrounding area and enough of the woods for privacy. But privacy is not what she was sure she wanted now. Not with this woman who made the hairs on her neck stand on end when too close.

She turned to look at the brunette. Lena's green eyes challenged hers with equal fire, a sapphire flame growing brighter by the minute.

"Should I stand or sit?" Lena asked, her indolent tone contrasting her rigid stance and the vexed, thin line of her mouth.

"Standin' is fine. After all, you don't see any chairs around, now do ya?" Kara disliked the harshness of her tone, especially compared to the politeness Lena still showed her.

She gulped as she felt the tension she'd sensed earlier overwhelm the room, like a tornado — a violently rotating column of air in contact with both the surface of the earth and a cloud. But during a tornado, attempting to shield oneself was often fruitless; going about finding a sliver of hope that one's walls would not crumble was a trying endeavor. These predicaments were similar to the ones that now presented themselves to Kara and Lena as they stood a few feet away from each other. There existed a blend of fury and the past, with not a thing to protect them from the force building in the room.

The aforementioned hairs on Kara's neck stood up. Her gaze lowered from Lena's intense green eyes to the covered neck, to the small shoulders, to the rise and fall of the brunette's chest. The dress, like every dress she wore, hugged the brunette's curves wonderfully and made Kara all too aware of the woman's femininity.
Lena was a woman through and through — one who was challenging her sense of sanity with each passing day. Lena had always been capable of making her question town protocols, and she couldn't help but think that Lena was trying to make her question things again.

The drop of the pen Lena had been holding reverberated throughout the home, prompting Kara to think of just how empty it was, aside from their presence. No one else occupied the place. No one, unless Mon-El dared to interrupt as he'd often done when they were youngins, would be disturbing them. This was even clearer when Lena didn't move to pick up the pen.

"What is it that you mean to say?" Kara asked.

Lena looked away, as though needing a reprieve. She moved to a table and placed her hands flat against it, leaning against it. From what Kara could tell, she was apparently debating with herself about what to state. Abruptly, she stood straight and unfastened the buttons on her collar.

Kara took a step back and wrapped her arms around herself. Lena hadn't done anything improper, but she felt weak and bare all of a sudden, as though Lena had started to undress. It was just Lena, she reminded herself. But others didn't make her feel uneasy the way Lena did. Others didn't look at or touch her the way Lena did.

"I mean to say I'm sorry," the brunette finally answered. She walked to one end of the room and back to the other before stopping right where she'd previously stood and glared. "But now I wonder if I even should. You're so shielded -- so closed off -- and you can't even see it."

"Excuse me for not having had the luxury of travelin' parts of the world," Kara fired back, no longer hugging herself so that she could ball her hands into fists.

"You don't need to travel parts of the world to figure yourself out, or to know what you want, Kara! All you need to do is listen to yourself. Stop letting others and their traditions or religious notions form your opinions."

Kara gritted her teeth. She'd rarely been angry at Lena when they were children, and she knew anger must show on her face now, but she didn't care. She wanted Lena to know how frustrated she was. "I think just fine on my own, thank ya very much. Case in point: It's my opinion that you shouldn't be meddling in my affairs."

Lena laughed coldly. "Is that why you invited me to 'meddle' in your affairs? You, Kara, you are the one who wound up in my yard that rainy day and told me of your troubles. You, Kara, are the one who's been telling me of your 'affairs' for weeks since."

"Oh? Well, I also asked ya not to admonish Mon-El! You said ya wouldn't!" Kara's anger flared beyond her control. "You've always had a need to poke at Mon-El. Why? What has he ever done to you?!"

Lena stepped toward her. "I said I wouldn't punish Mon-El. Admonishing wasn't promised at all. And since I've been back, it's me who has been poked by your beloved husband-to-be. Why do you care so much that I interfered? Are you afraid that he will never touch you again and that you will have to face the reality of whether or not you want to be touched by him?"

"Mon-El and I are betrothed. He has every right to touch me."

"Except, according to the town rules, he doesn't; there are circumstances. And according to the way you've behaved, you don't like it when he does."

"You twist my words." Kara moved directly in front of her.
"I twist nothing. I enlighten."

"Please stop this feud, or whatever it is, with him. I just want us to be friends like we used ta be."

"Mon-El and I were never friends. Not truly. We were civil to each other often enough, but it was always either you and me, or you and Mon-El. Ask him if you don't believe me."

Lena had only been in town for a few weeks and already she had turned Kara's life upside down. "It's not too late for us to all get along," Kara said.

*Get along* had apparently been the wrong words. Kara saw the fire in Lena's eyes immediately reignite. The brunette had the most alluring eyes, she thought, staring into their green, blue and yellow depths. Thick lashes framed the refined shape and beautiful array of colors. The tiny scar beside her right eye added to her beauty, making her look cynical one moment and playful the next.

Kara looked away. She was no longer angry at Lena, but what she felt now was confusing. Threatening.

"Do I make you uneasy?" Lena asked softly.

"I just...don't know how to act around ya sometimes. That's all." And it was true. Being around Lena, thinking of her, made Kara act differently, as if the moral code she had built for herself all these years was simply a cover. As if the town saw her one way, and Lena saw her another. Saw the true her.

Lena's gaze traveled over her face and then moved lower. Kara told herself that it was just Lena's usual behavior of assessing all of her, but the blunt appraisal made her feel hot and tingling. The acknowledgement in Lena's eyes made her proud to have the build she did.

"You're back in town, why?" Kara asked.

"I told you why. There was the matter of father's legacy. And I didn't like how we left things between us."

"A childhood friendship weighted on ya after all these years?"

"Didn't it for you?"

Instead of answering, Kara offered a slight frown. "Maybe we oughta not see each other so much anymore."

"Why does seeing each other pose a problem?" Lena asked, the gleam in her eye hinting to Kara yet again that she was treading on shaky ground.

"Seems to me that we're stuck and not letting each other breathe properly."

"Again...why does this pose a problem?"

Kara didn't know how it'd happened, but they were standing closer than before. Their breathing were the only noises to be heard. The musty scent of the house mixed with the lily scent of the woman before her. She could feel Lena's warmth. Lena was wearing heels that gave the brunette a height boost and brought the two of them right at eye level.

Lena reached for her. The thought of stepping back crossed Kara's mind, but she was intrigued. Lena's index finger ghosted along her cheek, then her jaw. Emotions raced through Kara like a flood
coursing through a tunnel and pushing aside a boulder that would otherwise restrict its flow. Her breathing became labored and her muscles tensed.

"Tell me again why you haven't married Mon-El," Lena said.

"I did tell you." Kara began to step backward and Lena followed until Kara's back hit the wall and her head rested against the window.

"No...you didn't." Lena gently removed Kara's spectacles and placed them on the table to the side.

Almost as if out of her control, Kara found herself staring at the display of emotions radiating from Lena's eyes. She felt like she was in quicksand, where she couldn't move, and that no matter how much she called out for help, she was certain to drown.

"Kara..." Lena's slender fingers gently cupped the side of her face. And in that moment, Kara felt herself snap out of the idle state she had been in. Such pain and longing reflected in Lena's eyes, echoed in her voice. Kara's need to comfort the woman overtook her and she found herself offering a small kiss to Lena's cheek. Her lips lingered there momentarily before her head turned ever so slightly and those same lips landed lightly against Lena's own.

Lena pulled back sharply, staring at the blonde as though trying to ascertain the appropriate course of action. Her eyes became hooded and she bit on her bottom lip before responding: "I warned you," she whispered, her face drawing closer, the sapphire in her eyes growing brighter.

When the brunette's lips ghosted against hers, all rational thought left Kara. Her eyelids fluttered closed, and there was only here and now. Lena's mouth was soft but pliant. A second later, it rested in place, unmoving. She heard Lena take in a sharp inhale of breath before breaking the kiss and resting her head against hers.

Lena hugged her close. From their chests to their knees, they touched. The mere thought that this felt right made Kara's eyes water. She kept her hands at her sides, unsure of what to do or how to act.

Lena's right hand worked its way up her back and found her neck, playing there as hot breath joined in. Kara felt goosebumps form there and down her spine. She felt her face flush. Lena's mouth brushed hers again, back and forth, as if familiarizing itself with Kara's. Kara bit down on her own lip in turn.

Was hugging a woman meant to feel this good? Was she supposed to kiss Lena back? It would be okay if she did, wouldn't it, as long they kept it brief and didn't prolong it?

Kara placed a hand above Lena's chest, no longer able to remain idle, not with her body flushing the way it was. She felt heat pool in her lower region and gasped, unable to properly digest all that was happening. She hadn't felt that familiar tingle since she was twelve. Was she sinning now? Were she and Lena sinning together? Her grasp on Lena tightened and she halted and looked down when she felt something rough at the woman's neckline.

Lena pulled back an inch as Kara's fingers found their way beneath her collar and released the black and gray pebble necklace that hung there.

Kara's eyes widened. "My necklace," she said. "You kept it." The necklace was tighter than it used to be, but fit perfectly nonetheless.

Lena breathed against her ear. "Of course I did." She grasped Kara's hands and raised them above her head, holding them there against the window as her breath whispered along Kara's jawline.
Kara giggled, and Lena pulled back. "It tickles," Kara sheepishly explained.

Perhaps it was the wrong response, because Lena let go of her then and abruptly stepped away. "I...um. I seem to have come under quite the spell," the brunette said. She raised a hand to her forehead, the implication of a headache clear.

Kara stood there, flustered. She wasn't so naive to think that what had just occurred between her and Lena was entirely innocent, or 'a spell' as the woman had called it, but she couldn't quite accept that Lena was deviant. Maybe Lena was testing her and this was an underhanded way of finding the deviant women in town since women were afforded the opportunity of touching one another? But then...why would Lena suspect that she was deviant? More importantly, how could she herself deny being deviant when her body had reacted the way it had to Lena?

Kara shook her head. She was more confused than ever. Had she been sinful with Lena just a few moments ago? From her perspective at the start of it, she had simply been meaning to comfort Lena. And if it was so sinful to kiss Lena, then why did the no-touching rule allow two women to kiss as long as it wasn't prolonged, deepened, and didn't lead to sexual touching?

She looked up to find Lena scurrying toward the door.

"I must be on my way," Lena said. "I think you were right about us needing some distance."

"I..." Kara moved after her. She watched the woman exit the home and quickly move to Wrangler, untying him from his position. "Lena?!" she called after her.

Lena mounted Wrangler and halted.

Kara could only think to ask what had just been on her mind, what she suspected Mon-El had been hinting at earlier in the day. "Are you deviant?"

Lena took in a deep breath and then looked over her shoulder at Kara. "Not any more deviant than you are," she said, and then moved ahead.

Kara watched her ride Wrangler along the path ahead and through the trees. She wasn't so sure that distance would do a thing to get them out of the trouble they both now faced.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Although this chapter mentions rape, none of the main characters in this story will be raped.

Lena sat on the side of a road near town. As she patted and rubbed Wrangler's head and he snuggled up to her, she felt angry with herself for having foolishly followed Kara to that blasted, secluded home. Curse Kara and curse herself for caring so much, she thought, wiping at the tears springing at her eyes. Being alone with Kara like that had been a mistake. And the kiss an even bigger one. "At least I still have you, huh, Wrangler?" she mused.

Wrangler neighed softly, moving his head to rub against Lena's.

Lena laughed quietly, continuing to think things over. Kara had always been one to worry about others and to follow the rules. And she had always had an innocence to her that Lena had lacked. It wasn't a surprise that she would defend Mon-El so passionately, or that she would giggle during an intimate moment. That giggle had snapped Lena back to her senses. Kara was still a child in some ways. And to Lena, that giggle had reflected her immaturity and that she was nowhere close to being ready for what Lena had in mind.

Lena stood and proceeded to walk ahead, her mind still reeling from such close contact with the blonde. Kissing Kara hadn't been a mistake. It had been unbelievably intoxicating. Where the childhood kisses had been borne out of mere curiosity and perhaps Lena's untapped knowledge that she was drawn to girls, the kiss in Kara's home moments ago had sprang up from a need and love as pure as anything Lena had ever experienced. She had needed Kara in that moment, and she wondered if Kara had needed her. She wondered if anything would change between them now. The kiss had been a good thing because it imparted knowledge to Lena that she had not had before, including the fact that Kara was capable of responding to her in kind. It had also been Kara who had initiated the kiss.

The thought of Kara's responsive body pressing against hers threatened to make heat pool in her lower belly, a reaction that had been elicited in her when they actually had been pressed against each other. Lena wondered if the aftermath of their kiss was just as stressful for Kara as it was for her. It had to be. But this didn't make her feel any better. While she'd had help sorting out her feelings via her lover, Kara had no one. If Kara was just discovering her attraction to women, who would be there for the blonde to turn to? Should she be there to counsel Kara?

No, she decided, briefly shaking her head as she finally made it back within town. She cared about Kara, but she also wasn't objective on the matter. Not that any of the prejudiced townsfolk were either. But if anything, she would feel as though she was preying on Kara. Furthermore, if Kara ended up not feeling the same or rejected these feelings, Lena would be in a dangerous situation. She hated to think Kara would expose her as deviant, but she'd seen people do unexpected things when scared or confused. And she'd seen both fear and confusion in Kara's eyes when she'd left the blonde's home. And either way she'd be in a dangerous situation even if Kara returned her feelings.
Lena frowned as she walked along a boardwalk. What did deviant mean anyhow? She knew it applied to her attraction to women, and to any activities or thoughts considered immoral, but who was to say that her attraction to Kara was immoral? She no longer believed in God, and wasn't sure she ever had, but she didn't remember reading anything in the Bible forbidding her from loving another woman the way she saw fit, in a way that was actually beyond her control. She also wasn't sure if perhaps a supreme being existed after all, but she couldn't imagine that such a being would strike her down for the way she felt for Kara.

She thought back to the saloon, of how it deviated from the town's rules, except apparently for the ones concerning sex and closing at seven o'clock. Lena had even seen a piano in the building, and it hadn't been dusty, which indicated that it was used to provide the saloon with music. Then again, Lar and Rhea did keep the place polished from head to toe. And whatever the case with the piano, it didn't make sense for Lena to restrict music in the saloon when drunkenness and gambling were allowed there. It was clear that it was the place to go to let loose and escape the strict rules of the town. Lena almost had half a mind to head over there now and let loose herself. Depending on how fast she rode Wrangler, that was thirty minutes away, however, and she had to stick to her duty as overseer. She had to stay clear of Kara as much as possible. The only way they could be together, if it was at all a possibility, was for her to violate her overseer duties, or leave Breighville.

Moving farther into town, she came across an empty street, spotting Sam finishing up some raking. The woman stood in front of a small home, wiping a hand against her sweaty brow. At least Lena knew that the overseer building had been closed without a hitch. Sam wouldn't be out here otherwise.

Lena sighed. The sun was beginning to set, and she needed to get home. But Sam had spotted her, and she knew she'd be held up for at least a few minutes. Sam wasn't too talkative, at least around her, but there always seemed to be this pleading look in the woman's eyes when they met hers.

"Lena, hey," Sam said, dusting her hands off on her clothes and walking to Lena.

Lena looked at the woman's apparel and not for the first time thought of how a number of women in her life wore pants. First Kara. Then Sam and Maggie. And later Sara. She imagined joining them in their trouser attire. "Hello, Sam," she said politely.

"I take it you tended to what you needed to?" Sam asked.

Lena grimaced. "Partly."

"Good. Seemed important. I mean, from what I could tell." The woman looked behind her, then back at Lena. "Would you like to come in? Get a cup of water?"

Lena looked up at the setting sun; Sam seemed to notice. "I won't keep you long," Sam said. "And I can get your horse here somethin' to drink too."

Lena rubbed a hand along Wrangler's coat. He was perhaps thirsty. "All right," she acquiesced, walking up to Sam's front door.

They secured Wrangler to a pole used to support the home. And, as promised, Sam put a bucket of water before him, and he greedily drank it. After that, Lena followed her inside. The place was small, the smallest home she'd been in so far, but it was also well-stocked. There were bottles upon bottles of what looked like water, and other bottles of things Lena couldn't identity from looking alone. There were stacks of wood, tools and blankets. On two different tables, there were bowls of fruit, jars of foods, and four loafs of bread.
"Quite prepared, aren't we?" Lena queried, making her way toward Sam at a counter.

"Oh," Sam said, running a hand through her hair, "I prefer to be in stock. Makes gettin' things easier." She poured Lena a cup of water and handed it to her. "Don't worry, it's fresh. Got it from the well today."

Lena accepted the cup of water and continued to look around. "You live alone?"

"I'm divorced. Sort of. People don't really believe in divorce, ya know? So, in their eyes, I'm still married." She moved to grab a mortar and pestle and began grinding some type of grain. "I'm a leper here, even more so because I'm absent in my daughter's life." She stopped for a moment, looking down at her hands. "Not by choice, though. The bitter bastard denied me my motherly rights, packed up his things and left with my baby girl. They live in a town about 90 miles from here. Haven't seen her in a year. Tried ta visit, but he has men there. Threatened to shoot me on the spot."

Lena's face softened. She didn't have much experience with what it must mean to be a parent, but it was clear to her that Sam was a good one. "Sam...I'm so sorry."

Sam shrugged. "It is what it is."

Lena watched the woman, seeing the pain on her face intensify and then fade. She put the cup of water on the counter and treaded carefully. "What's your daughter's name?"

A wide smile spread across Sam's lips. "Ruby."

Lena grinned. "Ruby, that's a beautiful name. You, know I--"

"-- Listen, Lena," Sam began, cutting short the subject, "I invited ya in because I want to apologize."

"Apologize?"

Sam's hands stilled and she looked up at her. "For how I treated ya when we were children."

Lena shook her head dismissively. "Sam, that's not necessary."

"I've seen how you've been with Kara. Things from when the two of ya were little have come back up to the surface."

Lena looked away, her jaw threatening to square itself. "That's different."

Sam leaned back against the wall, surveying Lena as though hesitant to press forward. "And I wanted to let you know that there's another reason folks don't quite trust ya."

Lena met her gaze, clearly intrigued. "And what would that be?"

"When your pa was the overseer, some of the townsfolk suspected that he raped a girl of nineteen who was later found unconscious in the middle of a road."

Lena's mouth opened and closed. She felt a chill go down her spine, but it was only because she knew that her father, for all of his flaws, would never have committed such a crime and she immediately thought of the true rapist and who he might be, for he was surely still out there if not dead. "My father would never," she voiced aloud.

"I'm not sayin' he would," Sam replied, offering a compassionate look. "There was certainly never any evidence. Folks only got to talkin' cause the girl was last seen at the overseer's building past curfew. And you know the building is never open that late. The girl was found half-naked the
following mornin' and non-verbally confirmed the assault. She didn't talk for weeks 'cause she was so shook up. And the investigation... Well, there wasn't much of one, which only added fuel to the fire concerning your pa's guilt. I didn't find out about the matter until I was fifteen. It was mostly an adult conversation, so it's not surprising that you're just findin' out about it too."

Lena looked off to the side, slowly processing all that Sam was saying. She still believed in her father's innocence, but the fact that he hadn't objected to her coming back to this town, which Lex had referred to as a bumpkin infestation, made more sense. Of course, he'd wanted the Luthor name cleared. Why else would he concern himself with this town? It's true that he hadn't done the best overseer job ever, and if he hadn't worked on the aforementioned rape case, this was even more indicative of his failure, but this job paled in comparison to his other work and would be but a scratch on his legacy.

Her eyes again found Sam's. "Where is the woman now and what was her name?"

"Anna. Anna Davies. I heard she lives in the same town as my little girl, but I'm not sure. Moved two years after the incident. The town pretty much treated the rape like it was her fault. Like she must have asked for it. There was even talk -- rare talk, mind you -- that it was her punishment for being out so late, as if your pa sought to punish her that way."

"Disgusting," Lena nearly spat, shaking her head.

"I know."

Lena began to pace back and forth before stopping and turning to Sam again. "And no rape has occurred since?"

"Not any that have been brought to light."

The chills Lena felt before returned. No one had cared enough to seek justice for this Anna Davies. They'd been content on believing that her father committed the crime, and relieved once he left. But what of the true rapist? If he was still in town, he was still a threat even if he hadn't raped since.

"Sam... We need to revisit this case."

Kara never thought she would face a case such as this. She watched Alex pace back and forth. Her sister was worried, that much was certain. But she'd never known Alex to be silent for so long after being told of a distressing matter. Immediately after her encounter with Lena, she'd rushed home to Alex's cabin to confess everything that had transpired between herself and Lena. And, to Kara, it was no doubt a confession. She'd told Alex exactly what she felt — that she'd been angry with Lena, that they'd argued, and that they'd ended up kissing and she was now confused.

Alex hadn't responded. She'd been pacing for four minutes straight. They'd headed to Kara's cabin for privacy since Jonathan would be home soon.

Kara eyed William, who sat on the floor scribbling on a piece of paper as he ate one of two cookies she had prepared for him. The boy loved pencils and writing. Already he had a proper pencil grip and impressive penmanship. And if she were not so preoccupied with her latest predicament, she would let her mind go to the history of pencils, of ways to improve upon them especially for him.

"And ya say the kiss wasn't prolonged?" Alex asked.
"Yeah."

"That's good."

"But --"

"-- I know, I know," Alex interrupted, waving her hands about. "Ya body reacted. Jesus, Kara, I don't need ta hear it again." She stopped in front of her sister and stared. "You think ya have an inclination toward women?"

Kara shrugged. "I... It's never happened before."

"Well, do ya or don'tcha, Kara? And is Lena the same?"

Kara looked down, tears beginning to form in her eyes. She removed her spectacles to wipe at them.

"Now, now," Alex said, moving to sit in a chair beside Kara and holding the blonde's head against her chest as she soothed in one of her sisterly fashions. "Ya didn't kiss for long. And as for the rest, it happens to every woman -- having that sort of pull toward another lady."

Kara looked up at Alex. "You too?"

"Yep. I was confused at first too, but it kept happenin'. And so I figured it's just normal. Probably the body's way of preparin' us for the opposite sex. It happened to me much earlier than you -- in my teenage years -- but since ya never been close to being intimate with a man and it seems that you and Mon-El are 'bout headed in that direction, it makes sense that it's kicked in late for you." She pulled back to look down at Kara. "And since it's happenin' to ya like it happened to me, I'm even more certain this is just a natural occurrence. Had it been more intimate, I might think ya deviant."

Kara looked down then, chewing on the inside of her cheek.

William walked to her and handed her a cookie. "Don't cry, auntie," he said, looking up at her with big, brown eyes. He always was a spitting image of Alex.

Kara laughed lightly, accepting the cookie and moving to hug the concerned boy. "I won't. Thank you, William."

Alex nodded. "See? Everythang's gonna be fine."

Alex made her way to the overseer building the following day. It's gonna be fine is what she had told Kara, but she wasn't sure. She'd heard of deviant people, but had never encountered one until now. Had Lena always been like this? Or, like herself and Kara, did she simply have a minor instance of being drawn to another woman? Alex needed to know. And with Jonathan spending fatherly time with William, now was as good an opportunity as any to find out.

She approached the tall black man at the front door. James is what she'd heard his name was. Explaining that she had a personal issue to discuss with Lena, he let her through. He clearly recognized that she was Kara's sister.

When she entered, wary eyes met hers, which was understandable, given that Kara had barged in here while on a warpath just a day earlier. But there were a pair of eyes she had not been expecting to meet — those belonging to a certain thief. "You," she charged.
Maggie grinned and lowered her hat. "Ma'am."

Alex moved to Lena's desk, pointing in Maggie's direction. "You let a thief work here? To decide on what's right and wrong? Ain't 'no stealin' a part of the rules?"

Lena looked from Alex to Maggie. "What she is talking about, Sawyer?"

Maggie mosied over to Alex's side, still grinning. "Just a little disagreement, boss. The lady here -- Alex -- thinks I stole from her garden."

Lena's eyes narrowed. "And did you?"

"It was before I had the job."

"For goodness' sake, Maggie," Lena said exasperatedly.

"See, she admits it," Alex added for good measure.

Lena gestured for Maggie to take her place against the wall. "We'll discuss this later," she said pointedly.

Alex shook her head in disbelief. "You're still going to employ her? You're willin' to have such an unscrupulous person work for ya?"

Lena turned back to Alex. "I believe you came here for a reason, Ms. Danvers? Or should I call you Mrs. Williams?"

Alex frowned. Something about Lena's tone was odd. "It's about what happened between you and my sister yesterday."

The atmosphere in the room immediately became uncomfortable, with Winn, Maggie and Sam looking from one another to the two women staring each other down.

Lena stood and walked to the first of three doors behind her, the one at Winn's right. "Follow me?"

Lena gestured for Maggie to take her place against the wall. "We'll discuss this later," she said pointedly.

Alex waited a moment. It made sense to speak about this privately, but if Maggie was any indication of the kind of company Lena kept, she doubted privacy mattered much at all. For all Alex knew, she was in a room full of deviants. Inhaling and exhaling deeply, she pressed forward, heading in the direction in which Lena had disappeared.

"You looked lovely at the funeral, by the way," Maggie called after her. "Not that a funeral is about lookin' lovely."

Alex shot the woman a scathing look. She didn't recall the woman being at Lonnie's funeral, and the thought of having been watched by her was unsettling.

Maggie tipped her hat. Winn and Sam snickered as the brunette followed Lena.

They walked down a short corridor that led to an open area with a table and two chairs.

"The jail is the next wall over, to the left," said Lena, before sitting behind the table. "But I figured this area would be more comfortable."

Alex straightened her posture and glared at Lena. There was a hint of playfulness in the woman's voice, and Alex didn't like it one bit.
"Now, Alex, what is it that you want to ask me?" Lena continued.

"Not a question at all, but a request."

Lena arched an eyebrow.

Alex pressed forward. "Stay away from Kara."

A soft smile spread across Lena's lips. "Alex... Have you ever known me to stay away from Kara?"

"No," Alex said firmly. She remembered how close the two had been and still seemed to be today.

"Then why do you ask now?"

"Because you put her in danger."

Lena sat back. She was suddenly having trouble meeting Alex's gaze. "I don't mean to."

"So you admit it then? You have abnormal thoughts about my sister?"

Lena glared. "No thought I have about your sister qualifies as abnormal."

"What you two did, it was just a passing impulse then? To prepare ya for a husband?"

Lena's face contorted into an expression that Alex had never seen before. It seemed to be both a mix of confusion and incredulousness. "What?"

"Ya heard me."

Lena was apparently having trouble getting her facial expressions under control. "Let me ask you something, Alex. You're in an unhappy marriage, correct?"

"That's none of your business." Alex scowled. Is that why Lena had been acting odd before, like she knew something about her others didn't know?

"Are you saying that you think women are sexually attracted to each other to prepare for a male suitor? Have you experienced this attraction yourself?" A hand went to Lena's head as her eyes diverted to the table. "What Kara told me about your marriage, I had thought it was simply an awful mismatch that you presented as successful, which is why I found myself amused by your gall to judge my relationship with her, but it all makes so much sense now. Granted, Jonathan also seems like quite the bastard."

"What are ya talkin' about?"

Lena's eyes went back to Alex's. "You didn't tell Kara this outlandish theory, did you?"

Before Alex could answer, the door flew open.

"Lena," Winn said, "got a problem outside."

Alex, Lena and the rest of the overseer workers rushed outside to find Sara being pinned to the ground by Kara, and a man going on about how deviant Sara was. "She was being sweet on my woman in the clothing shop right next door," the man said.

James was holding him back, and a crowd had gathered.
"I was complimenting her," Sara opined.

"Quiet," Kara told her, pressing a knee into the woman's back and holding her arms backward. "Lest you want to make things worse for yourself."

"Kara!" Alex called, running with the others in front of the display.

Kara nodded Alex's way, explaining, "This woman and the man got into a scuffle inside. Ended up spillin' onto the street. One of the townsmen sought me out, sayin' they needed a strong woman to intervene. Sara, they said her name was, happened to be givin' the boy a lickin'."

"Sorry I missed that," Winn quipped. Sam playfully hit him in the shoulder.

"I sure was," Sara laughed.

"She was not," the man argued. "I was goin' soft on her 'cause she's a woman."

"Ya shouldn't have been puttin' your hands on her at all," James scolded. "Didn't ya mamma teach ya better?"

The man yanked his arm free from James's grip. "Stay away from me, you nig--"

"-- Don't ya dare say it," Kara challenged, looking up at the man with so much ferocity that Alex was reminded of just how intimidating Kara could be. "Or you'll have me to worry about next."

Alex knew that Kara had stopped plenty of fights in their younger years, mainly those involving boys or men, and that she'd been in a few fights to boot — always for one's honor or to protect another — but this was her first time witnessing it with her own eyes. It was a part of the blonde's reputation that had died down, but some in town obviously still recalled. Otherwise, she would not have been fetched to deal with this latest incident.

Sara laughed harder. "Looks like you'll go on record as being beat by two women."

"Shut yer mouth," the man yelled. "You filthy bitch."

"Sara?" Lena questioned, moving closer.

Sara looked up at Lena. "Pretty lady, we meet again." Her eyes moved to Alex's, and her playful expression deepened. "And another pretty lady."

"What are you doing here?" Lena asked.

"My employers wanted me to wear a dress for some special occasion that's coming up. So I found myself here. Saw a stunning woman and said so."

Lena gestured for Kara to let Sara up.

"I want her arrested for deviancy," the man said.

"We don't arrest for that," James replied.

"Then punished for rule-breaking."

"Who here witnessed her engagin' in deviancy?" asked Sam.

The man grunted, raking a hand through his hair frustratingly. "My woman, of course."
"What woman?" Maggie queried.

The man looked around and found his betrothed long gone.

"I tell you what," Lena stated, stepping in front of the man. "We'll lock Sara up for just a bit, question her, and get things sorted. She's not in town often. So there's no need to banish her. Would that work for you?"

The man spat on the ground. "I guess," he said. He gave everyone a menacing look before walking away and pushing through the crowd.

Lena walked to the store owner. "I'll pay for the damages," she assured.

Sara dusted off her clothes, grumbling. "So not fair."

Lena watched Kara wrap an arm around Alex, the blonde stating that she needed to get back to work, before the two headed out of the jail room.

"Woman, you got it bad," said Sara, resting her arms against the jail cell she was standing in. Her eyes sparkled at Lena.

Lena turned to her. "Beg your pardon?"

"You can beg my pardon all you want, but it's easy as day to see that you'd rather that Kara girl do the begging. Can't say I blame you, though. She's easy on the eyes and strong as hell."

"I don't know what you think you know, but --"

"-- Are we going to play this game? I like women. You like women. You're not ashamed of it like these others, did I read you wrong on that?"

Lena considered the blond woman carefully. "No, you didn't. But you can't be open like that in this town. Or much of anywhere, really."

"Tough living, huh?"

"Indeed," Lena sighed, briefly looking around the dank room.

"Ever wonder how many deviants this town has? I'm thinking five percent men, and ten percent women. But since I prefer women, that may just be wishful thinking on my part."

"Couldn't say," Lena replied. Her eyes returned to Sara, who still seemed to be sizing her up.

"So...what is this about you wearing a dress? I thought we all had an understanding that you would only present as male."

"You'd have to ask my bosses about that."

"That I will. After attending to some other business first."

Following everything with Alex, Kara and Sara, Lena set out to do what she'd meant to do earlier in
the day — question the townsfolk about Anna Davies. The sky was a clear blue and the sun was pointing northerly. She stared at Mr. Ray in front of a bakery. "That's all I know, ma'am," he said, "which I reckon ain't much."

"It's all right," Lena assured. "Thank you for your time."

She headed down a path atop Wrangler. A man with a sack over his shoulder eyed her something fierce.

It was a reaction she kept experiencing. Men would not only ogle her, but they would look at her with suspicion. A part of it had to do with her family name, of course, but they stared at her as if it didn't make sense for an attractive woman of child-bearing age to be roaming the streets in such a carefree manner. Their looks said that she should be at home cooking or washing, or at least looking for a prospective husband, even if she was the overseer. And although Lena knew that many found her attractive, never had she been more aware of that fact than in this town, where the men seemed to be barely concealing their unbridled lusts. It made her briefly wonder if this lust had led to the rape of Anna, but it was a thought she quickly dismissed, for such an act could not be excused by attributing it to the natural impulse of man. Rape was a choice. And the man who'd raped Anna had made his.

She made her way through town, questioning men, women and those who were almost adults. Other than what Lena had already heard, no one had anything to impart on the matter. Some were quite dismissive and appeared to wonder why she was bringing, to their minds, unnecessary attention to her family name and herself.

And attention is exactly what she got, for the whole town was buzzing with talk of Anna by the time she made it to the main blacksmith shop.

She'd had Maggie and Sam question others, and she could have easily had them question Kara. But, truthfully, a part of her was looking forward to seeing Kara again. To being alone with Kara again. She sympathized with Alex, but she had no intention of cutting Kara out of her life. If she was going to stay in this town, she needed to mend things with Kara. They couldn't take back their passionate time a day earlier, but they could move forward. Hopefully.

Her shoes clacked against the walkway in front of the blacksmith shop before she stopped abruptly. By entering, she knew that she might lose herself at simply the sight of Kara. She'd been so engrossed in just staring at the blonde hours ago that Sara had noticed. Kara was her weakness, she knew this. And she was suddenly feeling nervous about being in the blonde's presence once again.

Still, she needed answers about Anna and her father's involvement, and Kara was just one more person to ask. It annoyed her to think that Kara may know something and didn't tell her about it, but she couldn't blame the woman for not bringing it up.

Looking ahead, she could smell the coal and smoke. She inhaled deeply, remembering the first time she had visited the shop. Jeremiah had been making a silver sterling ring for a young bride who was to be married. Kara had excitedly asked if a ring could be made for Lena, knowing how she admired jewelry. Jeremiah had jokingly replied: "If you're willin' to come in here and make it yerself."

Lena grinned at the memory. Kara always had looked for ways to please her.

"I've been watchin' you for a good three minutes straight, Ms. Luthor. Just sittin' here tryin' to figure out why you haven't entered."

Lena turned toward the voice, not expecting to see Ms. Merriam sitting in the waiting area a little
ways away from the walkway. It had been constructed for those who could expect their request to be fulfilled relatively quickly, typically ranging from one hour to three. It was nothing but an area outlined by an overhead stretch of tent fabric to protect customers from the sun. Ms. Merriam sat there staring at her like a hawk, a fan in her hand as she waved it to cool herself.

"Just reminiscing," Lena replied honestly.

Ms. Merriam nodded. "I'm here 'cause I need a new oven. The old pot just don't work the same anymore. Workers been tweakin' it for two days now. Said they should be done today. How 'bout you? Lookin to get anythang made?"

Lena walked to the woman. "No. Looking for answers, actually. Perhaps you wouldn't mind if I asked you a few questions?"

Ms. Merriam lowered her fan and squinted. "This wouldn't have anythang to do with that girl from years ago, would it? I heard you've been askin' around."

"Yes, Anna Davies."

"Why would you think I know anythang?"

"I'm not saying that you would, Ms. Merriam. It's just...the girl was raped and the rapist was never caught, and the town seems very content to think that my father, the overseer at the time, was the culprit."

Ms. Merriam started to fan herself again, looking away.

"Did you know her?"

"No."

"Did you have words with her?"

"No." Ms. Merriam finally met her gaze again. "But if you ask me, she got what she deserved. No respectable girl would be out so late at night. If your father saw fit to --"

"-- My father didn't rape her!" Lena's voice rose, causing Ms. Merriam's eyes to widen. "And what kind of overseer would he be if he saw fit to punish a girl for breaking a rule by committing a crime far worse than said rule?"

Ms. Merriam bristled.

"Also, madam, no girl nor woman deserves to be raped." Lena turned to walk away. "Good day to you."

She could feel Ms. Merriam's eyes shooting holes into her back as she entered the blacksmith shop. She knew she might be retaliated against, but she couldn't worry about that now.

Inside, she saw men hard at work, but no Kara. And, thankfully, no Mon-El.

As her eyes adjusted to the dimly lit area, which only grew light with temporary sparks of fire, she walked to one of the men molding some sort of belt buckle. He was in his late thirties. Lena figured that she might as well question him about Anna Davies as well, and it would give her time to cool down after her frustrating encounter with Ms. Merriam. "Hello, I'm --"

"-- I know who you are," he said, barely looking at her. "Name's Brian."
"Brian," Lena began, "I ask about an incident from eighteen years ago. A girl -- Anna Davies -- was raped. Have you heard of her?"

"I have. Didn't know her, though."

Lena watched the man. He clearly was not interested in continuing the conversation, and she was sure the other men wouldn't be too interested either. She could settle for asking Kara to question her own crew. "Well, thank you for your time, Brian. Do you know where I might find Kara?"

Brian used his head to gesture behind him. "In her office in the back."

"Thank you, Brian."

Kara sat at her desk working on a design for a campfire coffee pot. She knew that more modern means of brewing coffee existed, such as the Raparlier vacuum created in 1859 or the Burns coffee roaster patented in 1864, but the family she was making the pot for were very old-fashioned and couldn't afford the more expensive stuff anyhow.

She moved the pencil along the front of her design, playing with some flower patterns at the middle. The family, more specifically the wife, wanted it to look pretty. Kara didn't know how pretty she could make it, but she would try.

"Concentrating hard?"

The female voice shook her, and she immediately stood with the drawing and pencil in either hand. She stared at Lena, who had one arm lazily propped against the doorframe. The room was small enough as it was without Lena being here. She moved backward to put more distance between them, but the wall behind her didn't lend much space.

Lena was too pretty, too slender, and too damn feminine. This was supposed to be her sanctuary, her place to get a breather during work. But Lena standing there made her feel vulnerable and jittery. With the light pouring in from the window behind the brunette, she could see the woman's eyes clearly, but she didn't want to meet them. She didn't want to know what Lena was thinking. And she didn't want to fall prey to the depths those wonderful eyes could take her to, as they had times before.

Lena's scent drifted towards her, that same lily scent from yesterday. Images of their bodies pressed together, their kisses, and Lena whispering in her ear, came flooding back.

She straightened her back and balled her fists, nearly crumpling the paper. "Lena," she said, hoping her voice sounded calmer than the pounding of her heart. "Why are you here?"

"There are some questions I want to ask you." Lena took a step forward and her eyes settled on the long, rectangular paper in Kara's hand. "What do you have there?"

"A sketch of a coffee pot I'll be moldin. I think I'll call it 'Kara's brewer'."

Lena laughed. "You're going to name it?"

"Yes, why not?" Kara asked indignantly, moving from behind the desk. "Others have named coffee makers after themselves or similar."

"Yes, but those people were inventors, Kara. By contrast, you'll simply be making something that
already exists."

"Should I or should I not be proud of my work? If it's my particular design, then it's like my brand, ain't it?"

Lena took a step closer. In the small office, that step left less than two feet between them. Kara tried to get a hold of her breathing.

"I'm sorry. You're right," Lena said.

"Damn straight I'm right," Kara said with an emphatic nod, "and I'll have ya know..." Her words died in her throat when Lena reached toward her. Her body began to buzz in anticipation. Her palms began to perspire and her blood warmed. Lena was going to touch her, right here in her office where anyone could witness their —

Lena stretched an arm and extracted the paper from Kara's hand, which had loosened its grip. She looked at the design with much interest. "This is really great, Kara."

Kara moved to lean against her desk, briefly shaking her head to rid herself of the spell Lena often cast upon her. If Lena had touched her, she had a feeling that she would have melted like putty. She'd been trying to convince herself that there was no deviant pull between them, but it was only the first day since they'd kissed and the convincing was proving futile.

"I wanted to talk with you about a crime from years ago. A rape," Lena said. She put Kara's design onto the desk and stood in front of her. "Did you ever know of Anna Davies?"

Kara moved behind the desk and stared at Lena head on. "I did."

Lena's eyes widened. "What? And you never told me about it?"

"Well, you were already gone by the time word got to me. And since you've been back, why would I bring it up?"

"Because it concerns my father."

Kara shrugged. "Yeah, but we both know he didn't do it."

Lena faltered at that, and Kara saw relief on the brunette's face. She figured it must have felt good for Lena to hear someone confirm Lionel's innocence.

"Did you know her personally?"

"Nope. Never even talked to her. She left when I still a youngin."

"I've heard," Lena said, looking to the floor. "All the people here, and no one ever really knew her? Never talked to her?" She looked back up to find Kara's bewildered gaze.

"I'm sure someone talked to her," Kara offered. "You haven't questioned everyone in town."

"Feels like I have," Lena mumbled.

"Are ya worried about your pa's good name?"

"That...and the fact that the rapist may still be in town."

Kara observed the brunette's perfectly arched eyebrows pulling together. The woman was clearly in
deep thought. Kara sympathized with her, far too much, but she didn't trust herself to not try to comfort her, or to not try to help her solve this case. "Listen, Lena," she said, "I appreciate why you're here, but we're supposed to be keeping away from each other, remember?"

Lena's head shot up and her expression became dark. The wrong words had occurred between them yet again. "Oh right," Lena spat. "Can't have Kara being tempted."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Are you truly asking me that? After what happened between us yesterday? After you kissed me?"

Only then did Kara realize that the door was open and that anyone could have overheard them. She moved around Lena and closed it.

Lena's bitter laugh filtered through the air. "Yes, can't have anyone knowing how deviant sweet Kara is," she mocked.

"Women kiss one another all the time." Kara moved in front of her and challenged that fiery green gaze.

"Not the way we kissed."

"All I remember is our lips pressin' together but for a moment. Nothing prolonged or deep."

"We could remedy that." Lena moved close and whispered against her ear: "We could very much remedy that, Kara." She pulled back and smiled with satisfaction when she saw that Kara's cheeks had reddened. "When you're ready, of course."

Lena turned around and exited the room.

For the next few days, Kara did what she could to avoid Lena, but it wasn't easy. She would occasionally see Lena at a market, on a road, at the butcher's shop, or elsewhere, all incidents reminding her that the town wasn't as big as some thought. One day the men working on Lena's stable had wanted her to come by and look things over. And there were also the thoughts. The many lurid thoughts of Lena: Being pressed against her. Kissing her. Lena whispering against her ear. Kara had no clear answer for why Lena enjoyed whispering against her ear, but it was both infuriating and exciting, which meant that it was also an unneeded distraction that needed to be squelched. Because of Lena, she couldn't even look at other women in the same way she used to. She was paying more and more attention to their lips, their figures, the way they walked. Had Lena infected her with something? Except for the occasional concern about her own femininity, she'd never thought about these things before. And the matter was only made worse when she'd spotted a couple kissing beside an abandoned area on her way to her home in the woods. The two were kissing long and hard; Kara had witnessed tongues passing between mouths. Did people truly kiss like that? And how many in town were breaking the rules, like this couple had?

However many there were, Kara vowed to not fall prey to such debauchery.

And so she had come here, to the town church, set on praying away the blasphemous thoughts. She'd told Father Mable that she had sinned and needed to repent, to confess her sins, but that she wanted to do them in silence. He had gladly let her inside of the empty building and directed her to a kneeling area in front of an altar before going into one of the back rooms. Privacy is exactly what
Kara had needed. She would pray and pray, and make things right with God alone. That would do it. That would rid her of these feelings, and she would then be able to move on. She was sure of it. Her thoughts would be clearer if she confessed them in silence while alone. She'd had no intention of telling Father Mable about Lena's tendencies anyhow.

For half an hour, Kara had felt good about her prayers. That is, until she heard the church door open and someone join her a few minutes later. Then she heard the voice. Lena's marvelous, accent-challenged voice.

"Kara," she heard the woman say, as she continued to kneel before the altar with her eyes closed. "Father Mable told me that you wanted privacy. And I'm sorry to intrude. I just... I miss you. And I hate to think that you're here in this church right now because of me, but I know that you are."

Kara heard the woman's heavy breathing, the tears in her voice.

"I can't imagine what you're going through," Lena continued. "Well, I can, but it's different for some of us. And I think it must be worse for you, given this town."

Kara felt a hand on her shoulder.

"I just want you to know that I never meant to cause you any pain. But most importantly, I want you to know that you don't have some disease that needs curing. And I'm... I'll be here if you need me. If you ever want to talk."

The hand on Kara's shoulder retracted and Kara felt the warmth beside her disappear. A few seconds later, she heard the church door open and close.

Kara's fingers wiped at the stray tear on her cheek and wavered there, unsure whether their next action should be rejoining the other hand or grabbing horse reins and meeting Lena at the overseer building.

The door to the overseer building opened, and a city woman stepped inside. She tucked her sketchpad into her oversized purse and looked to the women to the left before settling her eyes on the man at the smaller of the two desks. When asked the question she had been waiting for, the question pertaining to how they could help her, she eagerly replied: "I'm Siobhan Smythe. And I'm looking for a very good friend of mine... Lena Luthor."
Kara pulled on her boots as Mon-El cooked some flapjacks and sausage on the stove. It wasn't morning, but it had been a week since she'd last seen Lena. She hadn't heard much about the brunette either, mainly keeping to herself and coming straight home if not praying at the church. The days in the interim had seemed slow, unlike the days that passed by so seamlessly that Kara would sometimes wonder how a certain day had come and gone. Already it was a little over mid-August, and she wasn't any closer to taking care of her forbidden-thoughts problem. If she didn't know any better, she would argue that praying had only aided in intensifying the troublesome images and words.

"Kar, where ya goin'?" Mon-El asked. "We just got off work, and breakfast for supper is one of ya favorites."

"I know," Kara said, standing.

"Then let's eat. We missed dinner, and I'm slavin' away somethin' fierce here at the stove." The playfulness in his voice belied his labor concern. "And ya haven't even bathed yet."

"I just..." Kara stood.

"What is it?"

"I need to see Lena."

Mon-El moved away from the stove so fast that Kara had flashbacks of his speed during childhood.

"Kara, let her be. She's not like us. She's not normal. She's --"

"-- Even so," Kara sighed. "I miss her." She walked to the door and opened it, sensing Mon-El's eyes on her back. "I won't be gone long."

Kara knocked loudly on Lena's door. Before it opened, she heard the laughter — Lena's infectious, calming laughter. And then she saw her, standing there with her hair trailing down her shoulders instead of in the bun she usually wore, and a smile brighter than any Kara had ever seen grace her features. She donned a linen, lace nightgown, which had ruffles at its square neckline and exposed much of her throat. Kara's eyes settled on the necklace there. The necklace she'd made after being taught how to construct such material by Eliza. The same necklace she'd given Lena the day Lena had moved away.

"Kara," Lena said, her face suddenly taking on a serious expression, "I wasn't expecting you." She pulled the door close to her.

Kara's eyes narrowed. "You busy?"

"Hm?"

"I mean, ya don't seem that eager to let me in. Ya never had to be expectin' me before."

Lena stared at Kara for a good few seconds. "You're right. My manners seemed to have escaped me. Come on in." She held the door open and waited for Kara to enter before closing it.
Kara waited for Lena to move in front of her and lead, but Lena paused, hugging herself. "Let's get you cleaned up first." Her eyes strayed from Kara to look down the hall and back to Kara again.

"Huh?"

"I have a guest."

"A guest?" Kara's brow furrowed. "Well, I guess that explains yer laughter."

Lena grabbed Kara by the hand and pulled her along. They made their way down the brief hall, moving into the living area until they came across the kitchen, where Kara saw a well-dressed woman sitting at the table sipping something, likely wine, from a glass. Their eyes met briefly before Lena quickly pulled Kara up the stairs a short distance away.

"Just a moment," Lena told the woman before she and Kara were out of sight.

They made their way to Lena's room. Kara noticed a bowl of water and a rag on the vanity. Lena pulled her there, dipping the rag into the water and bending over to begin wiping at her soot-stained hands. "Goodness, Kara, you didn't think to clean up before coming over?"

In the mirror, Kara watched the top and back of Lena's head, the way the woman's hair swayed with certain strokes. "Why would I need ta?" She looked at Lena, who looked up at her.

"Because."

Kara grinned. "Didn't you once complain about me giving 'because' as an answer?"

Lena smiled softly at that, moving to wipe at Kara's face. "Anyhow, I'm glad I already had some fresh water ready. I'd planned on washing my face. Makeup and such. I don't have any white vinegar for you, but..."

"You don't need makeup," Kara said softly. She stared as the brunette's eyes again met hers. Her gaze zeroing in on the pale skin before her, she moved to caress the woman's throat. She didn't mean to. It was as if her hand had a mind of its own.

Lena's hand stilled before slowly dragging the rag down Kara's lips. "Kara...what are you doing?" she queried, even as she lifted her head to give the blonde better access to her throat.

Kara heard the question, of course, but she didn't have an answer. All she could think about was Lena's skin always feeling pleasurable to the touch, and the provocative mole that rested on the woman's neck. She watched as Lena dropped her hand to her side, closed her eyes and bit down on her bottom lip. When her eyes opened again, they shown with what Kara recognized from their time together before their kiss, except this look was more restrained.

She rested her index finger against Lena's mole before sliding her hand down to lightly grasp the necklace that apparently meant so much to Lena that she was still wearing it after all these years. Lena surveyed her curiously, she noticed. Green eyes seemed to assess every part of her. At some point, the brunette became discontent with being idle, because a delicate hand found its way on Kara's right bicep and began caressing there. Those same fingers pulled up the sleeve of her shirt, as if searching for something. They halted as they found the small scar Kara had recently acquired when helping to build Lena's stable. Fingers slowly traced the scar as though admiring it, as though they could further along the healing process.

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Kara stepped back then. She moved toward the window to look out of it, folding her arms against the window's edge and resting her head against them. She needed to think, but her mind was coming up
"The cut has been healing well, I see," Lena said after clearing her throat.

"Mon-El tended to it."

Kara internally groaned. Perhaps that wasn't the right thing to say, especially since silence now stretched between them — that usual, uncomfortable silence that was starting to annoy Kara.

"Listen, Kara," Lena began, "I need to be honest with you before we go back downstairs and I introduce you."

Kara had forgotten about the woman downstairs. She turned to Lena, slowly rolling down her sleeve. "About?" she asked.

Lena's eyes averted to the floor, then back up to meet hers. They seemed apologetic at first, then defiant. "The woman, Siobhan, she's... Kara, she's my former lover."

Kara could have sworn her heart stopped at that moment. All of a sudden, the room felt too stuffy, too much like a cage enclosing her within its walls, and she felt defeated. She looked to the floor. "So it's true...you have that sort of leaning," she breathed so softly that she wondered if Lena had even heard her. Before this revelation, she could have gone on feeling like she was mistaken with regard to Lena's proclivities. But now, with Lena's admittance, Lena's confirmation, it was no longer something she could dismiss as a misunderstanding. And given the interaction they'd just shared, there was no way she could have doubted it any longer anyhow. She was still mixed up about her own feelings, but Lena's were as clear as day. And she doubted she could return them without a sense of betraying her family, the town, and God.

"If by 'leaning,' you mean a sexual attraction to women, yes," Lena said.

Kara looked up at her. There was no sense of guilt or mortification on the woman's features or in her voice. Kara wondered how that could be. "Where's your shame?"

"Shame?" Lena took a step toward her, frowning. "For being who I am? For wanting a happy and fulfilling life consisting of all the things that other couples have?"

Kara meant to say something, but Lena interrupted, holding up a finger to silence her. "And I know I can never have children with a lover of my choosing," she added. "Your dear Mon-El happily reminded me of that fact. But who says that a woman needs children to be happy? Would I love to have a child? Sure. But I'd also love to have someone who loves me. Someone who is my equal in every way that counts."

Kara studied Lena's mannerisms, the fall and rise of her chest, the pointed look in her eyes. "And this Siobhan woman makes you happy? I saw how ya looked when I opened the door. It was like all the weight was lifted off your shoulders."

Lena looked off to the side. "I... With Siobhan, I can be myself. I feel so caged in this town. So restrained. With her, everything's unfiltered."

Kara thought of how she'd felt caged minutes ago. "And she's livin' here with ya now? You two...have continued your..."

"She's living here." Lena turned to face Kara. "I didn't want her to stay in an inn or boarding house. But we haven't... We aren't intimate."
Kara and Lena eyed each other for several seconds before they heard a woman's voice calling out to Lena; it was Siobhan. She was wondering what was taking Lena so long.

"We better get down there," Lena said, heading out the door.

By the time they made it downstairs, Siobhan was rearranging plates on the kitchen table and had placed a third chair at the end. There seemed to be some sort of dish placed in the middle. She looked up and smiled as Kara and Lena approached.

"Siobhan, this is Kara Danvers. Kara, Siobhan Smythe," Lena said.

Siobhan held out her hand and Kara shook it as she took in the woman's features and attire. The brunette was pretty with dark-brown eyes. She wore a beige dress made of silk taffeta, silk velvet, and chenille silk. It had metal sequins, glass bead embroidery and pearls lining the hem, upper sleeves, and especially the neckline and collar. From what Kara could tell, there was no bustle. And although some women in town often kept their heads modestly covered, with caps made of fine linen or cotton, with ruffles around the face, and chin ties, it was clear that Siobhan was a lady of fashion and likely wore an elaborately decorated bonnet with flowers, feathers, lace, ribbons or ruffles to top it off. If Kara hadn't been told of different fashions by Alex during her seamstress job and some travelers visiting the main blacksmith shop, she wouldn't have been able to name all of the material that made up the woman's dress. She still wondered why she hadn't heard of a carousel until recently. But then again, travelers, who were mostly male, talked more about business, land, gossip, women, what the women were wearing, and sex. Inventions were farther down on the list. It was also likely that a number of travelers were as clueless as Kara was about some aspects of the outside world.

Siobhan removed her hand from Kara's in distaste and wiped it on a napkin that rested beside a plate on the table. Kara grimaced. She probably should have spent more time cleaning herself up first. This was no doubt why Lena had tried to take on that task.

"Kara's aware of our history," Lena informed the woman.

Siobhan offered a surprised look. "She is? And yet she remains. No running for the hills?" Her eyes returned to Kara. "Well, I must say I very much welcome this progressive guest of yours, Lena dear." She flashed a bright smile Kara's way. "Nice to meet you." She looked between the two women. "Shall we have supper?" She gestured for Kara and Lena to take their seats.

Kara settled into the seat at the end of the table as Lena sat beside Siobhan. She could see Siobhan sizing her up, and the staring was uncomfortable. The woman looked puzzled and, if Kara could describe it, a bit threatened. Her smile wasn't welcoming at all. It was challenging.

"Do try the meal," Siobhan stated, looking from Kara to Lena. "I'm at a loss when it comes to what dish to make here in Breighville. So many chickens and such. But I do know what Lena and I enjoy; so I pulled a few strings for tonight's supper. Do tell me what you think."

Kara arched an eyebrow. The woman's use of "do" was irritating. But she looked at the slab of meat on her plate. It was brown with what looked like some seasoning, and it was topped off with sauce and fancy leafy vegetables framing it. It didn't look like anything special to Kara, despite the design, but it tasted wonderful. She greedily took another bite and looked up at Siobhan in surprise. "What is it?"

Siobhan smiled as though pleased with herself. "Veal Fricandeau," she said. "Just separate a piece of veal from the leg, in the same width and depth, of course, and approximately eight inches in length. Create a hole in the under part and fill it with forcemeat, sew it up, lard the top and sides, cover it with slices of fat bacon, and finally with white paper. And, well, the pot, slices of undressed mutton,
and ingredients such as onion, sliced carrot, sweet herb and gravy take care of the rest. Lots of rigorous stewing involved." She turned to look at Lena lovingly. "But it's this woman's favorite, and I could never deny her anything."

Kara put down her knife and fork as she stared at the two. Suddenly, she wasn't hungry anymore. She felt a pang in her chest, and it wasn't helped by Lena seeming to blush at Siobhan's words while casting an apologetic glance her way. Siobhan could cook. The one thing Kara had felt proud of being able to offer Lena had long been provided by another.

"So, Kara, you're one of Lena's friends?" Siobhan turned back to view the blonde. "Lena's never mentioned you."

Again Lena offered Kara an apologetic glance.

"Yes. She's a dear friend," Kara replied. Her annoyance was growing by the moment. Lena seemed so enveloped, or devoured, by Siobhan's presence. Where was the Lena whose presence could overwhelm the room?

"And what is it that you do?" Siobhan looked Kara over, clearly assessing the grit on her clothes. She took a sip of wine and seemed to be waiting on Kara's every reply.

"Blacksmith."

Siobhan laughed. "A female blacksmith? My, you truly are progressive."

"Kara's one of the town's finest smiths," Lena finally said, sheepishly tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

"And your attire... That is of your choosing also?" Siobhan continued on as if she hadn't heard Lena. "Trousers and all?"

Kara looked down at her clothes. "It suits me." Her gaze returned to the woman scrutinizing her more thoroughly than Ms. Merriam ever had. "I've never been much of a dresses type of girl. And smithin' work ain't no place for them."

"Well, if you ever change your mind, just let me know. I keep up with all of the latest fashions, what works with skin tones and so on. At one point, I selected a number of dresses with emphasis on collar designs just to get Lena here to cover up that awful necklace she wears all the time."

At that, Kara and Lena exchanged an intense gaze. Siobhan clearly noticed. "You've seen it as well?" she asked. "It looks like something a child would have made."

Kara couldn't help the frown that formed on her features. A child had indeed made that necklace, but both she and Lena were now adults and that necklace had significantly more meaning than Siobhan was ascribing to it. "Yes, I've seen it," she replied through gritted teeth.

"Why, there was this one time I wanted to draw Lena bare. I'm an artist, you see. Well, in addition my title as a businesswoman. And by 'bare,' I meant I wanted her wearing nothing at all. But she wouldn't part with that abominable necklace."

Kara felt like she had been kicked in the gut. Siobhan was the friend that drew the woman in Lena's sketchpad. The friend who had seen that woman bare in what had not simply been a detached manner. It had been an intimate moment, an erotic moment. Kara's fingers had traced over what
essentially served as a timestamp for that intimate moment. And the woman's outline had been Lena's.

Kara scooted back in her chair and abruptly stood. "I need to go."

"Kara..." Lena said, standing as well and offering a pleading look.

Kara didn't stop to hear whatever it was the brunette had to say. She didn't want any more apologetic looks from her. She didn't recognize this Lena.

She snatched open the door and closed it behind her.

"Damn it." Lena bent her head as she leaned against the table. "Why'd you have to behave like that?" she breathed.

"Like what?" Siobhan queried.

"You were snobbish and condescending. You talked down to her."

Siobhan laughed. "What, by offering to dress her up a bit? By criticizing your necklace? I can't imagine what offense I might have caus --" Siobhan paused at this and narrowed her eyes at Lena, who was still looking down. "Who is that woman to you?"

"She told you," Lena said, walking to look across the hall at the front door. It had been a long week. One full of confusion, longing and guilt. Confusion because she kept doubting that she was right to hope that Kara would have a change of heart. Longing because, as much as Siobhan provided her companionship, she missed Kara dearly. And guilt because she had left Siobhan for Kara and all Siobhan wanted was for the two of them to rekindle their intimacy and leave Breighville. For days, the other woman had asked her why she'd left and what Lena could possibly do for this town. They'd settled back into their domestic life together, but without the physical contact. It was just like it was before, except the emotional tie was weaker and the sex was absent. And it was clear that Siobhan was still having trouble understanding and accepting any of it.

"Friends, yes," Siobhan stated. "But I also know that you broke off our relationship without explaining a thing. A couple of weeks later and I heard you'd moved to the country. And now I see this attractive friend of yours who became visibly tense at the mention of your mysterious necklace. Lena, who is she?"

Lena sighed and moved to turn back to Siobhan. She couldn't deny that the woman deserved to know the truth. "She's a childhood friend."

"And?"

"And I... I've loved her ever since."

Siobhan stood, putting her fresh napkin on the kitchen table. "Wait a moment... You mean to tell me that you believe yourself to be in love with this childhood friend? Didn't you tell me that you hadn't been to Breighville since you were ten?"

"I did tell you that, yes."

"Then how can you possibly be in love with her?" Siobhan asked, holding a hand to her right temple
as though doing so would help aid her brain in locating the answer. "Do you know how insane that sounds? You've only been back for a little over a month. You gave up our life together for this -- for someone you only knew for a time as a little girl?"

And there it was. The shock, disbelief, and ridicule Lena had been expecting. Of course it wouldn't make sense to Siobhan. Logically, it hadn't made much sense to Lena either. But the deep affinity she had for Kara had always registered clearly. Their connection seared her to the core. And now that they were both adults, that connection naturally allowed for the type of relationship she'd had with Siobhan, only deeper. It was the type of relationship she longed for and what had been missing with Siobhan. Her time with Kara this past month had proven that times over. "You wouldn't understand," she said, moving to head up the stairs.

Siobhan caught her by the arm, halting her ascent. "Then make me understand. We were good together, Lena." She moved up close behind the brunette, wrapping her arms tightly around a firm waist as her lips moved close to the other's ear. "Don't you remember? Hasn't this week together been marvelous?" She found Lena's right thigh and began to trail a path upward. "I miss you, Lena. And I know you miss me too."

Lena stilled the woman's hand on her thigh as her breath hitched. It had been a good week with Siobhan; she couldn't dispute that. And she remembered their sexual encounters all too vividly. It had been Siobhan's sweet nothings in her ear that had taught her how electrifying such an act could be. Until now, she hadn't even realized that she'd been using a similar exchange with Kara. But being with Siobhan wasn't enough, and she couldn't allow herself to lead Siobhan on or take advantage of her. She enjoyed sex, but not enough to forgo what scruples she had. "I can't," she said softly, breaking Siobhan's grip on her as she swiftly moved upstairs. "You should return home."

"The note says they're returned goods," Alex called over her shoulder to Jonathan from the doorway as she examined a box of fruit and vegetables, mainly consisting of tomatoes, potatoes and carrots.

"Not so much returned goods," a familiar voice sounded off a few feet away. "I bought ya some new produce, but it's my way of returnin' what I stole."

Alex looked up to find Maggie standing in front of her with a box in her hand. The woman's face somehow looked more relaxed, kinder, than before, and Alex found this appealing.

"And here's more," Maggie said.

Alex looked behind her for any sign that Jonathan was still near, then quickly moved to the olive-skinned woman. "What are ya doing here? Do ya want a punishment? 'Cause my husband wouldn't mind dishin' one out."

"That, I don't. But I needed to make thangs right."

Alex sighed, taking the box out of Maggie's hands. "Okay, you have. Now go."

"Right with ya husband too," Maggie clarified.

"Didn't ya here what I just said?" Alex asked, a frown forming on her brow.

"I'm willin' to take my chances," Maggie asserted.

"Stubborn woman," Alex muttered under her breath as she led Maggie inside. They stopped at the
kitchen table, where Alex had been splitting pea pods and popping the peas into a bowl. William was eating applesauce next to the vegetables. Maggie placed one of the boxes on the floor beside him, following Alex's lead.

"Want some?" William asked, holding out a spoonful of applesauce toward Maggie.

"No thank ya, little one," Maggie replied with a smile.

Alex pointed a finger at him. "What'd I tell ya about talkin' to strangers?"

"But she's not a stranger, mama. She's with you."

Maggie laughed.

"And I've seen her in our backyard."

Maggie's laughter stopped at that.

"What?" Alex queried, dumbfounded. She'd known that Maggie had been stealing from their yard for sometime, for at least a month, but she'd had no idea that William had witnessed it.

"Who's this?" Jonathan's voice broke through her thoughts. He stood tall in the kitchen, his eyes bearing down on everyone in the room before settling on the stranger.

Maggie immediately removed her hat and stepped toward him. "Maggie Sawyer, sir. I reckon you already know about the thievin' that's been happenin' on your residence. That thievin' is because of me. I mean, I stole your goods. I brought ya some replacements, though."

Alex grimaced, waiting for the reprimand that was sure to follow. But it never came.

Jonathan looked Maggie up and down and grunted. "Well, what was done was done." He looked toward the table. "Since you're here, ya can make it up to me by helpin' my wife with the peas." He turned to Alex. "Send William away when he's done eatin'. The boy don't need to be doin' women's work."

Alex blinked repeatedly as Jonathan walked away. What had gotten into him, she didn't know.

"Looks like I'll be helpin','" Maggie said with a grin.

Alex offered a slight smile in return. She couldn't very well turn Maggie away now. "Looks like."

They sat down at the table and began tending to the peas.

William giggled. "You're doin' women's work."

Alex playfully popped him on the head. "Hush, you."

Alex knew it would be a long night, but it was also turning out to be an interesting evening. One she knew would have her scratching her head in wonder the following day.

Morning arrived as uneventfully as it always did, or so it had seemed before Lena felt a gentle hand on her head, rousing her from her sleep. She mumbled unintelligibly. Loud hammering echoing outside roused her further and she jolted up in bed. She looked to her side, seeing Siobhan. It was
barely six o'clock in the morning, which she could tell from the amount of light filtering in through the window. "Siobhan?"

"There's someone causing a ruckus outside. I don't think it's the workers. Isn't your stable just about done?"

Lena quickly moved out of the bed and grabbed her robe, as Siobhan pulled her own robe tightly around her body.

They hurried downstairs and exited the house. The light hit them and they squinted a bit before stopping when locating the source of the noise. To their right, on the roof of the stable, stood a sweaty Kara hammering away. The woman's sleeves were cut off, showing ample skin and ample muscle. Lena felt her mouth go dry, which, given how parched she already was from having just woken up, was a feat all of its own. Wrangler stuck his head out of one of the three stalls neighing, just as Kara paused briefly.

"Kara!" Lena yelled. "What are you doing up there?"

Kara stopped and turned toward the two women, wiping a hand across her brow. "What does it look like I'm doing? I'm finishin' up the barn." She moved toward the ladder leaning against the stable, then, with a look of mischievousness, jumped to the ground with much athleticism.

Lena marveled at how easily such actions came to Kara. The blonde had always been like that, but seeing it now was different.

Kara walked to Lena with a smile. "I told the men ta let me handle the rest. I mean, I know ya probably expected them to finish. And I know you're capable of decidin' thangs on ya own. You're a very capable woman. We have a town full of capable women," she rambled. "But I... Well, I wanted ta do it." She used the rag slung over her shoulder to wipe at her arms, which drew all eyes to her biceps and the rest of her upper and lower limbs.

Lena nodded with a hum, her eyes widening while Siobhan's eyes narrowed.

When Kara looked up to meet Lena's gaze with a smirk, Lena could have sworn the woman flexed just a little.

"So you two can go back to what you were doing. I'll work on thangs for a couple more hours and finish the rest later."

"We were sleeping," Siobhan said pointedly.

"Yeah... Sorry about that," Kara replied, taking Lena by the hand and pulling her a short distance away. "When can ya get rid of her?" she whispered.

Lena stared at the blonde for a moment, dumbfounded. "Did I hear you correctly?"

"Well, she's not gonna stay with ya forever, is she?"

"Kara," Lena said, also making sure to keep her voice low, "I'm not going to kick Siobhan out."

"Then just get rid of her for tomorrow. You're off then, ain't ya?"

"I am, but --"

"-- Then do as I say. I have something planned."
"Kara..."

Kara didn’t give Lena a chance to protest. She walked back to the ladder and ascended it to continue her work.

Lena turned back to Siobhan, who was staring at her with arms folded. The displeased look on the woman’s face was more than enough to resign Lena to the fact that peace would be alluding her for as long as both of these women were in her life.

After accompanying Siobhan to a horse ranch within town and watching her select a dominant white breed, Lena said her goodbyes to the woman for the day. Siobhan had wanted to explore Breighville some more and refused to leave town without her. Lena had needed to meet with James as they were set to visit Lar and Rhea about the celebration the two would apparently be having tomorrow evening. It’d turned out that this was why Sara had been told to select a dress. When Lena had asked Lar and Rhea about it, they’d been vague and said they would send word when the time came. Clearly, that time was now.

Lena smiled as she watched James lift up one of his little girls in his front yard, the other pulling at his pants leg for attention. He obviously wasn’t bothered by the no-touching rule. His wife, an attractive dark-skinned woman with her hair intricately braided in a swirl pattern, hugged him and then looked at Lena warily.

James noticed his wife's line of vision and kissed her on the cheek before gesturing for Lena to come closer. "Lena, this is my wife, Opal." He motioned toward his children. "And my girls, Addie and Lela."

Lena smiled. "Pleased to meet you," she said, holding out a hand toward Opal.

Opal took it readily and shook it earnestly. "I'm mighty thankful for you givin' my James a job. And such a well-paid one too."

Lena laughed. "Well, James does good work. And he's pleasant company. I'm thankful to have him onboard."

Opal moved back closer to James, clearly unsure of what else to state.

"And who do we have here?" Lena asked, bending down in front of the shorter of the girls. She was adorably cute, with big almond eyes and big puffy ponytails.

"I'm Lela."

"And how old are you, Lela?"

"I'm four," she giggled. "Addie's seven."

Lena looked to the older girl, who was standing quietly beside Lela. She was also as cute as could be and had a hairstyle similar to her mother's. "Well, it's nice to meet you both." Lena saw the older of the two smile.

"Okay, girls, time to get back inside," James said. "Help ya mama with the chores."

"Yes, papa," the girls said in unison.
Lena and James watched as the three went back inside. "You have a lovely family," Lena said, turning to him as they walked toward their horses.

James grinned. "I do, don't I?"

They mounted their horses and began to ride ahead.

"And what about you?" James asked.

"I'm alone."

James offered a sympathetic look. "I hope that changes for ya."

Lena focused on the road ahead. "So do I."

They made it to the Gand Brew & Stew business just as music had began playing within its walls. Lena barely had any time to register the men singing and laughing all over the place before Lar approached her with a paper for her to review. It declared that Gand Brew & Stew was not beholden to the town of Breighville since the business is on the outskirts of town and was built on free land. It had been built on land that Breighville had never claimed. Trying to claim Gand Brew & Stew after the fact was like trying to claim a pair of shoes after someone else had already bought them. Lar and Rhea had told her everything with bright smiles on their faces before turning around to tend to their patrons and inviting her and James to relax. They'd both declined.

Lena exited the building with a deflated feeling. There was nothing she could state to dispute Lar and Rhea's rights. And while Sara had said the new development was a good thing, she believed anything but. She was without a solid answer for how this oversight had happened and she knew that no one in town would be taking this news well, except for the so-called non-conformists, of course.

She sighed, hoping to ease her mind, but she found that she could only find some sense of calm by thinking of Kara.

"Kara, what's gotten into ya?" Eliza laughed, as Kara hugged her tightly.

"What, I can't hug my ma?"

"You can. It's just not somethin' you do often."

"Well, I think I should change that," Kara asserted with a firm nod, pushing the spectacles back up on her face.

"Okay, why are ya here?" Jeremiah asked, folding his arms across his chest expectantly. "Ya only visit when there's a planned dinner or supper, or if we need help 'round the land."

"Hey!" Kara said, "I take offense to that assessment. I just said I wanna change thangs."

"Mm-hm," Jeremiah replied skeptically.

"Okay, I am here for another reason. But I really do wanna be a better daughter."

"You're a good enough daughter," Eliza assured. "Now what is it?"
Kara fidgeted. "I need ta know all about dresses from you, ma. And as for ya, pa, I need ta know some more about the trails you took on hikes in yer younger years."

"My trails?" Jeremiah queried.

"Dresses? " Eliza asked, her face growing hopeful. "For you? Or for Lena?"

Kara shrugged. "Kinda both."

"Lena," Winn said as she stepped into the overseer building. "Just in time. This man here — " he motioned to the man in tattered clothing — claims to be the half-brother of Anna Davies. Says he was a baby when she moved away and that they're related by their father. He grew up in a forested area not too far from here."

The man turned to Lena. There was something so lost, so foreign, about him. His shirt and pants were too short. Patches of lining showed through on the sleeves and what she saw was far from thick. His legs were thin, bare and bruised around the knees. His feet peeped out of the tops of his shoes.

Lena looked to Sam, Maggie and Winn, who all wore the same concerned expression. She looked back to the young man, unable to stop the anger bubbling up inside of her. She knew that not everyone had money, but it was clear that this man's circumstances were more complicated than that. Winn had just said that he grew up in the forest. "What is your name?" Lena asked him.

"I... I'm Clarence Davies," he said. His voice was scruffy.

"You say you're Anna's brother?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"And that you grew up in the woods?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Then forgive me for asking, but how do you know you're Anna's brother? What proof do you have?"

"Same father. He kept written documents of our births. Extensive detail." Clarence reached into his pocket and pulled out two crumpled pieces of paper. He handed them to Lena.

Lena observed the papers. As far as she could tell, they were authentic. Old and yellow in appearance, and nothing unusual about their construction.

"Pa wanted to be a part of Anna's life, but he said her mother didn't want him to be."

"And where is your father now?" Lena asked.

"Dead. About five years ago."

"And your mother?"

"Died in childbirth."
The man's dirty fingers clutched and unclutched. Lena could see a number of cuts and scrapes that were red and inflamed. She reached toward him and he backed away. "It's okay," she said. "I just want to assess your health. "When's the last time you've seen a doctor? Eaten? Bathed?"

Clarence simply stared at her.

The front door opened and Siobhan entered. Lena nodded to the woman before turning back to Clarence. It was almost completely dark outside. They usually closed at either thirty minutes past four or thirty minutes past five, but it was at least six now. Either way, Lena would be damned if she was going to send Clarence on his way before seeing to his safety. Clearly, the man had made it this long living away from society, but that didn't mean that he didn't need attention. "Okay, Clarence, how about I set you up at an inn near here? You'll get a hot meal and whatever else I can help you with."

Clarence nodded. Siobhan looked like she wanted to object.

Lena looked at the others. "Close up without me," she advised.

They conveyed their understanding. Winn stood abruptly. "Night, Siobhan," he stated.

Siobhan looked the man over and followed Lena without another word.

They rode to the inn, Clarence sharing a horse with Lena as he held onto her. The inn was three stories and the largest one in town. It had been built three years ago and reflected just about all of the modern comforts. When they entered, it was close to curfew and Lena knew she would be staying here for the night. The desk clerk looked up at them and turned bright red, as if they'd done something improper. "Sorry, ma'am, we're not that kinda inn."

Siobhan rolled her eyes and moved in front of them. "We know that," she nearly scolded the clerk. "We need two rooms. One for the man, and one for me and the woman you see here." She nodded to Lena, who had moved beside her. Siobhan pulled out a few coins and placed them on the desk. "Do you have two vacant rooms?"

"Yes, ma'am. Sorry about the misunderstanding."

"Don't worry about it," Lena said. "Send up maids with hot water to both rooms for a bath, and have three meals delivered from the dining room."

After the clerk directed them to the two vacant rooms, which were across from each other, they moved into the area Clarence would be occupying. They made sure to keep both doors open so that they would be there to direct the maids. Clarence's room wasn't as big as Lena had expected. The bed was small, the windows narrow. But at least it was clean. It seemed that, like some of the lower quality hotels she was accustomed to, the rugs were beaten regularly and that the sheets were changed weekly. She walked around the room and gestured toward the pitcher and basin, opened the cabinet, and revealed the lantern to Clarence.

Clarence stood there looking like a lost child. Lena meant to state something, but two teenage boys carried in a tub, followed by two more with buckets of hot water. After the tub was filled, maids came in and supplied towels, soap and fresh clothing. The same process was happening with Lena's room, where Siobhan had moved to direct other boys and maids.

Clarence started to disrobe and Lena waved him off. "Let me get out of your way first," she said, smiling uneasily. "Since I'm right across the room, let me know if you need anything. We can talk later. Until then, I'll see to it that you have a place here for at least a few weeks."
Lena began to leave, but paused when a grunt escaped Clarence's throat. "Thank you," he said hoarsely.

Lena smiled. "You're welcome."

She closed the door behind her. When she made it to the room she shared with Siobhan, she didn't even wait to discourage the woman from complaining. "I don't want to hear it," she stated.

"What?" Siobhan asked, kicking out of her shoes. "I think it's quite exciting to be sharing a room in a country inn with the love of my life. We've never done it in such a mediocre place before," she commented, a twinkle in her eye.

Lena sighed. "It certainly didn't escape me that you ordered two rooms, not three."

"Come on, did you really want a room all by your lonesome?"

Lena moved to plop onto the bed as she started to disrobe. There was just one bed. One small bed.

"Should I avert my eyes?" Siobhan asked, looking at her movements with obvious interest.

Lena paused. She shouldn't disrobe in front of Siobhan.

"Relax," Siobhan suggested. "I'm well aware that your desires lie elsewhere. And, besides, my monthly is on and I'm not feeling like my usual alluring self. I should have asked the maids for utensils."

"Still..." Lena gathered up her things and moved toward the door. "You bathe first. I'll wait in the dining room and bathe in a fresh tub afterward. And as for the bed, I'll take the floor."

"I'm not leaving you, you know," Siobhan stated just as Lena paused in the doorway. "I'm just biding my time. I'll get a job, because goodness knows I don't plan on being a housewife, but I'll bide my time some more. Eventually, you'll come around. You'll realize that I'm the love of your life too."

As Lena closed the door, she knew that she was dreading proving Siobhan wrong. She also knew that she needed to get some sleep for whatever type of day it was Kara had planned for tomorrow.

Kara fidgeted in the mirror of the women's clothing shop in the morning light. She looked to the store's timepiece; it was nine o'clock. If she was to make good time, she needed to be on her way. Her eyes returned to assess herself. She was wearing an embroidered cotton sundress. It was simple in style with only a flower pattern at the chest area, but it would do. She also wore a stylish straw hat that matched her shoes, which had heels that were slightly more elevated than her boots. She wasn't comfortable in any of it, and she'd almost slipped three times, but if Siobhan could wear dresses, so could she. If Lena was so fond of dresses on women, she'd show the brunette that she wore them much better than any other who might catch her eye.

"You look lovely, Ms. Kara," the female store owner who stood behind her said.

"Thank you," Kara replied.

As she made her way through town on her stallion, she should have known she'd get odd looks and surprised comments. Some of the townsmen clapped. Others said it was about time. Women gawked in awe. One of them must have alerted Ms. Merriam to the matter, because the old woman came
bumbling out of a shop with wide, teary eyes and a hand covering her mouth in shock. Kara felt like she was some rare species on display for human consumption. But she couldn't concern herself with any of that now.

She arrived at Lena's relatively quickly. For a moment, as she held her hands behind her, she was doubting that Lena was even going to be home. The woman did seem to like to work even when she didn't need to. But when Lena opened the door, she was pleased to see that her doubts had been for naught.

"So...what is this surprise of yours?" Lena queried with a smile. Suddenly, her eyes traveled over Kara's attire and widened almost as much as Ms. Merriam's had. "Are you... Are you wearing a dress?"

"I am." Kara grinned.

Lena's eyes went back to her face. "And is that makeup?" Lena observed Kara's loose locks flowing freely around her shoulders. She absentmindedly reached out to touch the ends. "And your hair?"

"Ya like?"

Lena chuckled, briefly looking at Kara's shoes and how the blonde's legs seemed a bit wobbly. "Yes. You are very lovely, Kara. Breathtakingly lovely." Her eyes once again met the blonde's and she moved closer.

Kara blushed as Lena observed her. "So...Siobhan's not here?" she asked, trying to take away some of the tension.

"No, she's attending to some business. And I told her I'd be out for the day. But, Kara, what is all of this?"

"Ya said that you feel trapped in this town. And, well, I occasionally hike the forest areas. There's this place I go to at times when I want ta feel free, like there's a bigger world out there."

Lena offered a querying look.

"No, not our special spot," Kara clarified. "Our spot is special and all, but I'm talkin' much farther than that. Which is why..." Kara revealed what she'd been hiding behind her back. She held out a pair of trousers and a shirt. "... You'll need to dress for the occasion."

Lena laughed. Not that long ago, she'd been considering wearing pants. "This is a role reversal, is it? I mean, what about you?"

Kara pointed to her own attire. "Oh this? This is just for show. Now, c'mon, get changed. I have all of the campin' material ready. Good food too. And you can bring the wine."

"More wine," a patron called out to Sara, who served some drinks from behind the counter. Mon-El, who'd entered the saloon moments ago, watched her pour the man a glass as others enjoyed the music the piano player offered, and as even more gambled. He'd heard about Sara from Kara. Seeing her, though, and a number of patrons, made him smirk. Not that he would expect anything less, but his parents had accomplished the seemingly impossible. The saloon was no longer off-limits. It was no longer beholden to the town. And it was therefore no longer absent of women. Some women
danced with men; others leaned over them as they gambled. A few sat with them at tables as they enjoyed a fine cigar.

The townsfolk hadn't taken the news well at all, of course, saying that this changed the order of things. They were so rowdy that it wouldn't surprise him if they tried to burn the saloon down again. Indeed, some were concerned about overpopulation, as if children would be popping out left and right or as though other towns did not exist. It was a valid point that Breighville was closest, but Mon-El didn't see that the saloon created deviancy; rather, it enabled it. Those who wanted to be here now had more freedom to do just that.

Mon-El balled his fists. Unlike the others, he didn't want to be here. He saw his father approaching him from his tall chair at the front. "Mon-El..." the man said, clearly at a loss for words.

"I'm losing her, pa," was all Mon-El could state.

Lar wrapped his arm around him and pulled him toward the back, just as Mon-El saw another woman enter; she was the new city woman everyone had been talking about — Lena's friend, Siobhan.

Mon-El sneered. Lena had pushed yet another person toward the edges of depravity.

Kara and Lena refreshed their horses and set out for the planned destination. Kara didn't think about it much these days, but thousands of acres of mountainous terrain existed in North Carolina. There were numerous, beautiful long-distance trails through different terrain and it all offered unique and exhilarating experiences. On the southern shore, there were foothills and a lake for swimming, boating, camping, and fishing, all of which she talked with Lena about as they passed by forested areas offering the occasional breathtaking scenery. At one point, they came across a subrange of mountains that featured a look-out spot. Lena spoke of how beautiful it all was. The most picturesque mountain views stared back at them, and Lena held her hand, seemingly without thinking. The brunette also hugged her close, and Kara didn't see any reason why she shouldn't hug back; so she did.

They traveled for hours, from day to dusk, making it through rhododendron, blueberry, ash, and beech forests, before setting up camp near a lake. As they sat by the fire after eating some rabbit meat Kara had prepared, Kara saw that Lena was staring at her intensely.

"Somethin' on ya mind?" she asked, placing her spectacles in her pocket. For comfort, she'd long changed out of the dress during one of her breaks to relieve herself.

"I just..." Lena looked down and then back at Kara again. "You surprise me sometimes."

Kara scratched near her eye. "That's good, right?"

"It is...but..."

"But, what?"

"I understand that you wanted to help me feel unimpeded. But, Kara, what are we doing here?" Her question clearly held a deeper meaning that she wasn't willing to voice.

Kara looked up at the sky. The stars shone bright. "I just wanted to spend some time with ya, Lena. I wanted to show you all of this." She looked back to the brunette. "Is that wrong?"
"You know that it's not."

"Good." Kara stood and walked to grab the bottle of wine. Before Lena could protest, she was downing its contents and coughing intermittently.

"Kara...careful." Lena stood up beside her, grabbing at the bottle. "You've never drank before."

"What brand is this?" Kara asked, ignoring Lena's concern.

"Château Lafite."

"Mmm. I'll put out the fire. You get ready for bed. I'll join ya in the tent in a few."

Lena looked at her with something Kara recognized as excitement. Kara felt her cheeks flush and she downed some more of the wine.

When she joined Lena in the tent, it was thirty minutes later and Kara had drank almost half of the wine bottle. She stumbled inside of the well-lit area and saw that Lena had changed into a shift. Kara sat on her bedroll, trying to disrobe, but stopped when she realized she was too sluggish to get the task accomplished. She watched Lena sit up across from her, the lamp near her illuminating her features. She sipped some more wine.

Abruptly, she moved closer to Lena, who reached for her wine bottle. "Ah-ah," Kara said, giggling. "This is mine."

"No, it isn't." Lena again tried to extract the bottle from Kara's hand, to no avail. Her fingers wrapped around Kara's.

Kara hiccupped and moved closer; she just wanted to feel Lena's cheek against hers. She just wanted to be closer to Lena. But Lena moved back.

"No."

Kara tried again, and again Lena moved back. "I said no." She finally managed to get the bottle out of the blonde's hand and place it behind her. "When you finally decide -- I mean, truly decide -- to come to me, I want you sober."

Kara pouted and fell back against her bedroll. Her eyelids felt heavy and she knew sleep was trying to take over. She looked up at the tent and then up at Lena who stared down at her with so much adoration that it made Kara's heart hurt. "Lena," she said softly, playing with the woman's necklace.

"Hm?"

"Will you smile at me the way you smile at Siobhan?"

Lena began playing with the loose curls of Kara's hair. Kara closed her eyes as she was soothed into a light slumber.

"Any time you like, Kara."

She felt Lena's lips on her forehead, and a foreign language she didn't understand followed: "Je t'aime."
Chapter 8

Lena stirred when a delicious-smelling scent infiltrated her consciousness and caused her to wake. She silently cursed her luck when she saw that she was alone in the tent. Again, she had fallen asleep beside Kara and woken up without her. If the aroma she smelt was any indication, Kara was outside of the tent cooking, but the blonde had still extracted herself from their entangled limbs. She had watched Kara sleep for hours before falling asleep while snuggled up against her. So other than Kara being an early riser, she knew she only had herself to blame for not waking before the woman had, but it was still an annoyance.

Even so, she smiled. At least she'd gotten to watch Kara sleep. And for that, not waking before the blonde had been well worth the price.

She pulled on her shirt and pants, slipped into her boots — a spare pair given to her by Kara — and headed outside. The direction of the sun told her it was somewhat past eight o'clock.

"She rises," Kara said, grinning her way while holding a pan over the fire. "How ya feelin'?"

"I feel like I should be asking you that," Lena replied, running a hand through her tousled hair.

Kara shrugged. "Oh, because of my drankin'? Yeah, I had a bit of a headache when I woke up, but nothing too bad."

"That's because you worked your way through the bottle slowly. You were what some would call mellow in your drunkenness. Weight, height, mood, and the type of alcohol can also be factors. Consider yourself lucky that you're only experiencing mild aftereffects." Lena moved to take a seat on one of the large rocks surrounding the cooking area. A blanket was spread out in front of it.

"Wait." Kara stalked to her, taking a hold of her belt buckle. "You didn't fasten it right."

Kara's fingers were on fire, Lena thought, as the blonde fastened her belt methodically, like it was some sort of procedure, and long digits softly scraped against her belly. She shivered delicately.

"Guess it don't matter much for the day I got planned," Kara said. She moved back near the fire and handed Lena a bowl of food and a towel.

"Butternut squash hash. It also has some apples and bacon in there."

Lena tasted it, the savory blend of chopped meat, potatoes and spices, and felt her mouth rejoice.

"Mmm, Kara, this is heaven."

Kara chuckled. "I promised ya good food. And I meant it. The rabbit meat was flavored well and all --"

"-- But it's nothing compared to this," Lena finished for her, using the spoon to point to the bowl.

Lena took another spoonful and another. Every bite tasted better than the last. She was so absorbed in the meal that she didn't notice Kara staring at her until a couple of minutes later. "What?" she asked, suddenly self-conscious.
"Do you always moan like that when you eat somethin' you thoroughly enjoy?"

Lena blushed. "I am not moaning."

Kara laughed. "Yes, you are."

Lena rolled her eyes and continued on with her meal.

But Kara kept staring.

Lena's face contorted into a plea. "Kara, stop it."

"Stop moanin'."

Lena picked up the towel and playfully threw it at her.

Kara caught it in one swift movement and laughed. "Okay, okay, I'll stop," she assured, standing to put out the fire and scoop herself up some hash in a bowl. She sat on the blanket in front of Lena and began to eat.

Lena saw that Kara was still staring, face turning red every now and again. Only then did it occur to her that her moaning must have been bothering Kara for a reason other than annoyance. "There are times that I moan, I admit," she stated. "But usually only in the privacy of my own bedroom."

Kara abruptly coughed, looking away with wide eyes and tomato-colored cheeks. Lena knew she wasn't playing fair, and she didn't want to make Kara, who seemed to be just warming up to the idea of having a more intimate relationship with her, uncomfortable. But Kara had tested her patience in a number of ways since she'd been back, and she felt it only fair that she have but a moment of indulgence.

"Anyhow," she said, changing the subject in order to give Kara time to recover, "I have to say that this spot is exquisite." She looked around at the lush green, the lake behind her and the horses tied to separate trees a little bit ahead. "It's open and peaceful. Certainly doesn't feel like Breighville."

Kara looked up at her, placing her plate down and recovering a pouch of water from a pile of camping material to her side. "Oh, you think this is the spot?" She took a gulp of water and handed the pouch to Lena.

"It isn't?" Lena queried, taking a sip.

Kara shook her head with a smile. "No, it ain't. The spot is a little ways from here." She stood and put Lena's plate to the side before pulling the brunette up. "Come on." She grabbed Lena's hand softly and pulled her along, picking up some towels and extra clothing.

"We don't need the horses?"

"No," Kara assured. "Like I said, it's just a little bit ahead." She pointed beyond the horses, and pulled Lena past a forested area until they came upon a small trail.

They came to a clearing that Lena could only at first describe as amazing. Before them was a quarry that was at least twenty-four feet deep and filled with gorgeous sapphire water.

"It's supplied by spring fed water," Kara said as they stopped to look at it from the top of the path that additionally stretched in a curve to the right, all the way down to the water's edge. "Pa says not too many people know about it yet."
The combination of the azure water and sky, smoky granite cliffs and white sugar sand beach created a tranquil and relaxing atmosphere. Green vegetation covered a number of the huge rocks jutting up from the ground and allowed for different resting spots, with trees overhanging them.

"I know ya skin don't don't mix well with the sun," Kara said, "so I brought ya some chestnut oil. And there's plenty of shade around. Just pick a spot and we can sit there. But first..." She took off her spectacles, placing them on the ground a safe distance away, and then grabbed Lena's hand. "Let's swim."

Lena's eyes widened and panic bloomed in her chest as she took in the significant drop below "You want me...us...to jump? Right now?"

Kara grinned. "Is there some other time ya were plannin' on jumpin'?"

"But our clothes..."

"That's why I brought extra." Kara pointed to the pile at her feet. "And towels."

"But..."

"Lena, what's wrong? Why ya dawdlin'?" Kara gave the brunette's hand a soft squeeze.

Lena felt embarrassed. She let her head lie on Kara's shoulder to shield her face; a strong hand caressed her back. "I don't do heights, remember? It's why I never climbed the trees with you."

Kara chuckled. "Ya never climbed the trees with me 'cause you were weak."

"Kara!" Lena hit her on the shoulder in mock protest.

Kara laughed harder, her features taking on a serous tone afterward. She moved to lift Lena's chin up with her hand. "Look, you're with me now, ain't ya? Standin' right here?"

Lena looked out into the quarry, seeing the expanse pool of water. "Yes."

"And you're not so scared that you can't look down or feel like ya need to run away?"

"No."

"Then take the leap with me." Kara cupped Lena's face in her hands. "I won't let anythang happen to ya, I promise. Do you trust me?"

Lena wasn't sure that a simple answer could convey how much she trusted Kara. She remembered trusting Kara when, as a child, Kara had suggested flapjacks go good together with blueberries. And when the blonde had said that staring at her childhood tormentors would make them squirm, eventually feeling the shame of what they'd done, and stop. There were other times as well. From day one, she'd trusted Kara. And now wasn't any different. She decided to go with a simple answer: "Yes."

Kara smiled, tightening her grip on Lena's hand, and then looked ahead. Lena's eyes followed Kara's and she braced herself.

They jumped off the ledge simultaneously, hitting the water with shrill yells and a hint of excitement. Their hands remained intertwined before they came up, and then they parted slightly as they bobbed at the surface, spitting out water and slicking back hair that would otherwise stick to their faces. They stared at each other for a few moments before laughing and feeling their entire bodies unwind and
take on a level of comfort with each other.

They repeated this process in varied ways. They held hands and didn't hold hands. They yelled and didn't yell. They tried different jumping techniques, Kara's naturally more daring than Lena's. In one instance, Kara did a backwards flip off the ledge. They splashed water at each other playfully and raced while swimming, the first one to the water's edge always the triumphant winner. Lena couldn't remember the last time she'd had this much fun.

When they were tired out and had dried off two hours later, they stretched beside each other on a large blanket, lying back in a shaded area. A few seconds later, they were snuggled up against each other, Lena's head at the base of Kara's throat, their clothes still clinging to their damp bodies.

"I wish we could stay like this," Lena said, her right hand playing with the hairs at the top of Kara's head while her left hand stroked Kara's abdomen.

"Ya don't have to work today, do ya?" Kara asked, one hand tucked under her head while her other stroked Lena's left arm, even as it trailed along her stomach.

"No." She looked at the blonde. Her mouth immediately meant to form words, but she found herself struggling to say anything at all. "Kara, I... You've made me very happy today."

Kara looked down at her and smiled. Her breathing seemed a bit labored. "I'm glad." She cupped Lena's hand on her abdomen and let their hands rest there, intertwined.

Lena wondered if maybe she had overstepped her boundaries. She'd seen muscles forming at Kara's midsection, by way of the dampness of the woman's shirt, and was naturally drawn to the area. Before she knew it, her fingers were tracing over the lines there. Until this very moment, she hadn't thought about what she had been doing. Nor had she previously thought about the toned skin that must exist under the clothing. No doubt she had imagined Kara bare times before, but she hadn't thought about the possibility of the blonde having a muscled abdomen in addition to muscled arms. How silly she felt now. It was obvious that all of Kara would be well-toned. She recalled that even the woman's legs were athletic in build.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

"For what?"

"I know this hasn't been easy for you -- these feelings you've been having. And I don't want to push you. I shouldn't touch you so much." Lena attempted to move away, but Kara pulled her close again, holding her there.

"The same can be said of how I act toward you," Kara breathed slowly, hesitantly. "I'm not blind, Lena. I know ya feel some sort of way about me."

Lena laughed. "Yes, some sort."

"I'm just... The rules, my family, my duties... I can't make complete sense of everythang and I --"

Lena placed a finger to the woman's mouth, suddenly sitting up on an elbow. "Whenever you sort everything, I'll be here." She dragged a finger along Kara's left shoulder, again without thinking. "But I have to tell you something right now... All the dressing up in the world couldn't make me like you any more than I already do."

Lena saw Kara's face flush, and they stared at each other for a long minute before she again rested her head against the base of Kara's throat. This time they kept their hands to themselves.
"You ever wonder what things would have been like if I'd stayed?" Lena asked.

"All the time. I reckon we'd be even closer."

Lena grinned. "I reckon that too."

Kara's brow furrowed. "Yer family... Are ya close to any of them? I know you've been worried about your pa even though you don't talk about him."

Lena looked at the water cascading down the rocks. "I don't know how long he has, and every day I fear losing him. He wasn't the best father, but I think he did all right. He strove for everything he had and to give us a better life. If it weren't for him, I don't think I would have recognized my full potential. The only price is that it took me away from you." She chanced a glance at Kara, who again seemed to be taking in heavy breaths. And again, their eyes tore away from each other.

"I still thank about my parents too," Kara said. "My birth ones, I mean. Their faces and voices, I can't quite remember, and it makes me feel guilty. Sad. But the love they showed me... Times they hugged me or laughed at my nonsense... I remember that well."

Lena watched the way Kara's throat bobbed with emotion. "Lex," she stated.

"Hm?"

"You asked me if I'm close to any of my family. Mother and I had a few times where we bonded, but it's Lex I'm closest to. We had our differences when I was in my late teenage years and early twenties, but we get along well now. I've been in contact with him by letter exchanges since I've been here. He's kept me updated on father. And he's spoken ill of this place," she chuckled. "Every time, in fact, but that's to be expected. He said he would feel confined here, and I had to laugh at that because it was exactly how I felt. But for Lex, it was about not living up to the Luthor name. For me, it was about --

"-- Not feeling like you could be yerself."

"Yes." Lena smiled softly.

"But you feel like yerself now?" Kara looked down at her.

Lena hugged the blonde close as she looked up at her in turn. "Very much so."

Lena saw something feral click in Kara's eyes, and her heart skipped a beat. "Any time you are here with me, there are no rules," the blonde said. "Even in our special spot, there are no rules." Kara traced her jawline. "It's still mornin', ain't it?"

Lena felt herself flounder as her heartbeat sped up. "It is."

"Then maybe we can try the mornin' kiss again?"

Lena felt that she should protest. Kissing Kara, especially if Kara wasn't ready, could only lead to problems. Lena knew that the blonde had gotten drunk to make being with her easier. She also knew that she wasn't sure if she could kiss Kara again and not deepen the kiss. But she recognized that this was perhaps Kara's way of testing the waters and taking things slow. So she relented by covering Kara's lips with her own. It was a chaste kiss, but it sent a wave of excitement throughout Lena's body. Kara's lips were as supple and as soft as she remembered. She sighed into the kiss. If this was Kara's olive branch, she would take it. She would let Kara set the pace. But she also wanted Kara to know that she didn't plan on never moving forward. So she placed a hand at the base of Kara's neck.
and let it trail there as their lips sought the other's out and they felt each other tremble, and hoped for a time that such an action would come to them as easily as the ragged breaths that escaped each peck they dared to give.

Siobhan watched as the man named Mon-El moved toward her in the saloon and sat at her table. It was her second day at the business, but she'd already heard from around town that the man before her was Kara's suitor. Her betrothed, in fact. Apparently, people in this town were engaged from birth, which was all the more reason for Siobhan to want to leave this abysmal place. But not without making sure that Lena came with her. She didn't know why Mon-El and Kara hadn't yet married, but she could only suspect that it was due to whatever bond Kara and Lena shared — a bond she was determined to disrupt, or destroy if she could. She wanted Lena to be happy, but she was also certain that the brunette could only be happy with her. She couldn't stop replaying their first meeting in her head — a 24-year-old ambitious Lena introducing herself as a woman intent on changing the world. And neither could she forget all of their happy times together.

Their relationship hadn't started out sexual. It had been predicated on necessary work discussions and small talk. During that time, she'd had her heart set on a man she'd met at an office celebration while Lena hadn't seemed particularly interested in men at all. The brunette would get more than the occasional lustful look and courting offers from male acquaintances and associates, only to ignore or turn them down each time.

It was only when Siobhan noticed that the woman paid more attention to other women, gaze lingering on their figures in more than just an observational manner, and finally focusing on her, that she concluded that Lena Luthor had an eye for the ladies. It hadn't been entirely shocking to Siobhan, who'd attended an all girl's school, where she'd often witnessed girls being a little too close. She'd also been sexually intimate with a woman one night after a drunken meeting. So when Lena had started giving her the telltale looks of infatuation after they'd began spending more and more time together, Siobhan had jumped at the chance, confronting Lena on a business trip to Chicago. The brunette had seemed so demure at first, but later transformed into an unbridled ball of passion, releasing obvious years and years of sexual repression and pent-up sexual frustration. Siobhan had always found Lena attractive, but she'd found her exceptional in that moment. And there was no way she was going let go of this exceptional woman now.

She sipped her brandy contemplatively as Mon-El gave her a nasty look. Brandy wasn't easy to come by, namely due to its several distillations, which were long and problematic. So she was surprised the place had it at all. Mon-El had just returned from the back, where he'd had some sort of meeting with the owners, who were also his parents, she'd been told. She didn't know what he wanted with her, but she figured she'd make the best of this encounter.

"You're Lena's friend. You were here yesterday," he said.

"My, aren't you observant," she responded sarcastically.

"Why ya here?"

"Why are you?"

Mon-El frowned. "Your friend is stealin' the woman I love."

Siobhan arched a brow. "Well, it seems we have something in common. Your almost-wife is stealing the woman I love."
"Yes, I'm *like that*," Siobhan clarified, placing her cup down. "And from what I've seen, so is Kara."

"Kara is not --"

"-- Whether she is or isn't, she's intrigued by Lena and Lena is infatuated with her. They have a history. It's only a matter of time before they sleep together."

"You're sick." Mon-El stood, raking a hand through his hair. "Then why are you worried?"

Mon-El looked back to where his parents were seated and then down at Siobhan. He obviously couldn't deny that she was speaking the truth. "Seems to me we can benefit each other... Mon-El, is it?"

"I'm handlin' things on my own," he said. "Just ya wait and see. Those workers of hers, they'll be put on notice too."

Maggie helped Winn paint the exterior of his home. They used a mixture of white and black tint, with the sides of the home being colored white and the rest gray. Maggie scratched her nose, accidentally marking it with paint as she focused on steady strokes along the house's left side. Winn pointed to a spot she missed. "I didn't notice," she said, quickly taking care of the overlooked area. "Ya the only person I know who's decided to paint their cabin."

Winn shrugged, making sure he got every crevice. "Well, I need to do something to make my place stand out, considering how small it is. When I save up enough money, I plan to have a proper home, like Ms. Luthor's."

"Why do ya need to stand out at all?"

"It's something at least. Everything is so boring here. Same food. Same colors. Same attitudes."

"It's like that everywhere," Maggie chuckled. "Where are ya from anyhow?"

"Originally, Boulder, Colorado. Then Virginia. Been here for ten years."

Maggie looked him over. "Everyone in Virginia dress and talk like ya do?"

Winn laughed. "No. My initial accent came from Colorado. While there, I saw a newspaper of how city folk dressed and I liked it. And the men's clothing...it had style."

"Let me guess," Maggie quipped, "and you thought they were proper men?"

Winn grinned. "Yep. Something like that. The women were mighty proper too. Anyhow, I learned about different accents and pronunciations and practiced them. Both in Colorado and Virginia. By the time I came here, I'd perfected my southern accent into something I felt was the best fit for me -- something without the informal tone and slang, you know? I could still sound like everyone else when I felt out of place, but I eventually let it go. My father being an outlaw and all made it so that people didn't care much what I sounded like either way. They just kept wondering if I'd turn out like him."
"Outlaw?"

"Most of the things we had, he stole. He was run out of town not long after we moved here. Haven't seen him since then."

Maggie shook her head in disbelief. "I know all about thievin', but even I worked for most stuff I have."

Winn sighed. "That's the way it should be. I mean, minus your stealing."

"Why aren't ya in the city instead?"

"Don't know. I guess I don't yet see the need to move. Only reason I'm here at all is because my parents wanted a nice and quiet life. They'd heard that North Carolina could provide that. Not sure how they ended up settling on Breighville, but they did."

Maggie nodded, signaling her understanding before sitting down on a tarp splayed over the grass a second later. Winn sat beside her.

"You're not from here either, are you?" he asked.

Maggie pulled her knees up to her chest, eyes surveying the areas they'd just painted. "No. Atlanta. Came to Breighville almost two months ago. You heard of the Mexican War, right?"

Winn offered a weak inkling of recognition.

"Under the treaty that ended that war," Maggie went on, "most of the Mexicans who lived in the new United States territories became U.S. citizens. But despite that treaty, many Mexican Americans were deprived of their land, and ended up livin' without any protection in unfriendly regions. My parents felt that North Carolina would be less hostile, I don't know why."

Winn smiled. "Seems like both of our parents were fed some stories about this state. Why are you in Breighville specifically?"

"I think I wanted a quiet life too. Didn't plan on the stern rules adhered to here, but what can ya do? I would have left if not for the job offer. I've always wanted to be some type of officer or sheriff. But now I'm staying 'cause..."

Winn looked at her, brow crinkling into confusion. "Because what?"

"I met someone."

Alex surveyed some pumpkins at a market. Jonathan wanted pumpkin pie and had sent her to fetch the best quality produce while he visited with Alaina's mother for William and Alaina's bonding time. She preferred to be there as well. Not to keep an eye on her husband's wandering eye, but to guide the children toward a more civil union. She would hate for them to be stuck in a loveless marriage. And if she could help it, they wouldn't be. But she also couldn't disobey her husband. So she was determined to select two of the best pumpkins and perhaps make it to Alaina's home just in time to catch the tail end of the meeting. She'd even brought her horse-drawn wagon along to help move about faster. After all, Jonathan hadn't said she needed to make the pie today. If he complained, she could simply state that he hadn't specified.
She walked beside the table, the male seller watching her carefully for any sign of thievery. Alex scoffed. As if she would ever steal.

"Pumpkins? It's not Thanksgiving yet. No harvest festival coming up that I know of either."

Alex turned to locate the voice. It'd come from the woman who'd been involved in the town brawl the other day. "You're Sara," she said.

Sara smiled, leaning an elbow on the table, much to the seller's vexation. "And you're Alex."

Alex looked the woman over. She wasn't in the manly attire she'd worn the day before. Instead, she wore a simple yellow dress, one which had oddly been ripped at the sides, almost as if to make moving in it easier. "I thought ya didn't come into town that often."

"I know that's what Lena thought, but a girl's gotta eat. And this town is closest. My bosses, they practically live in the brewery since it has everything any home could have, except with a lot more beer." She grinned. "But I prefer not to sleep where I work. Not for too long anyhow."

Alex nodded, staring at the woman pensively. She couldn't shake the feeling that Sara was assessing her in a way that titillated men would. She held herself self-consciously. "Is it true that you did that thang that man said you did? Flirt with that woman?"

Sara moved close, the smirk still playing on her lips. "Come by the brewery sometime and maybe I'll tell you."

The blonde looked off into distance, something across the space catching her eye. She walked away then, leaving Alex feeling perturbed and, even though she wasn't sure why, embarrassed. She turned back to the pumpkin seller to purchase her items, but the man had cleared off all the pumpkins and was now looking at her in distaste. A sign was placed on the table, which read: "Closed for the day."

Alex sighed. Why was her life being made difficult by women she'd known for only a fraction of that time? What had Lena Luthor unleashed on Breighville?

Lena lingered in the doorway of her home as Kara grinned at her. They'd gotten back into town after nine long hours and it was a little after eight o'clock. The timing reminded her of when she'd awoken earlier in the day. "I enjoyed myself," she stated.

Kara moved closer. "You said that already."

Lena moved closer as well. "I'm saying it again."

They remained there at the doorway watching each other curiously. Lena saw Kara fidget before eyeing her lips. "Careful...it's not morning anymore."

Kara chuckled as if catching herself. "No, no, it ain't."

Lena nodded. "You better hurry home. Since we were coming into town rather than intentionally staying out, there should be some leeway regarding curfew. So if caught, you have me to vouch for you." She looked out at the stars and then back at Kara. "But others shouldn't be out to catch you anyway."

Kara moved closer still, steadily invading Lena's personal space as she tucked a strand of hair behind
the brunette's ear. "Night, Lena."

"Night, Kara."

Lena had barely closed the door before she heard Siobhan's voice.

"I'm beginning to think you are not the best person to be overseer," the woman said.

Lena moved down the hall quickly, coming into the living area that had been rearranged. Instead of a wooden chair here and there, couches were placed opposite each other. Abstract paintings lined the walls, and vases of flowers sat on top of a desk and a table.

Lena watched the woman sitting on a lavish rug by the fireplace.

"It appears you had quite the day," Siobhan said, pulling her robe close to her body, eyes seeming to pierce Lena's before briefly traveling over the brunette's masculine attire.

Lena moved farther into the room, still observing the place. "Appears you have as well."

"How's Kara?"

Lena's face fell. She knew Siobhan had just heard their exchange and she didn't want to hurt Siobhan any more than necessary. She'd already hurt the woman — this woman who had been dear to her, and still was in some ways — enough.

Siobhan sensed her anxiety. "It's okay, Lena. Come sit and tell me about it."

Lena remained hesitant, looking toward the stairs and back to Siobhan again. She just wanted a hot bath and a good night's rest.

"Lena," Siobhan pressed, "I know when you need to get things off your chest. So sit. I could do with a bit of conversation and it might enlighten me as to why you feel for Kara the way you do."

Lena walked to Siobhan warily. It was true that she and Siobhan had often stayed up in the late hours discussing job issues, the difficulties of life, and various other things. She'd known the woman for four years to Kara's three, and yet she'd still never opened up to her the way she'd opened up to Kara today. A part of her felt like she owed Siobhan that much — a discussion in which she bared all and didn't hold back a thing.

She spent the rest of the night telling Siobhan all about Kara, why she'd sought her out after all of these years, and how deeply sorry she was that Siobhan was hearing all of this under these circumstances.

The following morning, Lena rode Wrangler while thinking about her night with Siobhan and her visit with Clarence hours ago. She hadn't needed to work today either, and had decided to focus on Clarence after helping Siobhan with chores. The man still needed a doctor, a place to live, and to be set up with a job, all of which she felt compelled to provide, but it just so happened that he needed a maid as well. She'd visited the inn expecting to only see him, but he'd had a little girl with him, a child named Hazel, his daughter. Before coming to Lena and her workers about Anna Davies, Clarence had left the child with some women he said he trusted.

The girl was three. And her eyes lived up to her name. She had light-dark curls and rosy cheeks,
was as angelic as any other little girl in appearance. But she'd also had scrapes that needed tending to, and she barely talked. Lena had queried how Clarence had cared for her, and he'd said the same way his father cared for him for years. He would venture into town when he was desperate for supplies. But other than that, he stayed away. The girl's mother had abandoned her, he'd said. His relationship with the mother had been a matter of two recluses having found each other and trying to keep to themselves without any trouble.

Lena knew how big North Carolina and its woods and hills could be, especially after her hiking trip with Kara, but it still amazed her that anyone would choose such a life. Granted, Breighville was also a poor choice. Either way, the girl had needed looking at and so Lena had accompanied them to the town's main doctor, who stated that, aside from bruises that every child occasionally gets, she seemed to be good in health. Although relieved to hear it, Lena considered how else she would be able to improve Hazel's life. For now, she was still staying at the inn with Clarence.

Lena smiled as she remembered the girl's face light up at the clean dress she'd given her. She would need to buy her a new wardrobe.

Pulling on Wrangler's reins, her smile faded as she came upon her residence to find a number of horses tied to the railing of her house. She couldn't fathom what this could be about, but she instantly sensed it wasn't good.

And it wasn't.

Lena entered to discover Kara, Mon-El, Rhea and Siobhan sitting at the kitchen table. Standing some distance away were Lar, James, Winn, Maggie and Sam. Her crew all looked apologetic, barely meeting her eyes.

She looked to Kara, who also wasn't looking at her. The blonde's head was bowed.

But Mon-El... His glare was focused solely on her.

"Ms. Luthor," Lar said, "we've been waiting for you."

Lena moved into the room, eyes raking over everyone. "What is the meaning of this?"

"The meaning of this," Lar emphasized, walking to her so that her gaze would settle on him and him alone, "is that you and your workers have not been abiding by the rules, but now you will." He handed her some documents. "Within that folder are Kara and Mon-El's birth records and the legal decision made by me, Rhea and Kara's parents to have them wed when they were of age."

Lena looked through the papers, seeing the confirmed dates, agreements and signatures. Assuming that Jeremiah and Eliza wouldn't want to be without this information, then these were copies. Lena's eyes lifted to Lar, then to Rhea, then to Mon-El.

"I told you before," Mon-El said, "she is to be my wife."

Rhea rubbed Mon-El's back soothingly, her fierce brown eyes boring into Lena's as though Lena had physically hurt her son.

Lena's eyes settled on Kara, who was still looking down. She could see that tears had started to run down the blonde's cheeks.

"Mon-El tells me that you have an unhealthy interest in women," stated Lar.

Lena's eyes went wide and she looked at her employees; they were fidgeting, unsure of what to do or
"Imagine my surprise upon learning that one of the reasons my boy is yet to marry is due to your interference," Lar continued. "Not only am I informed of your impropriety, but I hear that you touched your guard in broad daylight, despite the no-touching rule. And that your female worker, Sam, did the same with Winn here." He nodded in Winn's direction before moving closer. "So tell me, Ms. Luthor, what am I do to about all of this?"

Rhea shook her head in disgust. "No wonder you are without a husband. At least Sara's behavior can be explained by her poor guidance as a child."

Siobhan scoffed. "Yes, of course, because men are always such a prize," she said sarcastically, her eyes challenging Mon-El's and then Rhea's.

Lena frowned, nearly balling up the documents in her hand. She moved to the table and placed them there while giving Mon-El a scathing look of her own. She walked back to Lar and stood with her hands clasped in front of her. "You can do whatever you feel you need to do, Mr. Gand. But I assure you here and now that if your son was at all capable of stirring passion in Ms. Danvers, we wouldn't be having this discussion."

Mon-El angrily moved to stand, but Rhea held him rooted to the spot.

Kara had now turned to observe Lena, attentively watching her interaction with Lar.

"Then you leave me no choice, Ms. Luthor," Lar said. "From here on out, unless you want to be exposed as the deviant you are and have Kara exposed as the same, you will no longer come between Kara and Mon-El. You may very well continue to visit with her, but sparingly. Unless you want to lose your job as overseer, or unless you want your workers to lose their jobs, you will obey. Unless you want Kara's parents to find out about any of this, which Kara has asked -- begged -- not to come to fruition, you will obey. Unless you want the entire town to shun and/or expel Kara and her family, you will obey."

Lena smirked. She took a step closer, her chin lifting defiantly. "I obey no man."

"You will this time. And you will also allow Kara and Mon-El to touch. To make up for your and your workers' weeks of misconduct, of course."

Kara abruptly moved from her seat and looked down on Mon-El with contempt. "How could you?" She stalked her way out of the room.

Again, Mon-El meant to follow her, but Rhea kept him in place. "She'll come around," the woman said. "She'll see that it's all for the best."

Lena followed after Kara, catching up with her in the hall. "Kara, I'll figure this out. We'll figure this out. We can fight this. You don't need to adhere to any of it. We can move even."

Kara looked to her as though burned, tears streaming down her face. "What, and abandon my family? Have them be outcasts? My folks are fond of this place. They wouldn't move. And I'll fight like hell to keep them from sufferin'" She frustratedly wiped at her eyes and rid herself of her spectacles before stepping outside. "And what of my duties? As a daughter, wife, child of God? There's nothin' we can do, Lena. Nothin'."

She made sure to slam the door behind her.
Days passed, and Kara threw herself into being the best would-be wife she could be, but she kept finding she was falling significantly short of that title. She cooked and cleaned, including washing, when she wasn't tending to her blacksmith duties. But because she was already a cleanly person and she and Mon-El mainly lived in her cabin, where Mon-El would often tidy up after himself, she didn't have to clean much. She gave Mon-El massages when his shoulders felt sore, but she would squeeze too hard and he would just end up getting frustrated and ask her to stop. She accepted the hugs and flowers he gave her each day, but she would always break the hugs too soon for his liking and forget to water the flowers. She also allowed him to kiss her, on the cheek and on the lips, but she'd grimace most times, and he'd be left with this pained or hurt expression. She figured that since it was her first time kissing a man, this was why it wasn't working out as smoothly as either had hoped. But each kiss made her feel lousier and lousier. Each kiss led to a comparison to Lena's lips, much more fascinating and lush than the man's she would soon call husband.

She'd resented Mon-El at first, and a part of her still did. But he was right to expect her to uphold her betrothed duties. And this is what Alex had told her too. Their parents had been pleased to hear the news of their upcoming nuptials, although Jeremiah had watched her cautiously and asked if this was what she really wanted. She had lied and told him yes. What point would there be in saying no?

She had to put Lena out of her mind. She knew she wouldn't be able to, but she would try. And try is what she did, each and every time she saw the brunette. She couldn't have Lena getting her hopes up. Their hopes up. This wasn't a world that allowed two women to love each other as a man and woman did, and it never would be. Surely, Lena had to accept that. She had to.

Weeks passed, and Lena threw herself into her work, dolling out overseer punishment after overseer punishment. They were mainly fines, with only one instance of giving up livestock, but they were punishments nonetheless. She worked on each case rigorously, listening to all sides and ensuring that she was not simply going on one accuser's word. But she felt hypocritical every time, for she was steadily working to undermine one of the town's key rules. She didn't want to think about the reality that Kara might very well end up married to Mon-El, but, if she didn't figure out a way to end it, it would most certainly happen. And so she wrote the only person she felt she could — Lex.

As she waited for each letter exchange to make its destination, informing the carrier that each one was of the utmost importance, she checked up on Kara time and again. And time and again, she was either met with a slam of the door in her face, sometimes by Mon-El, or Kara brushing her off in some other way. She would try to bring by gingersnap cookies or another treat, and Kara would open the door and just stare at her. Lena would try to state something, and Kara would simply close it. At one point, the blonde had told her: "I'm not like you." Other times, she would see Kara at a market, usually in Mon-El's embrace as though he couldn't let Kara out of his sight, and the blonde would offer a faint smile before turning away. Lena would visit church just to see Kara, and to keep her promise to Father Mable to attend his sermons, only to see Kara engrossed in orations about staying away from sinful temptations and not giving into evil.

Each encounter, or almost encounter, made Lena feel sicker to her stomach. Why wasn't Kara fighting to be her own person? For them to be together? Kara had told her that she would fight like hell to not betray her code of honor, family, and God. But why couldn't she fight for their relationship just as hard, if not more so?

Lena had been consoled by Siobhan, of course, who'd insisted that perhaps Kara wasn't into ladies. The woman had urged Lena to move on, but Siobhan's efforts were fruitless; they both knew that.
They both knew that Lena wouldn't give up on Kara without first doing everything in her power to ensure that Kara had the freedom to choose her without any sense of guilt or devastating repercussions, even if this meant doing nothing but waiting for Kara to choose her, as she'd promised she would.

Lena hadn't expected her employees to console her as well, but they did, and she supposed that she could call them friends. None of them seemed bothered by the fact that her sexual attraction deviated from the norm, but she concluded that she shouldn't have been too shocked by that. They were all outcasts in a way — Lena for her family name and being unmarried, Winn for his father being an outlaw, James for the color of his skin, Maggie for not strictly adhering to femininity and for being of an ethnicity that most had to query her on, and Sam for being divorced. There was also Sara, who'd stated that Kara needed a swift kick in the hide to get set on the right path and that she would see to it. Lena had advised the woman not to, but, to her surprise, she'd occasionally seen Kara and Sara within the same vicinity.

Lena also spent time with Clarence and Hazel, especially Hazel. Clarence continued to work on his sister's case and as a ranchhand to make a better life for Hazel. When she wasn't staying with a maid Clarence had hired to look after her, she spent time with Lena. The little girl brought Lena more joy than anticipated.

But even with all of the support and time spent with friends or with Hazel, it still felt to Lena like a hole had been expanding and festering in her heart. And she longed to fill it.

So by mid-September, she couldn't control the joy she felt when she read the thoroughly detailed letter and papers from Lex. He'd suggested something that she reasoned she should have thought of herself. Regardless, it was the answer she'd been looking for. And one she wouldn't wait to share with Kara.

Lena pulled up at the field in front of Kara's cabin. It had only been a ten-minute ride, but she felt exhausted simply from anticipation. Everything hinged on this moment, on Kara saying yes. And the closer she came to approaching the blonde, the more jittery she felt. She hadn't even taken the time to put her hair up. But maybe Kara preferred it down. She knew that the woman was partial to her form-fitting, bustle-less dresses, one of which she was donning now.

She saw the blonde loading up bales of hay on a medium-sized wagon, a hat on her head to shield her from the sun and gloves to protect her hands from the harshness of the rope. The blonde used two hands, but was so efficient at handling the loads that Lena wouldn't bat an eye if she'd only been using one hand. The front and back of her shirt was soaked with sweat, leaving no doubt that it was due to hours of labor.

The area had been bigger than Lena had expected. It was like a small farm, with all the space afforded it and Kara's two stallions in a closed-off sector right beside all the hay lying around.

She saw Kara notice her and then roll her head, continuing on with her work.

Lena glowered. She would not continue to be ignored or shunned. She moved off Wrangler and tied him to an area at the back of Kara's home, then marched to Kara quickly. The sooner she told Kara her idea, the sooner the nightmare could hopefully be over. "Shouldn't Mon-El be doing this?" she asked, stepping up behind the blonde.

Kara threw another bale of hay onto the wagon. "Not if he doesn't want me to feel like a wilting
flower." She moved to grab another bale. "He's off doin' god knows what in preparation for our nuptials. It's givin' me some much needed space." She threw the hay with all the others.

Lena clasped her hands together, nervously wriggling them a second later. "Kara, that's what I want to talk with you about."

Kara turned to the brunette with a roll of her eyes. "Lena, c'mon, we've been over this."

"Just a few minutes of your time. Please?" She scrunched her face up in an imploring way she knew Kara couldn't resist.

Kara sighed. "Fine." She led them inside the cabin, and Lena quickly noted that it was the cleanest and tidiest cabin she'd ever seen. Kara didn't stop in the spacious area, however. She continued on inside of a room, taking off her hat and gloves and placing them on the vanity. She then turned to Lena expectantly. "Well?"

Lena stumbled for words for a moment, which she realized was more of a Kara quirk than an aspect of her own personality, and this made her smile. She missed Kara's occasional stammering.

"Lena?" she heard Kara ask again.

"What if you married me?" Lena let the words flow out in one swift go.

Kara couldn't have looked more scandalized and bewildered if she tried. "Are ya mad, woman?"

"Just," Lena said, holding up her hands by way of explanation, "just hear me out." She started to pace back and forth. "I've been speaking with Lex, and he reminded me of a change that's been happening. Well, a reality that's long been a reality, actually. The world thinks of women as sexless, gentle, subordinate. It doesn't concern itself much with the sexual lives of women, and especially with what two women may do together in the privacy of their own home. A woman's pleasure is all about a man's pleasure. Women are allowed to kiss, hold hands, be open with how they feel for one another. Why do you think the no-touching rule allows women to kiss at all?"

"Lena..."

Lena stopped in front of the blonde, hands twitching before pulling papers from her purse for Kara to look at. "There are colleges where women write each other love poems, give each other gifts, bouquets of flowers. In New England, some women declare themselves as having gotten married. Not legally, mind you, but they combine households, live together and support one another as though in a committed relationship."

Kara took off her spectacles, shaking her head as she lowered it and looked at the papers. "If ya haven't noticed, this ain't New England, Lena. And, yeah, Breighville ain't too strict about women touchin' and kissin' one another, but neither is it as free you're making these other places sound."

Lena took a step closer. "This is happening in Mississippi and Boston, Massachusetts, and other places, too. None of the places are as free as we'd like, not with so much of the world still expecting women to take a husband, but they are making strides. In Boston, there's talk of equality like none before. Women, usually wealthy ones, are declaring their independence and shunning a domestic life with men. I saw it in New York as well, with Siobhan. But I don't want Siobhan. I want you." She tucked a loose strand of Kara's hair behind her ear, causing the blonde to look up at her. "I've hired an attorney. One of the only two in town. He'll make Breighville see that women can be independent. Just look at Ms. Merriam. We don't have to ask to be seen as married, but we can ask to be seen as partners who prefer to live together...without husbands."
Kara moved away, dragging a hand along her ponytail as she stared out the doorway. "So Lex knows about your preferences."

"One preference," Lena corrected her. "And it's not truly a preference. It's the way I am."

Kara turned to her. "And an attorney from here? You would've been better off bringin' in a city one."

"As true as that may be," Lena acquiesced, extracting the papers from Kara's hand, face becoming ever the more serious by the moment, "all that is left is for you to answer the following question: Do you want to marry me or Mon-El?" She plopped down onto the lone bed, clearly awaiting an answer.

"Goodness, Lena, I told ya I'm not like you."

Lena's eyebrows bunched together. There was a stack of something beneath her bottom. She moved to the side to pull back the cover and saw a small painting of a naked woman. She picked up the stack of images. The next was a photograph of a naked woman. And so was the next after that, and the next, and so on.

Lena looked up at Kara with her most challenging glare yet. "Yes, not like me at all."

Their eyes held. If Lena had thought she'd seen Kara blush before, it was nothing compared to now. The woman was beet red. The color that flushed her face, climbing from her collar to the roots of her hair in less than a second, was imagery she would never forget.

"Sa-Sara gave me those," the blonde said. "Somethin' about helpin' me to understand thangs. And it's not like I answer to you anyway." She huffed through sentences. "You should leave. No, I tell ya what... I'll leave."

Kara made her way into the living area. Before she got far, she felt a hand on her arm and heard the thud of the purse. Papers went flying.

"Lying is unbecoming of you," she heard Lena say.

She turned to the brunette and braced herself for whatever was to come. A passing thought nagged at her to push the woman away while she still had the strength to do so, just like she'd done for weeks. It was unwise to let Lena continue to touch her right here, right now.

However long she lived, she would never forget the sight of a young Lena. Or their childhood together. Nor would she forget the adult Lena, with hair trailing far past slender shoulders, standing before her now.

Lena moved close and pillowy lips pressed against hers as soft fingers sunk into her hair. It was as though a strong breeze blew through her mind, breaking apart her thoughts to disperse them throughout the air. Her fingers curled into her palms. She nearly crushed her spectacles before dropping them to the floor and wrapping her arms around Lena's waist.

She was to be married to Mon-El. She had rules to uphold. A family name to keep respectable. But the woman before her was Lena and she'd always been weak to Lena's touch, and needs.

The brunette pressed harder against her mouth, raising herself up on dexterous toes, molding their
bodies together. It was clear that Lena needed her desperately. And she needed Lena too. There was
no way she could not. Maybe she was willing to admit that now because of the torturous past few
weeks she'd spent shunning the woman and trying to play housewife to Mon-El. Maybe it was the
way Lena's body against hers begged for her to forgo reason. Whatever it was, she was finally
admitting it to both Lena and to herself.

She moved her hands to slide along the length of the brunette's arms. They were covered, and she
longed for them to be bare. Her fingers met Lena's wrists at her neck, savoring the heat and
smoothness of the woman's skin. She squeezed softly before encircling the brunette's shoulders,
drawing small circles there and then sliding her hands down the slender back.

Lena groaned low in her throat. Contentedness filled Kara. She could illicit moans from Lena with a
simple movement of her hands. She possessed the ability to move Lena to passion.

Her triumph was lost to foreign parts of her mind when Lena probed her mouth. Her lips parted in
anticipation. But instead of an exploration inside, the brunette drew her bottom lip into a hot,
welcoming mouth and tenderly sucked on the delicate skin. Lena nibbled the curve and licked at it
slowly, swirling a plump tongue around Kara's lips, dampening them and causing the blonde's
breathing to become labored. Kara clung to the woman, shivering.

She felt Lena's hands move from her neck to her arms, then down her back, resting just above her
buttocks. When Lena pulled her closer, she arched against the soft the body, feeling the press of their
breasts. Kara knew only the basic facts about sex between men and women, and that it was
sometimes rough. But what she and Lena were doing now was all pliant and feminine and left no
room for brute force.

As Lena moved her curved hips against her, she silently swore at the clothing preventing her from
feeling Lena's bare skin. Her breathing increased. She reveled in the feeling of their bodies so close,
the touch of Lena's fingers stroking her sweat-stained back. The woman continued to tease her,
circling her mouth, pecking at the corners, but not really kissing her.

Kara knew that the brunette was restraining herself, but she was unsure why and it was frustrating.

"Lena," her low, trembling voice called out, the passion between them nearly incapacitating her
speech.

Vibrant green eyes met her own. She saw the fire in them and recognized what was fueling it. She
could also feel it. It danced along her body to ignite flames of its own, setting fire within her breasts
and between her legs. The flames left her heated and craving something she didn't fully understand.

"Kiss me," she breathed.

"I am." The brunette grinned softly, a dimple forming at her right cheek.

"You ain't. Ya teasin' me."

Suddenly, the charming smile was gone and was replaced with an alarmingly lucid expression.
"Marry me, and I'll kiss you proper."

Kara frowned. If Lena was so intent on teasing her, she would tease back. She maneuvered her
hands to rest just above the brunette's rear. Her fingertips traced just the hints of the female curves.

Their eyes locked, and the blaze in Lena's eyes returned, jaw squaring.

Kara let her touch move farther and farther along the sides until her palms rested just above the backs
of the brunette's legs, below the curves. She felt herself blush. Lena was looking at her as if drawn together so tightly she was about to explode.

Kara squeezed gently. Lena took in a sharp inhale of breath, grabbing a hold of her hands and bending them behind her. "You're a dirty player, Kara." The words fell from the brunette's lips with more bark than bite. She then lifted her mouth to the blonde's.

No hesitancy or teasing resulted this time. Lena's tongue sought the inside of Kara's mouth, and demanded a response.

Kara's heartbeat pounded loudly in her chest. She greeted the brunette's probing kiss, mimicking the woman's sweeping actions. The textures, sensations and wet slurping sounds only served to increase the hot liquid low in her belly. She clung to pale skin as the world faded away. Nothing was left but Lena and the emotions the brunette evoked in her.

Before she knew it, she was being lowered to the floor. Lena flipped raven hair to one side while looking down at her. It was possibly the most breathtaking thing Kara had ever seen.

"You are so beautiful," Lena whispered, dragging a finger along her cheek. She could feel the pressure of Lena's thigh against her center. She tried to breathe, but felt she couldn't.

"Don't be afraid," Lena said.

"Lena..."

"Do you trust me?"

Kara didn't get a chance to answer that. They heard the sound of horse hooves approaching. Mon-El was back.

Lena hissed, moving away from Kara faster than Kara had time to react. She watched as Lena scrambled for a purse and papers. Intense eyes met hers as she slowly pulled herself to a standing position. Her legs felt wobbly. "Think about my proposal," the brunette said, exiting out the back entrance.

And then she was gone.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Regarding the inquiry in the chapter 8 comments section... No, this story is not based on "Disobedience." Until recently, I'd never heard of "Disobedience," and the setup for this story had been written years ago by me under my Greatshow LiveJournal account. It was for a different fandom, but I never got around to working on it beyond a snippet. I've only fleshed it out with the Supercorp fandom. I have noticed the similarities with "Disobedience." I remember wondering what city to have Lena reside in before deciding on New York. But from what I've heard about the true focus/heart of the "Disobedience" book, and how it ends, this story is certainly not that one. Anyway, this is one of those rare times that I leave a significant and/or lengthy note before a chapter.

Kara stood there in the middle of the living area thinking. Mon-El had come in, kissed her on the cheek and went off to relieve himself, and yet she had barely moved. Her mind was too busy replaying the events that had transpired between herself and Lena just minutes ago. She kept thinking of the way Lena had looked at her, eyes so mesmerizing and penetrating that a mere glance could char one to the bone. Lena's mouth had pressed against hers with such fervor that she could detect every feeling, every emotion, the brunette intended to convey. That mouth had blended with her own in ways that not only made her aware of desires long buried, but that gave her a sense of unity and belonging. She felt in sync with Lena. At home. And standing here dazed and enraptured by that knowledge was sobering. She needed answers.

Picking her glasses up off the floor, she headed out the front door. She didn't hear Mon-El entering.

"Kar? Hey, Kar?" he said, coming from the backyard's outhouse and holding up his britches. "Know where more corncobs are? We're out. I used 'em up again, but I promise to get more. Or some soft paper; that might be better." He stepped farther into the room, looking around. "Kara?"

Only the wind blowing against the open front door was left to answer.

Kara didn't wait to enter once Sara opened the door. She pushed past the blonde, briefly looking around the woman's cabin. Sara had acquired it as a gift from Lar and Rhea before they'd threatened Lena with talk of unscrupulousness. Sara had considered getting another place to show that she didn't agree with their latest actions, but Lena had brushed it off, and so had Kara.

It was Sara who'd been there for her during the weeks she'd tried to be Mon-El's everything and had shut Lena out. They'd visit each other, talk about how to make their lives easier, and hunt when Kara wasn't busy smithing or tending to Mon-El's needs. It was Sara who had advised her on trying to find some semblance of peace with Mon-El while also advising her to come to her senses and realize that a union with him ultimately wasn't going to work unless she was resigned to be unhappy for the rest
of her life. It was Sara who'd pushed her toward embracing her true desires.

Sighing, Kara turned to the woman. "Why didn't ya tell me it'd be like this?"

Sara closed the door, looking to Kara curiously. "Well, hello to you too," she said, scoffing. "Am I to guess what it is you're talking about?"

"Kissin'..." Kara paused, a blush tainting her cheeks as she waved her hands around erratically "...and all that other stuff."

Sara laughed. She moved to grab a knife off the wall, before looking over her shoulder at Kara. "So I take it you and Lena did the deed."

"What?" Kara spluttered, her blush deepening. "Nu--oh."

Sara moved to the kitchen table and began sharpening her knife, lifting her head a few seconds later and raising an eyebrow, clearly suggesting that Kara continue.

"We were holding each other real close and --"

"-- You've kissed Lena before."

Kara shook her from side to side. "Not like that."

Sara chuckled. "She used tongue, I see."

Kara bowed her head in embarrassment, going to take a seat at the table. "I never felt anything like that. It stirred thangs."

"I bet." Sara smirked.

"Just -- will you be frank with me? All we did was kiss, but I think we came close to doin' more."

A grin spread across Sara's lips. "I wouldn't want to spoil you."

"Sara..." Kara offered one of her pleading looks. It always worked on her family, and on Winn, and she'd come to discover that it worked on Sara too.

"All right," Sara sighed, halting her work with a thoughtful look. "You see what I'm doing now?"

"Sharpening yer knife?"

"I'm preparing to hunt me some squirrel. Corner it and then go in for the kill. That's sort of what Lena is doing with you."

Kara scratched her forehead, the action indicating a detour in her train of thought.

Sara batted the blonde's hand away, undeterred. "Who was on top?"

"Lena."

"See?!" Sara exclaimed, her hand triumphantly slamming against the table.

"I... Huh?" Kara's eyebrows furrowed.

"Right now, she's doing the chasing. She's got you all flustered. You have to chase her too. Where I want to kill the squirrel, Lena wants to catch it."
Kara nodded in a perturbed manner. "I'm the squirrel?"

"Yep."

Kara took a moment to consider this. A squirrel? Something to give chase to? Was Lena in it for the thrill? A conquest of sorts? No, she decided. She had seen the sincerity in those green eyes. And the woman's proposal meant a lifetime of commitment. "Well, I don't think Lena just wants to catch me."

"You're right." Sara picked up her knife and pointed it at Kara. "She also wants to keep you."

Kara shook head confusedly. "Can we stop makin' the squirrel comparison now?"

Sara shrugged, going back to sharpening her knife. "If you want. Was a fine metaphor, if you ask me."

"Just tell me what to expect." Kara needed to know. The erotic painting and photographs Sara had given her were eye-opening in the sense that Kara had felt something stir low in her belly when looking at them, and she'd pictured what it would be like to touch any of those women in ways she'd become curious about, but she was still missing so much. The painting and photographs had been in black and white while Lena was a breathing, in-color person she could interact with.

Sara didn't respond at first. She just kept perfecting her blade. After a few minutes, she got up to get a small rag and dab it with polish.

"Sara, I'm no youngin. Just tell me."

Sara's shoulders dropped. "Like I said, I don't want to spoil you. It's more fun finding out about these things on your own. I wouldn't want Lena killing me for clouding your viewpoint. All pairings have their own flow." She turned to Kara with a pensive look. "But I suppose I can tell you a few things, and so Lena's not always in control." She moved to Kara and whispered in her ear as if saying anything out loud was too scandalous, all the while holding up two fingers in front of Kara's face and changing the motions of the digits.

This time when Kara blushed and her eyes widened due to whispers against her ear, it had nothing to do with a pull toward the one doing the whispering.

It was hours later when Kara looked up at the ceiling in her bedroom. The moonlight filtered in, and she was in slight awe of the way the light and shadows played against each other. She'd returned home to a rambling Mon-El; her betrothed had gone on about her leaving without letting him know where she'd be, and something about corncobs. She didn't know what he'd been so worried about it. It's not like she'd never been out without him.

Except, recently, she hadn't. Minus the times Sara had convinced him to let her have some time with a friend, she'd been with him every time she'd stepped out. It was like he was deathly afraid of something happening to her. Or rather...deathly afraid of something intimate happening between her and Lena. Something like what happened earlier in the day.

She put her hands under her head, watching a particularly funny-looking shadow. It resembled a face, horrified by whatever had spooked it. Kara supposed that that's what all three of them — Mon-El, Lena and herself — felt like inside. They all had something to lose no matter the pairing. If she stayed with Mon-El, she wouldn't be happy. And neither would Lena. If she chose Lena, Mon-El would be heartbroken, and it would put her family in jeopardy; Lena might also lose her job and be
subject to god knows what by the town.

As she thought about it further, she couldn't settle on what betrothed even meant. It's not like she'd ever had a choice in the matter, or that she and Mon-El had ever acted like a couple until recently. She knew about people in other parts of the world getting to choose, or at least consult with their parents about, their spouse. But her fate had been decided by her birth parents before she was even born. She suddenly had a bitter taste in her mouth regarding that decision. It was a decision she'd had no part in, and was now dictating how she should live. It made her want to see Lena all the more.

Abruptly, footsteps sounded nearby and she looked toward the entrance. Rising on an elbow, her heart sped up as she saw a light, no doubt from a lamp or lantern, and foot shadows at the slit beneath the door. She'd been dreading Mon-El trying to seek her out at night. The thought of sleeping with him, whether married or not, put her off. Surely he wouldn't try to force her? She watched with bated breath as the foot shadows lingered for another minute before disappearing. She fell back against her bed with a heavy sigh. She knew now what she would decide.

Lena opened the door. A part of her harbored a sense of dread, for if Kara was standing in front of her door in broad daylight with a bouquet of brilliantly white flowers, it may very well be to wish her goodbye. But another, larger part of her hoped that Kara was here with happier news, and so she smiled. "Kara," she breathed.

"These are for you," Kara said, handing her the flowers. "I remember you like these kind. You like a lot different kinds, but, yeah."

Lena laughed. "That I do." She accepted the bouquet from Kara's fingers. "But there are a few I'm especially fond of. These are Anemone hepatica. You know...some believe they can treat certain ailments. And also --"

"-- I accept your proposal," Kara said. To Lena, it was clear that any other time, Kara would be interested in hearing all about the history behind an item, but that all the blonde wanted to do right now was let her know of the wish to be with her. And this overwhelmed Lena; she felt more joy in this moment than she ever thought possible. She hadn't even realized she'd pulled Kara into a tight hug, their bodies achingly close, until she breathed in Kara's intoxicating scent. She stared at the beautiful, tan neck sprouting shiny blond hair.

"But," Kara said, pulling back and clearing her throat as though flustered, "only if you can promise me that my folks will be awright."

"I can," Lena affirmed.

They stood there, awkward and lingering, before Lena remembered herself. "Well, shall we?"

They entered slowly. Lena racked her brain for anything to say, to break the tension, but Kara spun her around before she could. She could see the want in those blue eyes as the blonde's lips moved toward hers, but she knew they couldn't do this here. Not right now. "Kara," she said, holding the blonde a safe distance away, "I have company."

Kara's head bowed a little, almost as if defeated. "Siobhan is here."

"She's asleep upstairs." Lena confirmed, hesitantly leading them into the living area.
Kara appeared to accept the reality of their situation, but her eyes still reflected the truth of what she'd rather be doing. It made Lena flush. The memory of Kara's mouth, the way it tasted, and Kara's hands on her, were still very fresh. The woman looked around with much interest, which Lena concluded was in part to ease their interaction and part genuine surprise. She must not had paid much attention to the changes the last time she was here, when they'd been at Lar's mercy.

"You've changed the place."

"Siobhan did. Just a little."

Kara's gaze drifted toward the small desk with two chairs at opposite ends in the center of the room. Her expression indicated that she recognized the game set atop it. "Chess?"

Lena's eyes widened in surprise. "You're familiar with the game?"

"A bit." Kara shrugged. "There were these two old men who always used to play outside my blacksmith shop while waitin' for whatever service they'd requested. I learned some of the plays from them. They played for about five years, on and off. Eventually, they stopped venturin' into town, but I always wondered what happened to 'em."

Lena smiled. "I'm glad you know of it." She gestured toward the table. "It's quite the romantic game, you know."

Kara arched a brow. "And you've been playing this 'romantic game' with Siobhan?"

"And with Sam," Lena confessed.

Both of Kara's eyebrows rose.

"But not in the way you're making it sound," Lena chuckled. "Come on." She walked to the desk, pulling out a chair. "We can play while we discuss our situation."

"You're close with Sam now?" Kara moved to sit.

"She was there for me. The others too."

Kara nodded guiltily. It was clear to the both of them that their separation hadn't been easy for Lena either and that 'the others' meant Lena's other employees, as well as Siobhan.

Lena set the board, the both of them stealing glances as the quiet continued to creep up on them as it so often did.

"I don't wanna talk about our current situation," Kara admitted. "Not directly anyhow. We can talk about that tomorrow."

"Then what do you want to talk about?"

"You. If we're to do this marriage thang, then I wanna know more about you. The adult you."

Lena sat back, eyes watching Kara curiously. "Well, since you know all the big stuff already, I assume you want to know the minor things? You've known my favorite color since forever."

"Red, yes," Kara stated, clearly set on attaining more information. "But I don't mean stuff like that. I mean everythang."

"Everything?"
"Everythang."

Lena folded her arms across her chest and looked to the board. She already knew what move she wanted to make, but it also depended on accurately anticipating Kara's play. "That isn't simply something revealed in a day's time," she finally said, gaze meeting Kara's.

"Still," Kara replied, sounding resolute, "we can start today."

Lena sat up straight, hands clapping before her. "Okay then. But I get to ask you things too."

Kara nodded her agreement.

"Make your first move." Lena gestured to the board. "And make it good."

"I thought you said the game is romantic."

"Well," Lena explained, "only in the sense that it was sometimes used as a social function to allow young men and women to meet with the goal of romance at the game's end. It was used as an excuse by daughters to woo men to their bedchambers." Her eyes momentarily found Kara's. The use of the term bedchambers hung in the air like a mouth-watering aroma refusing to let up. "But," she continued, "the game was not mostly about that. Players sacrificed pieces for the sake of introducing tactical complications to get a lead in development, and there was always a sudden attack, with the opponent being mated with a flourish. It was only earlier this decade that the game became more strategic with long-term planning." She leaned on her elbows and tightened the grip of her clasped hands. "Because of this, I'd wager it's the former style of play you witnessed."

Kara hummed, not seeming to fully digest everything Lena was divulging. "If you say so." She moved a piece.

Lena's mouth fell slightly open. Kara had chosen The King’s Gambit. It always was one of the most hostile openings at White's command. It surrendered a pawn and revealed the White king at the same time on Move 2 in exchange for swift development. If Lena was not watchful with Black, White could have a quick checkmate. But she was too experienced for that.

Kara was looking at her with a self-satisfied smirk. "So...what type of books you enjoy readin'?"


Kara raised an eyebrow. "Guess you have a hungry mind. You always did." She pushed her spectacles back up on her face, ever studying the board.

"Suppose so. But this isn't about our youngest selves, right? So let's try not to compare." Lena knew that the thrust 3…d5 was championed as the best route to equality for Black, but Kara was still determined to give her hell. The blonde played 8. h4!? Be7 9. h5 10. Nd5?!. "You still afraid of irregular patterns of holes?" Lena asked.

"I am, but only if they look like disease or skin. You still 'fraid of worms?"

"Very much so." She chanced a glance at Kara. "What relaxes you? I don't think it's still climbing trees. Is it still visiting the lake -- our lake? Skipping rocks?"

"Smithing and being in my own head," Kara responded, eyes still surveying the board. "Thinkin' about all the places I've never been to and have never seen. It's not as somber as it sounds, though. And don't get me wrong; I pay attention to my work, but I can really lose myself in it. Ya know?"
Lena did know. Losing herself in her work is what had helped her get through being shut out by Kara.

"But lately," Kara continued, "being around you relaxes me."

Lena paused. She felt her body warm at the admittance, and looked up at the blonde. But Kara was still focused on the board. Lena tried to decipher the woman's strategy. 10...Bg5?! would lead to bleak terrain after 11. h6! Nxf3+ 12. Bxf3 0-0! 13. d4!. Kara was still down a pawn and appeared to have barely any reimbursement after 13. Nxe3 fxe3 14 d5 Nb4 15. a3 Na6 16. Bxe3 0-0, with Kara's king more exposed than the Black equivalent. "You relax me too, Kara," Lena confessed.

"Have you always known you were..." Kara let the question hang in the air as she drummed up significant pressure on the long diagonal after 17...Bg4?!

There was a soothing flow to the room as they played more moves. Lena eventually consolidated and went on the attack. "No," she finally answered and looked up at Kara. "But once I understood -- truly understood -- I couldn't stop thinking about making my way back to you." A wide smile graced her features. "I shouldn't try to fool myself; I always thought about making my way back to you."

Kara's eyes met hers. They stayed staring at each other even as they played moves.

Black's counterattack was close to triumphant, but not close enough. Lena was a pawn up with a good chance of winning. But the game ended in a draw by a reiteration. White's developed passed pawn on b7 was enough to persuade Black to take the draw in hand.

"A draw?" Kara asked.

Lena grinned. "I'm impressed." And she meant it. She had been playing the game since she was a child, after she'd left Kara and Lionel had introduced her to it. And yet Kara had proven herself a skilled opponent from simply watching a couple of old men play, albeit repeatedly. Lena figured that she had been distracted and hadn't played her best game, but she had to give Kara credit where credit was due. She wanted to know if the woman had natural skill or just a really great memory.

Kara stared at the board in amazement, clearly proud of herself.

"But, Kara... I don't like trying to get to know you through a game. We obviously didn't do much talking."

Kara chewed on the inside of her cheek, apparently considering Lena's words.

"I think the best way for us to get know each other better is to live together, like we've planned."

Kara opened her mouth to speak, but a child's voice uttering Lena's name sounded off behind them.

Lena instantly stood and moved to the girl with a smile. "Hazel." She watched Hazel wipe the sleep away from her eyes before taking her by the hand and ushering her toward Kara. "Kara, I think you've heard of Clarence. This is Hazel, his daughter. I've developed quite the bond with this little one."

Kara flashed a bright smile, possibly the brightest smile Lena had seen, and knelt before the girl. "Hello, Hazel."

"Hello."

"My, what big, beautiful eyes you have."
"The better to see you with," the girl giggled.

Kara chuckled heartily, exchanging a brief glance with Lena. "I see someone's been readin' **Little Red Riding Hood.**"

Hazel nodded vehemently. "But pa don't like it. Says it's not a story for youngins."

Lena rested caring hands on the girl's shoulders, redirecting the small face up toward her. "That's why we've been going through a whole selection of friendlier tales. Isn't that right?"

"Yes, ma'am!" the girl responded excitedly. She seemed to be thinking about all of the different stories, before her eyes trained back on Kara. She ran a hand down Kara's pants leg. "Do ya always wear trousers?"

"I do. And you know what?" The corner of Kara's eyes crinkled with enthusiasm. "They're very comfortable."

"They are?!!" Hazel's gaze shot back up to Lena. "Can I wear trousers too? Like Kara?"

"We'd have to ask your father about that," Lena replied. "But since you like dresses so much, I don't know."

"Can I like both?" the girl asked earnestly.

Kara and Lena laughed.

"Of course," Lena assured.

Kara stood, patting the girl on the head, somewhat distracted by the curls that were sandy brown with hints of dark brown. Her eyes soon caught Lena's. "I take it this is also what ya meant by 'company'?"

"Yes," Lena said sheepishly. "Didn't know how to segue from Siobhan."

"I understand."

Lena looked around awkwardly. "Why don't you stay for dinner? Or supper even? My cooking has greatly improved."

Kara waved a dismissive hand. "Nah. I think I oughta be gettin' back."

"But..." Lena stepped away from Hazel and in front of Kara, eyes reflecting concern. "You still intend to..."

"Be with you?" Kara cupped the brunette's face in her hands. "You bet."

"Good." Lena grinned. "We can discuss everything tomorrow."


"Oh, and Kara..."

"Don't tell Mon-El," the blonde guessed her train of thought. "That much goes without sayin.'"

"At least not until we have everything worked out," Lena affirmed.
"I hear ya."

Kara's eyes made contact with Siobhan's at the stairway before heading toward the door and exiting it. Lena saw the exchange and wondered how long the woman had been standing there and how much she'd heard.

"Will Kara be there?" Hazel asked.
"Perhaps." Lena held up the purple dress in front of the girl.
"She's like a prince."
Lena smiled. "You think so?"
"She has a ponytail, the eye thingies, and trousers. Like the prince in one of ya stories."
"Spectacles," Lena corrected. "That's what the eye thingies are called."
Hazel giggled. "Funny name."

Lena ran a hand along the dress. She would have to remember to not make up another fairy tale about Kara. It was just that sometimes she felt she could tell a better romance than the children's books had to offer. Only now did she think about the fact that Hazel had yet to meet her employees. If the girl had, then seeing Kara in pants after seeing Sam and Maggie wouldn't have been such a shock. As it stood, it wouldn't take much for Hazel to connect the dots and figure out that a few of her stories were indeed based on Kara. Hazel was three, but she was sharp.

"I think this dress will look lovely on you," Lena said, hugging the girl close.

Even though it hadn't been long since Lena had become acquainted with the skinny, quiet child, she felt like she'd known Hazel for much longer. They spent an incredible amount of time together on Lena's off days and even some days when Lena got off work. Clarence brought her by in the mornings when Lena didn't have overseer duties, and picked her up once he was done with his ranchhand labor. In the evenings when he didn't have to work, he'd also allow Hazel time with Lena. And when Hazel wasn't with her, Clarence had one of the other two women he trusted look after the girl.

"You wear necklaces like this one?" Hazel asked, holding up one of the pieces of jewelry from a stand near the bed.
"Not as much anymore," Lena replied softly, absentmindedly touching a hand to her neck.
Hazel's eyes followed. "Who gave ya that one?"
Lena grinned. "Kara."
"See?" Hazel's eyes went wide. "Just like the prince."
"You'll get to wear a necklace too," Lena chuckled. "In fact, you can have one if you like."

Hazel smiled shyly, as if receiving gifts was as unfamiliar to her as clean clothes and healthcare had been. But these past few weeks, her bruises had healed considerably. She talked more and more, and had an innocent and infectious sense of humor. Lena concluded that the girl must have at times talked
with Clarence a lot in whatever home in the woods they'd lived in, for, even with as smart as Hazel was, her speech progression couldn't all be attributed to time with Lena. Before, she'd must have simply been shy and/or out of practice when it came to conversation.

"Lena?"

"Yes, Hazel?"

"Can I call you 'ma'?"

Lena's features significantly softened. "I don't think you can, honey."

"But why? Why don't I get ta have a ma?"

Lena hugged the girl close. She didn't have an answer for that, and she felt a sharp pain in her chest. For so many years, she'd felt empty inside, always like a part of her was missing. But she'd pressed on, hoping that the dull ache would go away. It had subsided somewhat with Siobhan, but it had still been there. And now, having only been back in town for a couple of months, the emptiness had been filled by a blonde she'd always longed for and a child she'd only known for a short time. She silently berated herself for ever thinking she needed to settle, that nothing would ever be enough. These two were enough. She just didn't know how long she would have them for.

Kara was almost asleep when she heard the distinct sound of pebbles clashing against her bedroom window. She leapt up to look out at the midnight landscape and spotted Lena staring back at her with a smile. Opening the window in a hurry, she wasn't able to keep the surprise out of her voice.

"Lena?"

Lena dropped the remaining pebbles to the ground and dusted her hands on her dress. "Sorry about attacking your cabin," she said, walking to look up at Kara.

"It's more of a log house than a cabin, but, Lena, what in the --"

"-- I needed to see you, and there's no messenger I could send for this. So..." She looked nervous, apologetic almost. "We should keep our voices down," she whispered.

"What's this about?" Kara asked.

"I never specified where we should talk tomorrow. We can meet at my house, after the gathering. You will be at the gathering, won't you?"

"Yeah."

"Good." Lena smiled.

"But what does that have to do with anythang?"

"The attorney I told you about. He's willing to meet tomorrow. It's his earliest opening. He knows that many in town, us included, will be at the gathering from mid-morning to noon or later, and so he's agreed to meet afterward. I don't know, perhaps he wants to enjoy the get-together first as well."

"I see." Kara bit on her bottom lip, looking at all of Lena. The brunette looked so ethereal, so beautiful, under the moonlight.
Lena stared about, pulling her shawl closer around her shoulders. It was uncharacteristically chilly out tonight. Just a little.

"Well," Lena said, looking at her, "I should be going." She moved to turn away.

"Lena, wait." Kara Leaned against the window, sticking her head out.

Lena turned to her, confusion plastered on her elegant features.

"Can I kiss you?"

Lena looked taken aback, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. She moved to Kara and placed a hand against the window frame as though it were an extension of Kara's arm. The placement was soft, hesitant. "Kara... If I kiss you right now, I'll surely climb through that window. And goodness knows I won't be able to tear myself away."

Kara felt her cheeks and blood warm. The message was clear, and all the more evident by the desire radiating from Lena's eyes. She settled on nodding her understanding.

Lena moved back slowly, eyes still assessing Kara.

"You're breaking a rule, ya know. Being out late like this," Kara teased. It was the least she could do to balance out the tension.

Lena chuckled. "Oh, hush." She moved atop Wrangler and sat up proudly, a perfect picture of resoluteness and contentedness. She stared at Kara one last time before riding off.

And Kara thought that every time she was certain Lena never looked more beautiful, she was proven wrong.

"I hope they have some good food," Kara whispered.

Alex, fanning herself silly, looked over at her. "Father Mable knows to have extra delicious meals on days like this. But what he should be worried 'bout is the air circulation in this place," she said, looking around at the church windows as if she were about to die of a lack of ventilation. She turned the fan on William, ensuring that he got a breeze as well.

"Don't worry. We'll be outside soon enough," Kara told her. "And the weather won't remain the way it is for much longer. Come October, you'll probably be wishin' for the heat." She watched as Alex rolled her eyes, but she couldn't concern herself too much with her sister's minor troubles. The heat never bothered her like it bothered Alex, but she still felt the need to adjust her collar. She looked around at the townspeople, some still ushering in. All she wanted to do was eat and meet up with Lena. Despite what she'd told Alex, she wasn't certain how long it'd be before they relocated in the field some yards away from the church for the gathering.

It was clear that a number of townspeople were still wary of Lena and how she and her family had left for the city. They didn't like her looking into Anna Davies's rape, no matter that she hadn't uncovered anything. Kara couldn't help but think about how Clarence and Hazel fit into the perceptions. Lena obviously cared about them both.

Kara looked over to where Hazel was sitting a few feet away. Her purple dress, with ruffles at the collar and cuffs, somehow complimented her eyes. Kara had seen it when the child had briefly
turned around. She was so very pretty and could easily be mistaken for Lena's own child, what with her angular features and sharp, pouty mouth. Kara reasoned that perhaps that was part of the bond Lena had with the girl; she could envision her as a younger version of herself or as a child she might have had if only she'd married a man. Kara had never thought about having children with someone until this very moment. A part of her felt saddened by it. It was the one thing she'd never be able to offer Lena. That, and an official marriage recognized by God.

She watched as Lena returned from wherever she'd gone to and spoke softly to Hazel. She'd wanted to get a better look at Lena, only having seen the back of her since she arrived with Alex, but it was suddenly time to usher everyone outside and to the areas of the field, near one of the two town schools, that would be hosting the gathering.

Mr. Ray stopped by to say hi as she, Alex and William made their way outside. Jonathan was behind them talking with Alaina's mother; Alex didn't seem to mind, more concerned with where Mon-El might be. Kara, letting her know that Mon-El had said something about sorting out his grandfather's will and that he wouldn't be attending because of that, knew that this would at least make her day less complicated.

Sighing, she breathed in the fresh air as they made their way over to the field. The sun shone brightly, birds tweeted and occasionally hopped from one branch to another. Several tables of food were set up every few feet apart. Games, children's games especially, were in place in some of the empty areas. Groups of people sat on blankets in shaded spots with their loved ones. Like harvesttime, which had already begun for some and was just beginning or around the corner for others, this was the time of year used to share information about one another's lives. It was the social event many in town looked forward to, and even more so this year since no work other than those who'd helped set up the festivities was required. If it were any other day, Kara would find such an atmosphere welcoming. Refreshing. But today, with everyone dressed in their Sunday best and chatting without a care in the world, she felt like an outsider. The things she wanted no longer meshed with the traditional views of the town. Perhaps they never did. After all, there weren't many girls or women lining up to be a blacksmith; there weren't any.

"Enjoying yourselves?"

Kara turned toward the familiar voice. Ms. Merriam smiled their way, one of the woman's signature feathered hats blowing in the breeze on top of her head.

"Ms. Merriam," Kara and Alex said in unison.

"Been sometime since we've had a chance to talk again," the older woman said. "That goes double for you, Alexandria."

Alex smiled through gritted teeth. Kara knew that her sister despised being called by her full name. "I've been so busy with married life and all," Alex said, running a hand through William's brilliant head of hair. "And this little guy."

Ms. Merriam's eyes narrowed as she looked over the brunette's shoulder. "Yes, I can see your husband is well taken care of."

"Ms. Merriam," Kara and Alex said in unison. "I've been so busy with married life and all," Alex said, running a hand through William's brilliant head of hair. "And this little guy."

Ms. Merriam's eyes narrowed as she looked over the brunette's shoulder. "Yes, I can see your husband is well taken care of."

Alex's eyes followed Ms. Merriam's line of vision to Jonathan a few feet away, oblivious to his wife and engrossed in conversation with Alaina's mother. Alaina herself looked absolutely bored holding onto her mother's hand. Kara silently groaned. She didn't like the implication.

Alex cleared her throat. "Yes, well, Emma's a good family friend. She's Alaina's mother, as you know. And Alaina is William's betrothed." Alex looked off to the side. "And, oh, look -- I see
another family friend. If you'll excuse me."

Kara smirked as she watched her sister scurry off toward Maggie at a food table. Kara could use a food table right about now. Instead, she was stuck with Ms. Merriam.

"Good morning," Lena's voice abruptly sounded near her.

She turned to view Lena and Hazel smiling up at her. She saw a light blush on Lena's cheek, and quickly deduced the reason for it. Today was of course the day they would meet with the attorney for their union. But there was more to it than that.

Lena was dressed differently than usual. Her dark hair was done up in a braid that hung over her right shoulder, a silk ribbon outlining the circular pattern at the top. The ribbon matched her silver silk dress and half-black bodice, which both did their part in highlighting her curves and reminding Kara of what she'd been pressed up against and had only briefly touched. But it wasn't like she could forget.

She fought to tear her eyes away, to not think of how much more she wanted to explore. At this point in time, Lena wasn't someone she could openly desire, if ever. And Ms. Merriam's gaze and instincts were acute. She couldn't give the old woman any reason to suspect that her relationship with Lena was anything but platonic and sisterly. "Hi," she said, forcing her eyes to meet Lena's.

Ms. Merriam bent down toward Hazel. "Your name is Hazel, ain't it? My, aren't you a pretty thang."

Hazel beamed. "Lena gave me this dress. She said I'm a princess."

"You sure are," Ms. Merriam assured, straightening to look up at Lena. "So you watch this little girl when her father is workin'?"

"Sometimes," Lena said, a soft smile stretching across her lips.

"How nice of you."

Kara grimaced. When they were children, Ms. Merriam had often told them that kindness breeds kindness and to be nice instead of nasty. There was a chance that the woman was proud of Lena. But there was also the fact that Ms. Merriam wasn't very nice herself.

"Kara?" Hazel queried, pulling on her pants leg. "Ya look handsome."

Lena stifled a giggle.

Ms. Merriam's eyes nearly bugged out. "Not handsome, child. Kara's a woman." She looked Kara over — the way her hair was pulled back into its usual ponytail, the spectacles in place of makeup, and the suspender suit. "Not a very lady-like woman, mind you, but a woman nonetheless. So you should say she looks pretty. Or lovely even."

"You look pretty, Kara," Lena piped up, the dimple in her right cheek more prominent than ever.

"Thank you," Kara replied, putting on her best effort not to blush. She looked down at Hazel. "And thank you too, Hazel. I accept compliments in any form."

Ms. Merriam shook her head disapprovingly, but was apparently content to let the subject drop. "Do you mind if I introduce this sweet girl to others from the church?"

Lena looked as though she wanted to object, her attachment to the child clear.
"I promise I'll have her back with ya in no time. I'll be right over there," Ms. Merriam pointed to the crowd ahead of her, and to a group of older women in particular.

"As long as she's not gone long," Kara interjected. She was all too aware of Ms. Merriam's standing in the church community, and in general, and knew that Hazel being introduced by the woman could only help the town better accept both Hazel and her father.

Ms. Merriam smiled. "Appreciate it." She took Hazel by the hand, and Lena nodded at the girl to let Ms. Merriam take her. She was as attached to Lena as Lena was to her.

"Ya don't mind?" Kara asked as they observed Ms. Merriam joining her friends with Hazel at her side.

"Of course I do," Lena nearly whined. "That woman may be a great a cook and all, but I'm not entirely sure of her motherly instincts or guardian skills. Plus, she's always hated me. And now I've just left her with a child she knows I care about."

"Lena, c'mon. Ms. Merriam is many things, and can be detrimental in a number of ways, but she'd never harm a child."

Lena frowned slightly as Hazel explained something to the group of women with wide gestures, and the women belly laughed. "Perhaps."

Kara guided Lena's attention back to her. "So where's Clarence, or Siobhan?"

"Clarence said he couldn't afford to take a day off from his duties. I told him it was nonsense and that I'd cover for him, but he insisted. I'm sure he knew what a great opportunity today would be for him to blend in, but, as you know, he's not very sociable. If he wanted to blend in, he would have attempted that years ago. But I suspect he wants more for Hazel." Lena looked over at the child with a grin before turning back to Kara. "As for Siobhan, she's somewhere around here talking with Father Mable. The woman doesn't have a religious bone in her body, but she's convinced she can talk Father Mable into giving her a role working at the church. You see, she's been complaining about women's jobs in this town being work that would ruin her hands and/or will to live, and that taking on a job with me would require her being more conniving than she already is."

"At least she's honest," Kara laughed.

"Indeed," Lena grinned. "What about Mon-El?"

"Tendin' to something concerning his grandfather's will."

"And are your parents not coming?"

"Unlike yours, they never were big on the gatherings," Kara said, thankful that the same applied to Mon-El's parents. She didn't know what she'd do if Lar and Rhea showed up here.

Lena's demeanor suddenly appeared to change, and she stepped in front of her then. "So we're all alone for the time being?"

Kara stared into the brunette's viridescent eyes. There was something peculiar about the sparkle in those eyes. Something that made Kara want to pull her close and kiss her. She could smell her lily scent and feel the alluring warmth of her body. "Seems like," she settled on.

Lena tucked a finger beneath one of Kara's suspender straps and briefly ran the digit up and down it. "Never saw you in these before," she whispered. "They're nice."
Kara felt her eyes flutter but refusing to decidedly close. It wasn't that long ago that she thought she'd never see Lena again. When the brunette had left, it had seemed that would be it. It was, after all, the reason she'd given up her only necklace. And now that Lena was back, she still had a bit of difficulty believing that all of this was real. Lena wanted her when the woman could have any man, any suitor. She knew that Lena's inclination toward women gave her an advantage, but why her? Why not Siobhan? Why not any other woman? Despite whatever concern existed regarding Lionel's legacy, Lena had come back to town just to be with her? To marry her even?

Nothing was closer to a dream than being with Lena in all the ways afforded a husband, Kara was starting to realize. And just the thought made her weak in the knees.

Ms. Merriam brought Hazel back over and left them just as quickly, apparently determined to get back to her gossiping friends.

"You could come over and picnic with us," Lena said," grabbing a hold of Hazel's hand. "I've set up a spot by a tree."

Before Kara could answer, they were called over by Lena's employees and Alex. She and Lena turned to see James and his family, Alex, William, Maggie, Sam and Winn all sitting on blankets in a circular fashion. They walked to the group and those unfamiliar with each other were introduced. By the time everyone had been filled in on who was who and their relationship to one another, Kara had eaten two chicken drumsticks, and Hazel was stuffing her mouth with mash potatoes and rambling on about a drawing of a dog she made. This piqued William's interest, as he noted some of his own drawings, namely a shield to fight evil guards. Then James's daughters, Addie and Lela, joined in. Addie, being older than all of the children, talked about being able to knit doll clothes instead. For a moment, Kara felt overwhelmed by little voices.

"Lena, you knit?" James's wife, Opal, asked.

"Not very well, I'm afraid," Lena replied apologetically.

"Oh, that's no problem, boss," Maggie chimed in. "Alex here could teach ya."

Alex clearly didn't take well to that suggestion, which didn't go unnoticed by Lena, who looked down to fiddle with some grass. Her red lipstick was more vibrant than the roses adorning one of the picnic baskets, and Kara again found her attention settling on the brunette's mouth. She knew she should tell Alex about what happened between Lena and herself, but Alex was so cold to Lena already and she didn't want anyone else trying dissuade her from being with Lena. Mon-El and his folks were enough.

Lena noticed her staring and looked up with a blush. "Stop it," she whispered.

"Stop what?" Kara's shoulders lifted and fell with a shrug.

"Staring."

"I can't help it. You look..."

A strong breeze passed by and nearly took off Maggie's hat.

"Lena's too good at her job," Sam finally added to the conversation. "Often doesn't have time for women's work. 'Lest it's cookin' meals for herself and washin' clothes when time allows."

Lena and Sam took this chance to delve into the intricacies of being an overseer, with Winn and Maggie corroborating or disagreeing every now and then. Lena laughed her captivating laugh.
And Kara just watched her. She couldn't discern why she was so aware of Lena's every movement now, except maybe as a side effect of their prolonged kissing the other day. Her gaze moved to the brunette's bodice and she pondered what fabric, besides the silk of the dress, lie beneath it. How the full, pale bosom would look bare and against her tan hand. Her blood immediately warmed and she wiped a palm across her brow. She needed to keep her mind preoccupied with anything other than Lena.

"I think Lena and Kara were hoping for some time alone," Sam said.

The group all looked to the two, with Opal appearing confused as to the implication. Apparently, she was the only adult present, besides Alex, who didn't know the true nature of the relationship between the two women. James told her he'd explain later. Kara hoped the woman was understanding, but, because of the prejudice that existed in the town regarding people of color, it was unlikely she would be believed even if she tried to expose them as deviants. There were already enough people giving James and his family the side-eye. Kara figured that at least it seemed James trusted his wife.

The group, all except for Alex, agreed to excuse Kara and Lena, and Lena offered a look of thank you to Sam. It seemed that Sam was to Lena what Sara was to Kara. Alex was staring at Kara with a look of worry and skepticism, as if hoping that the two women were simply catching up on days they might have missed together.

As Lena and Kara were about to part, with Hazel in tow, Siobhan arrived. Her gaze focused solely on Kara and Lena, but Winn jumped up to intercept. "Siobhan, hi," he said. "Mind walking with me for a bit?"

"Oh no," James bemoaned with humor in his eyes.

From what Kara could decipher, Winn was interested in Siobhan beyond a platonic context. Kara knew from Lena that Siobhan had been interested in men, but Siobhan didn't strike Kara as the kind of woman who would want a country boy like Winn or who'd give up on Lena without more of a fight. Hell, Mon-El hadn't given up on her despite multiple signs that he should, and they hadn't even been together.

Siobhan gave Kara and Lena one last look, challenging almost, as she agreed to walk with Winn. Kara hadn't known it until that moment, but Lena had been holding her breath. She heard, and visibly saw, her exhale as Siobhan was whisked away.

Children played one-on-one, with two small rackets and a shuttlecock. Some of the shuttlecock's feathers were lost to the wind as child after child volleysed it from racket to racket as many times as they could without letting it touch the ground.

"It's my turn now?" Hazel asked, looking from Kara to Lena.

Kara smiled. "Yes, it's yer turn. Just make sure ya stay with the smaller children."

"I will!" Hazel said, running ahead.

Lena watched her join the other children, determined to make sure she was paired properly. Lena knew better than anyone that being a small child had a number of disadvantages. For her, it had simply been how she was built. For Hazel, it was about age. Most 3-year-olds were that small; she knew that much.
She watched one of the adults look at Hazel and briefly instruct the girl on what to do. William stood triumphantly, having just won a game. He moved to Hazel, smiling at her with a wide grin and intent on offering his expertise, but Alaina showed up to trip him. Addie and Lela approached then, and Alaina and Lela argued over who'd play Hazel before Alaina got her way.

"Some headstrong children," Lena said, leaning back against the tree she'd picked out earlier, before she and Kara had been called over to converse. She stared at Alex dusting off William and pointing a scolding finger at Alaina. "I don't think William and Alaina like each other very much."

"Well, they are only four," Kara yawned, relaxing back on the blanket.

"Tired already?"

"Not until I at least have some ham and turkey. And some more of that lemonade."

Lena chuckled. "How do you eat so much?"

"It's a gift."

"With the way you never seem to have to worry about it, I imagine so."

Kara had removed her suspender straps from her shoulders and unbuttoned the top of her shirt, revealing the beginning of her tanned torso. Her eyes, which were currently absent their spectacles, shut closed. Siobhan still hadn't returned from wherever she went with Winn, which Lena was thankful for. It meant that she and Kara could remain relatively undisturbed for the time being.

She stared at Kara, at the features she knew so well. The blonde's lips eased into a light smile. The small scar on her forehead seemed smaller than when animated by crinkles and furrows. The light freckles stretching across her cheeks and nose were as beautiful as Lena remembered, but they weren't as noticeable as they had been all those years ago. Her breathing slowed, and Lena appraised the length and scale of her chest and shoulders, recalling how it felt to be pressed against them, to run her hands over the woman's toned back.

She shut her eyes, fighting off the thoughts. It wouldn't do to lust after Kara in the open like this, and with Hazel and other children so close by. But she couldn't help thinking that maybe it was a fluke, that maybe Kara's desires didn't run as strongly as hers. There were times she could recognize the passion in Kara's eyes. The kissing in Kara's home days ago couldn't have happened unless Kara wanted her in some way too. But did Kara truly want to experience her touch? Could Kara get past religious convictions enough to let anything sexual happen between them? And if not sexual, could she and Kara be happy living together with just the love they share for each other?

She opened her eyes when she felt her braid shift behind her and a hand on her back. Kara had moved to sit beside her. The blonde's long fingers moved slowly against her shoulder blade and down the small of her back.

"Kara?" she asked, a definite question rather than a statement. The last time Kara had touched her like this, they were at their lake in the woods and Lena had struggled to tell the woman how she felt. Taking in a labored breath, she looked around for any eyes that might be on them, but found none. Kara interacting with her like this now felt dangerous. There was too much at risk.

"I just wanted to touch you," Kara said. Her voice was low and lethargic-sounding.

"You can't touch me like this in public."

"No one will see."
Kara's fingers moved to the space between them to trace her hip. Lena went still. A delicious shiver ran along her body. Kara's fingers were on her hip, playing there, tracing circles. And there was no one who could see it. But she no longer cared if anyone did. All her mind kept focusing on was the stroking at one of her erotic points — the middle of her left hip — and the heat that traveled up her thighs and farther to her center. It was no secret to her that some women found this part of the body sensual, but how Kara knew about it, she was less clear on. She licked her lips as the onslaught continued and her breathing hitched.

And then the tantalizing hand was gone. Lena waited for it to return. When it didn't, she finally turned to Kara. The blonde had her arms folded across her chest and her eyes were again closed, as if nothing had happened.

Annoyance suddenly replaced desire. She wanted to pull her hair out. Had Kara honestly teased her?

"Are you trying to drive me mad?" she asked.

Kara grinned. "You asked me ta marry you. I think you're already there."

"You..." Lena pushed her hard against the shoulder. "I will make you pay for this one day."

Kara laughed, finally opening blue and attentive eyes to stare at her. "Is that so?"

Lena felt herself on the verge of smashing her lips against the blonde's, but an altercation near the children's game Hazel was involved was brought to her attention. Jonathan was arguing with James over James's daughters playing against his son. Both skin color and gender were the basis of heated words as the children were pulled to the side by other adults, including Alex and Opal. Lena attempted to rise, but Kara held her back.

"James will handle this on his own," the blonde said. "He always does."

"But to sit here and just allow such disrespect? Going over there will at least --"

"-- Make things work worse. Not better," Kara challenged as they witnessed Mr. Ray enter into the fray to help talk the men down. "Trust me, I've defended James enough to know. And he's told me enough that he don't need rescuin'."

Lena stared at Kara, observing the conflict on her face. There was definitely history there. "I notice that you don't interact with James much."

"Well, I'm often busy. I don't interact much with Winn these days either." Kara briefly glanced at her. "But if ya must know, James was once sweet on me, 'bout nine years ago after he arrived in town. Before Opal. Mon-El sensed it and they almost came to blows a few times, with Mon-El going on about how the town would never accept James with a white woman. It's not like I was interested anyhow. In either of 'em."

Kara and Lena held gazes, and Lena's eyes relayed her understanding.

"But Hazel..."

"Here she comes now," Kara said just as Hazel ran up to them both.

"Lena! Kara! I won."

Kara stood and picked the girl up in her arms. "So you did." She smiled. "But you still haven't played me yet."
"You wanna play?"

"I most certainly do."

Lena looked back over to the area to see Jonathan and James and their families leaving. She watched Kara take up the mantle and play with this needy and deserving little girl. She watched as a light in Hazel shone brighter simply due to Kara's presence. And she knew that marrying anyone else would always be unfathomable to her.

Marriage was something that was a duty, Kara thought, as she stared at the pudgy-faced, plump attorney sitting across from her and Lena. Siobhan had stayed behind at the church, having managed to convince Father Mable to let her help there as a service worker. Kara had come straight to Lena's home and discussed matters. And the attorney, Walter Hamby, had shown up soon afterward. Like Sara, who'd decided to attend the gathering late and clearly drunk, Kara felt late to the prospect of such an important and long-term commitment, and drunk via thoughts of finally being with Lena. She'd never committed to Mon-El; so this was new for her. But Lena had committed to Siobhan. Would she ever be able to compete with that? Would she ever be enough for Lena? It's not like their union would even be legal. But then again, Lena and Siobhan's union hadn't been legal either.

"I'm going to be frank with you, Ms. Luthor," Walter stated, looking up from the papers in front of him as he adjusted his pince-nez spectacles at the bridge of his nose. "I don't mean to toot my own horn, but you're lucky you came to me instead of to the other attorney. This will be quite the uphill battle."

"I'm aware of that," Lena said, clutching Kara's hand and glancing at her before looking back at Walter. "But we're prepared. I didn't select you by sheer luck."

Walter ran a hand over his scruffy beard and sat back in his chair. He had salt and pepper hair, and appeared to be in his fifties, from what Kara could gather. "The town will not feel as threatened if you present yourselves as women just wantin' to live as friends, without wifely duties that come with husbands," he said. "But you will still be threatenin' their way of life. Here, and most everywhere else, a woman is expected to take a husband, obey that husband, and bear him children. Two women sayin' they'd rather live together with no ties to men will raise many an eyebrow. Some in town will suspect that you are deviant."

Lena lowered her head, seemingly thinking things over. "I gathered as much."

Walter picked up a document, looking it over. "The places you described to me are not as concerned with women lovin' each other in such a way. This place, as you know, however... Its focus on non-conformists is high." He moved to sit upright and look over more papers. "But there are some things you could do to lessen suspicion."

"Like what?" Kara asked, eager for anything that would lessen the danger she might be putting her loved ones in.

"Well," Walter ran a calloused hand across his brow, "one of you could take an actual spouse. It would look odd for a woman to insist to live independent of her husband, yes, but it would be something."

"Marry a man?" Lena asked incredulously, her tone taking on offense. She dropped Kara's hand frustratedly. "Out of the question."
"But, Ms. Luthor --"

"Out of the question, Walter," she sneered, pointing a finger at him. "The whole point of this union is to get Kara out of a marriage contract she never wanted to be in. It's to make it so that she has a choice."

"And I choose Lena," Kara affirmed, taking hold of Lena's hand once more.

Walter looked to the women's intertwined digits and smiled. "Listen," he said, looking up at the two. "I've seen a lot in my lifetime. I haven't always been a part of this town. So your wish to be together doesn't surprise me, but it will surprise others, even if they see it as all platonic. I'm just tryna cover all of the angles."

"Choose different angles," Lena demanded.

Walter grinned. "Very well then. The only reason I took on this case is because there is an openin'. You see, Kara's birth parents signed that marriage contract, but the folks who took her in did not. Of course, the Danvers family adopting Kara wasn't legally formalized, but the marriage contract, unlike the marriage itself if it were to happen, has no legal standin' either. It's just an agreement between families, like every other arranged marriage in town. The town obviously has its rules, and one of those includes adhering to the contract, but if Kara's adoptive parents were willing to tear up the contract, or otherwise negate it, the town would have no choice but to accept it. They would need to accept that Kara's adoptive parents are the ones who raised her and should get a say in who she should be with."

"I can't bring my folks into this, I can't," Kara said with panic in her voice. Lena squeezed her hand in support.

"There may be no other way, Ms. Danvers," Walter pressed. "Your folks should be safe as long as they aren't publicly endorsin' a same-sex union. If they publicly support you being an old maid, the town will be willing to accept it, just like with your blacksmith duties. Certainly more acceptin' of it than you breakin' a contract simply because you want to."

Kara looked to the table frowning.

"The only thing left to ensure is that no accusations of deviancy spring up. But from what you've told me, your betrothed and his folks are willin' to expose you. If that happens, that is where most of the uphill battle will come from. You will need to either confirm or deny your true relationship to Ms. Luthor. And lyin' won't do us any good, especially not under oath if this goes to trial for accusations of deviancy. But the truth would also obviously be damning. Can you handle that?"

Kara looked at Lena. "I can."

Lena smiled. "We can."

Walter chuckled. "Then I guess we're all set. It would still be best if you can find some way to talk your suitor out of exposin' you, Ms. Danvers. That is one of the concerns as well, is it not? To protect your family at all costs?"

"It is," Kara replied.

"Good. So to help show stability and that this is not some very new occurrence, you should start livin' together as soon as possible. Do that for a couple of weeks or more first. Let the town get used to the idea of two unmarried childhood friends livin' together in the same home. And be warned that this may still go to trial for the simple fact that even though the marriage contract is not legally
bindin', it is bindin' in the court of public opinion and the town will want a say in it all to ensure that your decision doesn't break their long-standin' marriage customs. As such, it would help a great deal if the two of you are able to honestly say that you haven't been sexually intimate."

Lena and Kara looked to each other and then back to Walter.

"Have you been?" he asked.

"No," Kara and Lena said simultaneously.

"Good, good. I need you to keep it that way until all of this is settled. Can you do that as well?"

Kara and Lena again looked to each other, their intertwined hands squeezing not only for comfort, but also for strength. They had a long battle ahead of them indeed.

Talking things over with Mon-El after packing up her belongings the following day had gone over as Kara had expected it would. He was shocked, appalled, saddened, and angry. He'd looked at her as though she'd stomped on his heart and spat on it. And that expression didn't change as she'd stood in the doorway, with the rest of her bags slung over her shoulder, ready to be loaded onto her wagon. She told him that if he loved her at all, he would let her be, or at the very least he would not expose her, for it would hurt her family. He seemed to agree, but it hadn't stopped him from making a threatening vow: "I'll fight you on this," he'd said.

"You'll lose," Kara had said in return, before closing the door behind her.

During the week that passed afterward, Kara discovered that living with Lena wasn't any easier than living with Mon-El, if only because she barely spent time with Lena. And Siobhan, with as much free time as the woman had, always seemed to be there. Walter had said that Siobhan continuing to live with them would also help the image of old maids simply trying to get by on their own. But to Kara, the woman was a nuisance. Any chance she got some time alone with Lena, such as in the living area when Lena was reading a book and Kara would watch her contently, Siobhan would show up to watch her as well. The watching didn't seem to bother Lena, who'd simply look up and smile at them both.

On the days Lena had Hazel, Hazel had taken to asking Kara to tuck her in for bed. And every time this happened, Siobhan made her way downstairs to be with Lena or headed to Lena's bedroom, which was directly across from Siobhan's while Kara's room was a little farther down the hall. Kara had smiled one night when she saw Lena opening her bedroom door immediately after Siobhan had closed it. Siobhan always did attempt to close it, as if something intimate would be happening with Lena. It bothered Kara, but not enough to intrude. It was never pleasant when all three of them were in a room together.

Nearing dinner or supper time, Siobhan always insisted on cooking, which left Kara with nothing to do for Lena except clean when timing allowed. She and Lena had found one instance of washing clothes together as Siobhan prepared a meal, but it was tense the whole time. Lena kept giving her glances that signaled desire, but the fire would be gone just as quickly as it appeared. They'd ended up throwing water on each other and laughing to make things more lighthearted, but that stopped when Kara had gotten carried away and Lena's dress was doused and clung to pale curves like a second skin.

"If you'll excuse me," Lena had said, moving to head back inside. Kara had stepped right in front of
her, eyes heavy with want that continued to take her by surprise. Lena had stared back, and simply side-stepped her.

That would have been tortuous enough, if Kara hadn't found herself in the predicament she was currently in. She'd opened Lena's bedroom door, needing to speak with her about their less-than-ideal living arrangements before the brunette retired for bed. She'd stopped in the doorway, mid-sentence.

Lena stood in a nightgown at the end of the bed, one leg propped on a stool, as she rubbed something, lotion perhaps, on her thigh all the way down to her calf and ankle. It was the most Kara had ever seen of the brunette's bare skin, and it was captivating.

Green eyes suddenly found hers.

"Uh, s-sorry," Kara spluttered. "I shoulda knocked." She moved to close the door.

"Kara..." Lena called, halting her departure.

Kara stood there, back turned to Lena.

"Come," the brunette beckoned her.

Kara took in a deep breath and exhaled, her shoulders rising and falling with emphasis. "But...we shouldn't."

"Come," Lena said again, her voice sounding like the beginning of a sonnet meant to soothe, but also one that promised forbidden joy.

Kara closed the door. She was right — they shouldn't be doing this. They needed to refrain from sexual intimacy if they were to avoid untruths, including perjury, unless they chose honesty instead.

But even knowing this, Kara turned to the woman. Lena's eyes were all over her, chest heaving unnaturally, belying the nervousness that didn't dare show itself on that beautifully alluring face. She was still standing in the same position as before, one leg propped on the stool, ample skin exposed. Kara's eye's drifted there, to her thighs.

Lena inclined her head as though calling her once again.

Kara approached slowly, cautiously, not sure what to expect or if she should retrace her steps and head for the door. When she made it to the woman, she lifted her chin proudly, indicating that she would not show shame for what they both knew they wanted.

Lena smiled. And like before, she ran a finger under and along one of Kara's suspender straps.

Kara's breathing constricted, and her gaze again drifted to Lena's legs. Could she touch her? Should she?

"I really do like you in these," Lena whispered. "I don't know how many times, but goodness knows I've fought against my mind spinning images of me sliding them off your shoulders."

Kara felt all of the air leave her body. Lately, when Lena said "goodness knows," there wasn't much of anything else to say. Lena pulled her closer. Was this actually going to happen? Was this their moment?

If was their moment, it was interrupted by a blood-curdling scream. Lena and Kara, alarmed, pulled
apart, and Lena yanked on a nearby robe before hurrying out with Kara. At the bottom of the stairway, they saw Siobhan on the floor cradling a twisted and bloodied leg.

"I fell," she said.

"Oh, Siobhan," Lena uttered, hurrying to the woman with the utmost concern. "How did it happen? You're lucky it was just a fall." She gently caressed Siobhan's limb.

"I don't know," Siobhan replied, her eyes abruptly meeting Kara's at the top of the stairway. "Clumsy, I guess."

"You silly woman," Lena chided. "Kara," she looked over her shoulder, "get some utensils. Hurry. It's late, but we might need to venture to a doctor. Siobhan's leg...it's looking bad."

Kara nodded as Lena turned back to focus on Siobhan. But Siobhan's eyes remained on Kara. As Kara moved to get utensils, she knew that look was trouble. It signaled a whole world of danger.
Siobhan stared out the window beside her bed, the covers pulled up to her waist as she watched a squirrel scurry up a tree. How pathetic she felt. To hold on to a woman who'd been clear that there was nothing more between them except perhaps friendship, she'd physically harmed herself. She'd listened against Lena's door and had been overcome with rage the instant the woman had mentioned relaxing Kara's suspenders.

It had been spur of the moment, she realized, but she'd gone about it with the least amount of damage in mind. Having read enough of Lena's medical texts, some of which concerned sections on minor injuries, she'd known what to do. She remembered reading one section, which concerned both minor and major injuries, in particular; it had been about ankle dislocation, breaks, and deaths from falls, especially among the elderly. Harm all depended on how the person fell down, and what state their body was already in before the fall. Elderly people could perish easily even from minor trauma due to their age and fragility. They might also die from complications of an injury. And a person of any age could crack their cervical spine and paralyze their diaphragm from the drop. However and wherever she landed, she knew that her body was going to take a significant impact if throwing herself down.

So she'd had no intention of tumbling the whole way, even with the stairway not being too long. She'd moved halfway down the stairs quickly and twisted her leg in one of its designed gaps. The scream had ripped from her throat without mercy and she had let herself tumble the rest of the way, scurrying to get into a fitting position just before Lena's door had opened.

Bruising was one of the main aspects of a fall. It could either appear immediately or later. Sprains in the wrists, which she'd attained along with bruising, were also common since people reflexively put their hands out in front of them to break their falls, which could also mean that the wrists were most impacted. So falling only halfway had given her the signs of a tumble without the life-threatening predicament Lena believed she'd avoided.

Resetting her bones after the breaks in her leg and ankle had been extremely painful. The leg was easier to remedy than if she'd had a thigh fracture, since large and strong muscles are subject to significant degree of contraction and shortening. For the leg, it'd taken more than just one person to help do the setting. After pulling and resetting and seeing that both limbs were the same length again, the doctor had called the procedure a success during her late-night visit with him after Lena had almost taken his cabin door down with Kara in tow. Curfew had been forgotten in light of the emergency. It had been Lena and Kara who'd helped with the resetting and bandaging. The attentive doctor had given her a pair of Civil War crutches, which meant she'd at least be able to tend to chamber pot matters and menial tasks on her own, despite risk of strain and pain. He said her joints would require lengthy rehabilitation, and also how lucky she was that the procedure had worked and that she'd been spared a head injury since it might have been catastrophic or tragic. She'd known this, of course. And still, all she could think about was how lucky she was that Lena, a woman who'd studied medicine for a time, loved to dote on the medically-challenged.

She turned to view Lena just as the brunette was entering with a tray of food. "How are you feeling?" Lena asked, moving to sit on her bed and placing the tray on her lap.

"Like I fell down a flight of stairs," Siobhan exhaled, straightening her back with a grimace.

Lena made a pained expression.
"Lena...I'm okay," Siobhan assured, placing a hand on the woman's shoulder.

"You could have died." Lena's voice was soft. Concerned.

"But I didn't. And you're here, and everything's fine." Siobhan smiled brightly. She couldn't blame Lena for worrying. If she'd fallen unintentionally, she might very well have died. And the healing process wasn't anything to take lightly either, but that was something she was looking forward to.

"So," she said, moving some loose hair out of her face, "what have you brought me?" She looked down at her plate.

She could see Lena forcing a smile before following her gaze to the tray.

"Biscuits and sausage, as you can see. And cornmeal mush, with syrup," Lena said.

"Cornmeal mush?"

"It's a type of porridge. Kara said she took extra care to get it just right."

Siobhan sat back, trying to hide the disappointment on her face. "Kara made this?"

"She helped just a little." Lena scooped up some of the mush. "But I promise you I'm responsible for most of it." She held a spoon to Siobhan's mouth. "Take a bite?"

Siobhan wanted to pout like a child. She didn't want to taste anything Kara Danvers had whipped up, even in part. But for Lena, she'd do almost anything. She took a hesitant taste, letting her tongue slip out just a little. The sweet flavor called to her hunger and made her greedy for more. She had to admit, Kara was a pretty damn good cook and probably matched her culinary skills. She tried to conceal the joy she got from the mouthful of syrupy porridge.

"Good?" Lena questioned.

"It's okay," Siobhan responded with a stubborn toss of her head, her eyes briefly going back to staring out the window.

Lena smiled. "And here's some hard cider." She handed the cup of liquid to Siobhan.

Siobhan wanted tea, but she wasn't surprised by the choice of drink. For a number of people in town, cider was the default drink for breakfast. It had zest, was cheap, rich in essential nutrients, easy to preserve, and probably the only alcoholic beverage the town allowed. Water wasn't always the best, especially here, and milk was more so thought of as something for babies. A few preferred orange juice. Tea and coffee were either expensive or weren't available. And there were many people who made some terrible coffee, but those who made a good or great pot of it were highly respected.

She sipped the cider and smiled politely at Lena. "Remember when you took care of me when I had that terrible cold?"

"All too well," Lena said, tucking a strand of hair behind Siobhan's ear and straightening her pillow. "But it was the flu you had, not the cold. And you could have died then too."

"But I didn't." Siobhan grinned wider, the cup still to her lips. "I had you to take care of me, like now."

Lena smiled softly before standing and placing a kiss to Siobhan's forehead. "Don't you ever scare me like this a third time." She pulled back to stare down at the woman with caring eyes. "Get some rest. Kara should be meeting with Alex right about now, but I'll be downstairs cleaning up. Just ring
the bell if you need me." She nodded to the tiny instrument sitting on the stand next to her and then headed for the door.

As Siobhan watched the brunette leave, she couldn't help the frown and sour mood that descended upon her. She'd successfully interrupted an intimate moment between Kara and Lena, but now she was bedridden. Although Lena would have to spend an inordinate amount of time with her, the woman was still free to be with Kara in the interim, including at night. This needed to be remedied. And that also meant having a talk with Kara. She'd learned quite a bit from Lena about the blonde, and she intended to capitalize on that knowledge.

"That ain't right," Kara said, standing in front of the stove beside Alex. She could hear adults and children in the yard out back. Apparently, Jonathan had decided to have his own gathering, complete with Alex slaving over a hot stove and guests of his choosing, to make up for what he deemed a ruined social event a week ago.

Alex adjusted the stove's flue. "Certainly more right than what you're doin."

"But to support a made-up rumor that Lena has been intimate with Clarence?"

Alex stood straight and glared at her. Her pulled-back hairstyle wasn't her usual coif, and it made her expression appear even more hardened. "If it means gettin' her outta town and keeping ya safe, then yes, Kara. What you've told me is sickenin'. You've been lustin' in the most shameful of ways. And marriage? You honestly think that a marriage to that woman will be legally sanctioned or recognized in the eyes of God?"

"I told ya I don't," Kara huffed, pushing her spectacles back up on her face. "But I can't help how I feel. I tried. All the prayin' and hatin' myself somethin' awful didn't do a thang. Lena didn't make me like this. It's just the way I am."

"Nonsense!"

Kara took a step back. She tried to remain calm. This wasn't the first fight she'd had with Alex. They were sisters; they'd had many fights. And most times, they came to an understanding or compromise. Maybe this would be one of those times. "Do you want me to be unhappy?" she asked.

Alex stepped to her, eyes simultaneously shining with both fear and adoration. She placed a hand to her cheek. "Not unhappy, sister. Safe."

"Alex --"

"-- From what you've told me, neither Mon-El nor his folks will just sit back and allow you to live in sin with Lena. And the town -- they simply don't tolerate such wickedness. Not that long ago, I couldn't even purchase a pumpkin because Sara was there with me. There are rumors about her too, ya know. There's no tellin' what the people here would do if they thought you broke off your marriage arrangement so that you could be with a woman."

"But --"

"-- All your attorney talk don't mean nothin'," Kara. Sounds like yer attorney also knows this ain't likely to go over smoothly. At least with the rumor of a Clarence and Lena affair, people may just figure that she ain't deviant after all. If the rumor gains enough traction, she'll be run out of town regardless because we can't afford ta have an immoral sheriff or overseer, what have you, but she
won't be harmed. She'll go back to her big city life. But what about us, Kara? Our folks? My son? Are we all to just leave with her? Do ya think Jonathan would allow it? That ma and pa would even leave? And say we leave, are we to leave them behind to face the scorn each and every day?" Alex scoffed. "I won't do it."

Kara chewed on the inside of her cheek as Alex went back to tending to the stove. Sounds of voices drifted in from out back. They were mostly women. And to Kara, more women meant more gossip. She didn't yet hear Jonathan's voice, but she had tried to talk to her sister about the way he'd treated the children at the gathering. "Have you even considered what this will do to his daughter?" she asked. "Hazel's an innocent girl in all of this."

"Hazel will be corrupted by Lena, just like you were."

Kara balled her fists. Again, it wouldn't do to get angry. "Lena nurtures her. Helps her grow as her own person. She's the only mother the child has."

"The little angel would be better off if taken in by another family. She's close to the same age you were when taken in by ma and pa, you know."

Kara sat down at the kitchen table. "You talk about being such a good person, but don't sound like a good person now."

Alex spun around. Angry, virtuous eyes glared at her. "How dare you?"

"I dare because Hazel is a child, but ya haven't let that stop you from bringing her into this."

"You brought her name up!" Alex's voice rose two notches. "And it's because she's a child that I consider her. I may not be able to do anything about her fate, but I can do something about yours."

"My life is not yours to control!" Kara fired back.

"I'm your sister, and I have a husband. Your reputation is somethin' I'm responsible for. I took on thangs just so you could be free to be a blacksmith. So that the focus wouldn't be on how odd you are compared to every other woman here."

Kara stood. "So is that what this is all about -- you not getting to choose yer own path?"

"Don't twist my words."

Kara shook her head. "I always knew you accepted thangs a little too well. That with as strong-willed as you are, you must have wanted to live a different life."

"That's not what I said."

"You didn't have to," Kara sighed. "I'm sorry, Alex. I never wanted you to feel obligated to do anything concernin me."

"Quiet!" Alex walked to her. "You will not make this about me. This is about your deviancy, your poor judgment."

"Alex."

"I feel like I don't even know ya anymore."

Kara stared at her sister. She couldn't blame Alex for the resentment, but did things have to be like this? "Does the Bible not teach us of acceptance and forgiveness?" she asked.
"It teaches us a lot more than that. Clearly, ya missed a few chapters."

Kara could hear the faint laughter and conversation from outside. If she could hear them, she wondered how many had heard her and Alex. She'd revealed her true self to Alex in Alex's bedroom, before they moved on to prepping the stove, but it wouldn't do if the guests had tuned into their kitchen discussion.

She listened some more. They weren't talking about her. They were talking about Lena, Clarence and Hazel. About an unmarried woman fooling around with a man and looking after his child, and how distasteful it was. She felt out of place here.

But it wasn't something that surprised her. Lena being looked down upon by this community was just par for the course. Why should any of them have ever thought she'd win over enough people to be considered decent? She had her supporters, but not nearly as many as she deserved.

The back door opened and Jonathan walked in. He leaned against the wall, a cup in his hand as he greedily drank from it. Kara remembered that he had a preference for ale, regardless of town rules. He stared at her with much interest, like he knew a secret she didn't know.

Kara rolled her eyes. She didn't need this. She moved past him, and decided on taking an hour alone to think. She had enough to worry about with Mon-El. She didn't need her sister and her sister's husband to be problems as well.

"It's just not somethin' you have to do anymore," Mon-El stated, eyeing his parents in the back room of their brewery. He'd lost a sense of normalcy, precious aspects that had made his life make sense. First his grandfather, and then a steady life with Kara. He didn't want to also lose a chance to remain in Kara's life beyond their blacksmith work. But he feared that this was exactly what would happen if he didn't stop them from exposing her. The town would be too against her after that to even consider her as a proper wife. And although he'd said he would fight Kara on breaking their marriage contract, she needn't be exposed for what she was for that to happen. He wasn't even certain if he wanted to challenge her anymore. He loved her, sure, but if she truly had no interest in men, how could he begin to change her? What kind of life would they have without passion?

He grimaced at the memory of the faces she would make when they'd kiss or when he'd kiss her on the cheek. It wasn't the type of life he wanted, but his grandfather had always told him not to give up and to instead fight for what he believed in. He still had a lingering hope that he and Kara could make it work.

"That woman has put you through hell," Rhea said. "It'd be the least of what she deserves."

"And how would I marry her then, ma? What type of life would we have if scorned by the whole town?"

"Well, your father and I are scorned by the whole town and we're doing just fine for ourselves."

Rhea moved to sit in a chair across from him, folding her arms in a huff.

"Enough," Lar demanded, rising from his desk near Rhea. "Mon-El wants us to hold off, we will."

"Not just hold off, pa. Don't hurt her like this, period. Or me, for that matter."

Lar narrowed his eyes. He walked to Mon-El slowly, and Mon-El suddenly remembered how imposing his father was. The man placed a hand on his shoulder as if bracing him for some serious
"She will still be hurt when this goes to trial, son. And make no mistake about it, this will go to trial if you expect to have any chance of marrying her."

Mon-El felt sick. Why had Lena been given the one thing he cherished most in all the world? Why hadn't it been him?

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Lena placed an apple in Ms. Merriam's basket. "Here."

"What's this?" Ms. Merriam queried, turning to face the brunette in the outside fruit market. People steadily tended to their purchases.

"A peace offering."

"Just because we bumped into each other don't mean we need to shop together. I can pay for thangs myself."

"I know that, Ms. Merriam." Lena smiled. "It's just that I'm thankful for the way you welcomed Hazel, and got others to welcome her too."

The old woman harumphed, but Lena could have sworn she saw a faint smile. "I saw no reason to shun the child. Just doin' my part to be neighborly." She raised a finger and pointed it at Lena. "But don't you go tellin' people we're fond of each other now. Can't have people thinkin' I'm friends with a Luthor."

Lena laughed. "Of course not, Ms. Merriam."

They moved along the market, assessing different fruits and the occasional vegetable.

"What is it that you and Kara are up ta?"

Lena opened her mouth to think of a counterclaim, but the old woman pinned her with a glare.

"Don't bother tellin' me it ain't nothin.' She moved in with ya. The town knows it. I know it. But what we don't know is why. You two also spent the day together at the gathering, when I would have expected Mon-El to be there with her instead."

Not for the first time, Lena felt paralyzed in the woman's presence. Absent one of her signature hats, with her brown hair not as tightly pulled back, there was a softer look to Ms. Merriam. She appeared younger. And she was just as quick-witted as she was all those years ago. Ms. Merriam was no fool.

"Mon-El would have been there," Lena replied. "It's just that he was looking into something regarding his grandfather's will. Kara and I wanted to catch up on time lost. With my work as the overseer and Kara's smithing duties, we don't get to see each other as much. As you might have seen, we first spent time with friends before enjoying the rest of the day with Hazel."

"That still don't explain why you and Kara are livin' together. And what about that other friend of yours...Siobhan?"

Lena internally groaned. Ms. Merriam never did know when to let up. "Kara and Mon-El have hit a bit of a rough patch. She felt it best to stay with me until they mend things. That way, he won't be so tempted to see her. And Siobhan's decided to stay in town, but she's not quite ready to live on her
own. She never did in New York either. It would be her first time doing so. And now... Well, she also had a terrible fall recently, which resulted in a broken her leg. It was reset, but she obviously needs to heal."

"I'm sorry to hear that, dear. Father Mable's goin' to be heartbroken to know he's out of a worker." Ms. Merriam picked up a hand of bananas and put it in her basket. "As for livin' alone, hopefully she overcomes that. Women need to be stronger when they don't have a husband." There was a hint of melancholy in the woman's voice, and it made Lena feel for her.

"True," she acquiesced.

"And what about you and Hazel's father, Clarence?"

"What about us?"

Ms. Merriam turned to face her, thin eyebrows raising. "I assume you're watchin' the girl because you care about him."

"Yes. But I care about her too. Very much,"

"Does he have any intention of marrying ya?"

"Ms. Merriam --"

"-- So he expects ya to look after his child for free?"

"I offered."

Ms. Merriam looked her over something fierce; she clearly didn't approve. "I suppose it's for the best that he don't marry ya."

Lena couldn't object to that, but she was curious as to Ms. Merriam's reasoning. "Why's that?"

"Look around."

Lena suddenly noticed several people staring at them, clearly having eavesdropped on their conversation.

Running a hand through her hair, she issued a silent curse. She'd only meant to stop at the market quickly, return to Siobhan before it was Kara's time to take over watching the bedridden woman, and then head to the overseer building. And now she'd let members of the town in on her business. It was partly what Walter wanted, but, in this moment, all it did was serve to remind her that nothing truly stayed secret in Breighville.

Kara entered the overseer building with a furrowed brow and immediately moved to lean against a wall. She looked up to see the team all huddled around a large map-like paper. She'd heard them talking about a rape when she'd barged in. She knew that Lena was still trying to solve the Anna Davies case, but she needed to speak with the woman now. Siobhan could wait.

Lena's eyes met hers. She didn't even have to state anything. The brunette nodded toward the wall behind her desk, and excused herself before heading down the hall to Kara's left. Kara followed swiftly, disregarding the eyes boring into her back.
She marveled at the stairs leading up to the second floor. Although the building was two stories high, she was so used to seeing Lena and her employees on the first floor. Unfortunately, the stairs also made her think of Siobhan and whether the woman was fine at home alone. She knew that Lena had given Siobhan all the utensils needed before leaving and that Lena's workload was shortened in order to spend more time with Siobhan, but the last thing either of them needed was for the woman's health to worsen.

Kara looked around the spacious room once they had entered and Lena closed the door. It was clear from the cobwebs and dust that not many people came up here these days. It looked like a place to stack old files. But it at least had a window, a desk and chairs. One chair was behind the desk, and others were stacked atop one another in a corner. Kara grasped one of the chairs, dusted it off and sat down in front of Lena, who leaned back against the desk. "I'm angry," she decided on as a conversation starter.

"I gathered that," Lena chuckled, watching her fold her arms across her chest. "What's wrong?"

Kara glared at Lena and then looked away. Her anger was fueling her, but it also scared her. She knew she was very much involved, just like Alex had said. It didn't mean that she didn't see reason. "I know I need to get back to Siobhan, and I will. But I was with Alex earlier, like I told ya I'd be, and..."

"What, no extravagant wedding planned for us, I take it?" A smile stretched across the brunette's lips. It made Kara want to relax and just enjoy Lena's company.

"This ain't no time for jokin,' Lena."

"Why not?"

"It just ain't."

"Because some in town want to spread threatening rumors about me and send me running for the nearest train?"

Lena no doubt saw her astonishment, but waved a dismissive hand anyway. "I'm not oblivious, Kara. I remember how Breighville works. They want someone gone? Salacious rumors and the impending shame will do the trick. And it doesn't help that I might have added fuel to the fire during a discussion I had with Ms. Merriam today."

Kara gave her a questioning look.

"Long story," Lena replied. "Just how bad are these rumors?"

"Pretty bad." Kara stood.

A puzzled expression clouded the brunette's features.

"The rumor says you're sleeping with Clarence. Alex supports it 'cause I told her about us -- you and me -- and this tale makes ya sound fond of men. One man at least."

"So the looks I got in the market today might have been tied to that. I'm guessing some want Clarence out of the way since talk of Anna Davies reminds them of the blemish on the town. And since I've been talking with him and taking care of his daughter, they want me gone as well. Not to mention...the ones who think my father raped her." Lena looked to the floor. "I must say...I never thought Alex much for rumor-spreading, but she might have a point on this."
Lena's eyes snapped back to hers. "Have you thought about it? It would cause doubt as to the nature of our relationship. But," she paused, biting on her lower lip," it would also make people less inclined to support us living together. They would feel that Clarence and I should get married instead of live in sin."

"Like I said, not good."

"Even so..." Lena blew a stray hair out of her face. "Anything else I should be concerned about?"

Kara's eyes strayed to the brunette's neck, to the way the buttons of her blouse went all the way to the top and helped obscure delicate flesh. Lena wasn't to blame for the way she was. But then again, she'd never felt this way until Lena came back to town. "Alex thinks you'll corrupt Hazel."

Lena's jaw squared. She opened her mouth to say something and then closed it — a typical Lena response when she was floored. "Absurd."

Kara watched the woman's eyes look everywhere but at her. Did Lena not want to address the accusation in more detail?

Suddenly, Lena's eyes were back in her line of vision. "You don't think that's true, do you?"

"Of course not. It's just..."

"Kara!" Lena sounded equally offended and shocked. "People aren't turned into people like me... Like you... And even if we were, Hazel's just a child. A baby, really. I wouldn't fill her head with adult matters."

"I'm not sayin' that. Any of it. All's I'm sayin' is that before you, life wasn't like it is now. You opened my eyes, is all." She turned her back to Lena, unable to bear the look of hurt and defensiveness she saw in those penetrating eyes. She heard the woman move closer to her. Caring this much about someone other than family was scary. Terrifying even. She had never stopped caring for Lena, and she knew she never would.

"I'm always going to be this way, Kara. I've always been this way. And I think it's the same for you."

Kara turned to face her. She stared down at those welcoming and caring eyes. This was the Lena she'd always be enamored by.

"You do believe me, don't you? You know that I'm right?"

Kara felt her lips forming into a smile. "I do," she said, slowly moving away from the brunette to look out the window. The town looked as though it always did. People bustled about, attending businesses or markets. Even Mr. Ray, who happened to be looking up at her, tipped his hat in her direction.

"I wouldn't think of leaving without you," she heard Lena say. "Unless it meant ensuring your or your family's safety. And unless you were clear that you wouldn't be coming with me."

Kara turned to her. "I know that." There was still too much left unsaid between them. Too much that they hadn't yet experienced together. She wasn't ready to part with Lena. She never would be. "At least the town's talkin' about us livin' together. They're wonderin' what it's about and why I still haven't married Mon-El. So our plan is well underway."
"I wouldn't blame you if you decided not to be with me, you know. There's your family, of course. And although it pains me to say it, I think your religion and sense of honor mean a great deal more to you than I do." Lena said it sheepishly. Insecurely.

"Lena, ya know I couldn't put religion or sense of honor before you."

"Only you did." Lena arched an eyebrow.

Kara moved to sit back in the chair. She thought about everything she'd been through these past few months — Lena returning out of the blue, the instant attraction, the confusion, the guilt, the shame. "I thought you understood."

"I did... I do," Lena said with a sigh, going to sit behind the desk. "It's just... It wasn't easy."

Lena was right, Kara knew that. Religion and sense of duty had always been something she'd prioritized, especially the latter. It wasn't surprising that Lena figured she loved those things more than she loved her.

Loving Lena had come easy to her, from the first moment they'd met as children. And when the brunette had returned, the pull had been stronger than anything she'd ever felt. But her sense of right and wrong had made her reject it and deny what her heart kept telling her was true — that Lena Luthor had always been meant to be hers, and she'd always been meant to be Lena's. She'd been in a battle, at war, with herself over that denial. And still, it wasn't gone entirely. It still existed, leaving terror in its wake and keeping her from saying everything that needed to be said.

Could she overcome the terror? Could she ever truly be free and just live?

Not fully accepting everything made her angry with the town and it rules. It made her angry with Alex. Alex's warnings and demands only served to make her want to defy her sister and anyone else who stood in her way. It made her want to be with Lena more.

"I was wrong for the way I treated ya," she said. "I wasn't prepared for eveythang that came about, but I shoulda trusted my heart."

"I don't fault you, Kara," Lena assured with a soft smile. "Not with the world we live in." She stared at the blonde studying her, the intense blue eyes behind glass frames, arms folded over a rising chest that seemed to be pacing itself.

For eighteen years, she'd waited to see Kara again. She'd thought she'd faint from a lack of air moving through her lungs when she'd first seen the blonde again. There was a point in time she would have done anything to have Kata look at her lovingly or in any desirable way, but the way the woman was looking at her now was more pensive than anything. The apology meant a lot, but she couldn't forget how awful she'd felt when Kara had turned her back on any viable life they could have together.

But then again, unlike Kara, she'd never had a betrothed. Her circumstances of being born out of wedlock and being the secret love child of a Luthor had separated her from the rest. It was yet another reason she could empathize with Kara.

Kara was wearing blue trousers and a loose-fitting shirt. It wasn't her usual buttoned-up attire and, unlike last night, it wasn't supported by suspenders. Kara was in the habit of wearing belts, which Lena found odd since the high cut of the material made belt use unserviceable and mostly a decorative object. Since there were no loops to hold up the pants, she wondered how the woman ever kept them in place with no suspenders attached. Maybe Kara's were of a particular design, like
the ones Kara had assisted her with on their trip to the quarry, or the ones many men in New York
donned. Or the blonde had been wearing suspenders all along and they'd been covered up by other
fabric Kara wore at times, like her vests. Last night, she'd been so close to reveling in such a design.
It was also last night that she knew that no matter how much she resisted her need to be with Kara,
the passion between them would always blaze as intensely and as hotly as it ever had.

Kara's blond waves were uncharacteristically free today, framing her face like a halo via the
afternoon sun filtering in through the window behind her. The would-be halo glowed in sync with
her skin. Lena had touched that skin so many times, but not nearly enough and not in as nearly as
many ways as she'd like to.

If Kara had missed her as much she'd missed Kara when they were parted for so many years, if it
wasn't just her who'd held on tightly to their childhood bond and dreams, it was enough for her to
hope that everything would sort itself out and eventually be right. It would mean that Kara loved her
as thoroughly as she loved Kara.

"You're a strong woman, Lena," Kara said, getting up and moving toward the desk. "Patient.
Intelligent. Wise. Forgiving." She sat on it with a sigh and then turned to stare down at her. "How'd I
get so lucky?"

"I suppose getting blamed for a lot of the mischief you caused years back played a part in shaping
my resilience." Lena saw Kara's eyes switch from admiration, intrigue, want, worry, and back to
want again. She saw the past flare in those eyes. She wanted to reach across the desk and pull Kara
closer to her. She wanted to kiss her, take her right here and disregard her vow to not be intimate
with the woman until all of their troubles were behind them. Much like she'd been so close doing last
night.

She decided on looking away.

Kara chuckled. "Yeah, you never were that bad. If Ms. Merriam knew, the woman probably
wouldn't dislike you so much."

"Actually, Ms. Merriam and I have seemed to come to an understanding." She risked a look at Kara.
"I think she mainly fears me hurting you. But I 'explained' things, and I think she believes me."

"Ya certain?"

Lena stood, walking around the desk to stare Kara in the eyes. Her fingers lightly grasped strong
shoulders. A trembling hand covered hers. She watched as the woman's mouth parted slightly, and
she squelched a momentary urge. "I'm certain," she said. "I truly think we can get through this. We
will be happy, Kara."

"Ya don't know that," Kara said, moving away from her to stare toward the window. "Everythang's
outta our control."

"Kara, it's called faith. The same thing your Christian religion teaches you. Besides, there are ways to
get things under control."

Kara turned to her then, looking her over in much the same way she'd looked Kara over that first
time in the overseer building. "Yeah...there is," the words rolled off the woman's tongue like butter.

Lena felt herself blush, and a lump formed in her throat. "Well, we can talk about all of this later. I
should get back downstairs." She turned to leave.

"Wait!" Kara's voice croaked. She forcefully turned her around and wrapped an arm around her
waist, pulling her close until their faces were mere inches apart.

Lena could see the wheels turning in the blonde's head. There was conflict in those ocean eyes. And sensuality. "Kara..."

"Just kiss me."

Kara's lips touched hers. It happened so quickly that Lena hadn't had time to react. Kara's arm around her waist loosened, and the blonde pulled her closer. Lena knew she should push her way, but soft lips parted against hers and an eager tongue brushed across them. And just like that, all hope of protesting seemed lost.

She returned Kara's advances with a heated embrace of her own. She felt Kara press against her. She could feel Kara's breasts meet hers and was thankful that she'd forgone her bodice for the day. Kara's tongue teased at her mouth until she allowed entrance inside. It swept past teeth to battle for dominance.

Lena couldn't think. She needed to steer the interaction in some way, to regain some level of control. She attempted this by caressing Kara's face. But Kara held her still.

While in the past, she was the initiator, Kara was now the aggressor.

Kara's fingers sank into her hair and trailed down to the back of her neck. Teeth nibbled on her bottom lip, and the utterance of her name sent shock waves throughout body. Before long, Kara was moving her backward toward the desk until her legs hit against it.

"Relax," she heard Kara say, physically coaxing her into a sitting position.

Settling onto the cold surface, Lena felt herself surrendering. Her legs spread subconsciously as Kara positioned herself between them. If the desk was higher, it would level her hips with Kara's. But as it was, Kara's thigh easily pressed against her center. She shivered, looking from Kara's face to Kara's leg and back again. Either Kara had known enough about bodily pleasure from hearsay or self-exploration, or the woman had learned from her the day she'd almost taken Kara on the floor. The light press made her hips buck toward the friction. Intense need in her lower region throbbed in sync with her swift heartbeat, driving her toward the insanity she'd been mindful to avert in the past. The time in Kara's house in the woods, the time in the tent, and especially in Kara's cabin, she'd always been in control. She'd set the pace and had possessed enough willpower to pull back if needed.

Today, Kara held the reins. Kara had something to prove. Lena called on the courage to turn her away, but she was unable to. Not when Kara touched her so gently. Not when the woman's soft, indiscernible whispers came to her so truthfully. Not when there was nothing between them but want.

"I'm in control," Kara breathed, gliding her mouth along Lena's jawline. Lena suppressed a moan as teeth lightly bit her chin. "Not Alex. Not anyone else."

Fingers met Lena's collar and unfastened the buttons there. Lena considered the fact that they were in her office, that they needed to wait until there was no longer a threat of them being exposed. She considered that Kara likely wasn't ready for this and was only acting out of defiance. But even if the woman didn't intend on going all the way, Lena wouldn't be the same after this — coming so close to offering herself to Kara and not having her after all.

"Kara, you need to think about --"

"-- I don't," Kara said, pressing impossibly plush lips to her neck.
Lena moaned, grasping at powerful arms, intent on rejecting the offering. She relinquished instead, holding on to Kara as Kara's lips played at her neck, just grazing there as if they were unsure whether to leave kisses in their wake. The blonde had only loosened two of her buttons, but it was more than enough to put her on the brink of madness. Kara's lips were suddenly wet against her neck, as if they'd been licked. Warmth grew between her legs.

When Kara placed a hand on her thigh, it took everything in her to not guide that hand to where she needed it most. The single image of Kara pressing into made her move against Kara's thigh, the trouser fabric brushing against her dress both a relief and an irritant.

"I curse you, Kara Danvers," she whispered.

Kara sought out her eyes. Fervent desire shone in the blue irises, and lips she remembered so well pulled into a grin. "I'm with a witch now, am I?"

"We...we need to wait."

"Is waiting what you had in mind last night?"

"Kara, I --"

"-- Let's not talk. Just for a bit, okay?" Kara lowered her head toward Lena's. "I just wanna kiss ya."

Lena gave in once more. There was no way she couldn't. To reject Kara now, with the woman kissing her ever so softly and moving a persistent thigh against her center ever so slowly, was impossible. She felt her brain jumble, her eyes closing as the pleasure threatened to take her over. It felt so good. Everything felt so good. And it hadn't even yet progressed beyond clothed grinding. She broke away from the kiss, moving her her hands up to grasp Kara's shoulders — to get her bearings and and stare into the woman's eyes. Those eyes were full of emotions, not all of them recognizable, and it was all so intimate.

Kara continued to rub against her and she continued to grind, her need growing as her underthings pooled hot liquid. And suddenly, there was something else. Were those tears forming in the blonde's eyes?

She stopped, too stunned to continue. And then Kara stopped too. Before either of them could think to say anything, the door opened. It was followed by an audible gasp. Kara jerked toward the sound. Lena already knew who'd witnessed them in a compromising position. What luck would they have for it to be anyone else?

"To hear it is one thang. But to see such an abominable act is another," Alex's voice boomed in the room like a condemnation from the almighty himself. "When Mr. Ray said he saw you up here, it was suspicious enough. And the way yer friends acted downstairs... Well, I shoulda braced myself, but I don't think all the bracin' in the world could have prepared me for this."

Kara moved away from Lena, using a hand to briefly remove her spectacles and another to wipe at her eyes. "Alex, wha-- Why are you here?"

Alex glared at her. "I didn't like the way we ended thangs earlier. We haven't argued like that since we were little. When searchin' ya out, I didn't think I'd have reason to argue with you some more. But I see it all so clearly now... In all its disgustin' glory."

Kara bowed her head. Lena moved off the desk. "That's enough. It's me you're angry with, correct? You needn't take it out on Kara."
"This ain't about anger. It's about what's right. God-fearing. Respectable. If others were to find out about this -- those outside of your circle, that is -- she'd be ruined. So would our family name. Have ya thought about that, Lena? Of what your corruptin' Kara can lead to?"

"Lena and I discussed all of that," Kara said, walking to stand in front of Alex. "And it's not like we did anythang anyhow. Are you even sure what ya saw?"

"Do you think me blind now, sister? I saw enough. The placement of your hips. You two embraced, holding each other close, staring into each other's eyes. I was spared from seein' more, but the tears in your eyes pain me just as much. Did she put those tears there? Force ya into somethin'?"

Lena's fists balled at the accusation, but she remained still. This was unsettled business between two sisters and she was like an interloper, even if an interloper significantly responsible for the discord she saw before her now. She also wanted to know why Kara had shed tears. Had the blonde felt pressured in any way? It had certainly seemed like she'd felt it was something she had to do, which isn't the response Lena had ever wanted. She wanted Kara to want her out of real desire, not out of a sense of defiance or duty.

Kara frowned. "I was doin' thangs with Lena. Unholy thangs, Alex. I did them because I wanted to. It was my choice. Not yours. Not the town's. But mine's."

Alex couldn't look any more appalled if she tried. "You being without a husband, and dressin' the way you have, for so many years... I wondered if you were perhaps like this. But I would immediately banish the thought from my head 'cause it pained me so, and I knew my sister was right and true. And now it seems my wrongheaded suspicion wasn't so wrongheaded at all."

Lena moved to Kara's side. "Alex, it's not as duplicitous as you make it sound. If you'd just let me explain..."

"Lena, no," Kara said, eyes never straying from her sister. She took in a deep breath and exhaled. "Alex, if you cared about Jonathan at all, then you might know what you're sayin.' You might even - "

"-- Don't dare speak of Jonathan to me! At least I have a husband, a child. What kind of life can you possibly hope to have with this woman?" She looked Kara up and down. "I'm ashamed to call you my sister."

Lena attempted to offer Kara a comforting hand, but Kara ran for the door, hurrying out without another word. She proceeded to go after her, but Alex stepped in her way. "See what you've done?"

"What I've done?" Lena asked incredulously. "You're the one who just chased her off...for being herself. For loving who she loves."

"What you and Kara have is not love!" Alex spat, pointing a finger at her. "Not the way a man loves a woman." She took a step backward to look at Lena. "Ya know, back when we were little, I thought it was charmin' when you said you'd marry my sister. If only we knew how serious you were about your vow back then... Might have saved us all some trouble." She backed toward the door. "I will protect my sister, god help me." She turned away and headed out the entrance.

"Holy hell!" Alex was fuming as she made her way downstairs. She heard Maggie calling after her, but she couldn't stop for the woman. Maggie had known about it too. She'd deduced that much from those almond eyes. Maggie had kept such a horrid secret. Hadn't shared it with her.
"Damn all of you."

Alex was so caught in bumping past James and moving to the side of the building to get into her wagon that she barely felt the hand on her arm. She turned to see Maggie huffing and puffing at her. "What do ya want?"

"To talk to ya," Maggie said.

"There's nothin' to talk about. You knew my sister was deviant and you said nothin.'"

"That's because," Maggie lowered her voice, her facial expression changing from cautious to resoluteness, "I am too."

"What?!" Alex screeched, yanking her arm away from Maggie's. "Has the whole town gone mad? Or is it just the women?"

"Don't act so surprised. What do you thank we've been doing these past few weeks?"

"Pealing peas."

Maggie rolled her eyes. "There's a lot more to us than that, and ya know it. I've seen how Jonathan treats you. I've seen how you look at him compared to how you look at me. How ya joke with me."

"Maggie --"

"-- Just...before you continue dragging yer sister through the mud for supposed immoral behavior, you might want to consider reflecting on your own life and feelings."

She watched as Maggie left her then, in a hurry to get back to whatever life the woman held dear. It was a life Alex most certainly had no interest in being a part of.

"She'll come around."

Lena observed Sam. After discussing her situation over with Clarence and them both deciding it best for the time being to not see each other, or have Lena watch over Hazel, she'd needed someone to talk to. She'd eventually visit with Clarence and Hazel again, but the Alex issue was currently more pressing. Sam's words about the woman coming around were incomprehensible. There was no way that Alex Danvers would be "coming around," not even with what Lena assumed was the woman's predilection toward women. She'd seen this in New York — so many men and women hiding in the shadows about their true attractions and the dreams they'd hope to base those attractions on. A lot of those people were so lost that they'd never live their truth. Lena couldn't shake the feeling that Alex was one of those people too. "I don't think so, Sam."

Sam poured her a glass of wine; she'd become accustomed to the beverage after seeing how much Lena loved it. She sat across from her at the dining table, then poured herself a cup. "Well, ya thought the same about Kara, too, didn't ya? And her feelings changed."

"No," Lena said, holding up a finger while taking a large gulp from her glass. "Kara was never as stern as Alex, and our bond allowed her to see reason. Alex has no one."

"She has Maggie." Sam took a sip of wine. "I mean I think so."

Lena sat up, raising an eyebrow. "You know that Alex is...that she's..."
Sam laughed. "I've seen the way you and Kara look at each other enough ta know that there's somethin' in the way Alex looks at Maggie. Whether or not Alex knows it is another matter."

"Suppose so," Lena sighed. "And Maggie too, huh?"

"She looks at Alex the way Alex looks at her. I saw it at the gatherin.'"

Lena sat back, eyes narrowing as she took another sip from her cup.

"With the way you were caught up in Kara, I didn't expect you to notice."

"Ha, ha." Lena grinned.

"But, seriously... I don't think Alex will stay opposed."

"You sound so sure. Wise even. Makes me wonder why you don't have suitors lined up."

"Because I learned my lesson the first time," Sam laughed.

Lena chuckled.

"Don'tcha worry, though. If love should ever find me, I'll hold on to it. Just like you should hold on to what you have with Kara."

"Hold on to what I have with Kara," Lena mumbled to herself as she cleaned some dishes. "Easier said than done."

She'd returned home intent on following Sam's advice. And she would have if Kara had been there. Instead, she'd been greeted by the ringing of a tiny bell and Siobhan telling her that Kara had come home, helped and then left. Waiting for the blonde hadn't proved fruitful either.

Kara didn't return that night. And she still hadn't returned by noon the following day.

Feeling a sense of dread, Lena stepped out to confront her. Knowing Kara was working today, it wasn't a task to find her, but knowing what to say was another matter entirely.

She stood there in the woman's blacksmith shop watching her mold, with great detail, some creation that wasn't yet identifiable. There were only three workers today. One was at the very back, and Brian was some distance off to the left, his attentive eyes occasionally looking up to observe her and then go back to his work. She'd addressed Kara by name only seconds ago and the blonde still wasn't paying her much mind. Like Brian's, her eyes would lift to meet Lena's and then return to her tools or design.

"Kara..." she repeated, keeping her voice low. "I know that what happened yesterday -- with us and with your sister -- unsettled you. But we can't just let things stay like that. You can't retreat into your shell. We need to talk about this."

Kara picked up her tongs and continued to focus on crafting the material before her.

"Let's go in the back, to your office."

Kara's eyes met hers and held before refocusing on the work at hand.
Lena moved around the table and stepped closer, her fingers softly gripping Kara's bicep. "I... It's true that I can't stop thinking about what we did. What you did to me." She looked at Kara's profile — the strength, the beauty. "But I'm not here for that, I don't think." She wasn't sure. Her gaze faltered to Kara's office. What would happen if they stepped into it? Would all they really do is talk? It seemed that Kara wasn't sure about that notion either. The woman seemed to be thinking just the opposite, in fact.

Kara's gaze met hers, sweeping over her torso and back up to her lips before going back to their previous focus.

Lena swallowed hard and moved back around the desk, catching Brian's stealing yet another glance. "Well," she cleared her throat, "you know where to find me when you're ready to confront this." She headed out of the shop without looking back.

It was near sunset when Kara entered Lena's home. Their home.

She hadn't been surprised by the visit to her blacksmith shop. She'd avoided the brunette all yesterday by tending to Siobhan and then immediately leaving to sleep at her home in the woods. And she'd avoided her today by not even checking in. She knew Lena would be free from overseer duties today and looking after Siobhan while she worked. And she'd unexpectedly needed the break. She loved being with Lena, but after their exchange in Lena's office, and her exchange with Alex afterward, she'd felt herself getting drawn back into the shameful mindset she'd had before. There was no getting around the fact that she and Lena had been sexually intimate. It had been as new and foreign to her as it had been exhilarating. And now she could no longer truthfully say that she and Lena had not crossed the line of sexual impropriety. It made her wonder if there was any point to them not doing more, or to waiting. Maybe what they'd done didn't really count since they hadn't gone all the way. But what did *all the way even* entail for them?

"Lena?" she called out, putting her blacksmith apron on a couch. It desperately needed washing.

A familiar bell sounded in the quiet, echoing off the walls.

"Siobhan," she grumbled.

Siobhan watched as Kara entered her room. The blonde was dirty as usual from smithing, and there was the same look of compassion and understanding in the woman's eyes despite the regulated duty of caring for her. And, surprisingly, it wasn't out of pity. Siobhan reasoned that if she were in Kara's place, she'd feel a sense of resentment. She was, after all, taking away time that the woman could be spending with Lena.

Still, considering what she'd been told about Kara, it was to be expected. The blonde was kindhearted and put others before herself. This was an endearing trait, no doubt. An honorable one. But it was a trait Siobhan was would be exploiting nonetheless.

"If you're wondering where Lena is," she said, "you just missed her on her way to the butcher's shop."

"Is there anythang you need?" Kara walked to her, eyebrows rising in earnest.
"No," Siobhan said, reaching for the cup on the stand beside her bed. She'd finally been able to acquire some tea. "I heard you come in and was hoping we could talk." She took a sip, and gestured to a chair in the center of the room. "Sit."

Kara moved the chair closer before sitting. "What is it you wanna talk about?"

Siobhan stared at the woman from over the rim of her cup. "Lena."

"Oh?"

"I know the two of you are hoping to have your union go off without a hitch," she stated, lowering the cup in her hands. "But I wonder if you've thought this out thoroughly enough."

Kara's brow crinkled. "Why do you say that?"

"Because," Siobhan paused, pinning Kara with her most serious glare yet. "Lena has...intimacy issues."

She couldn't let Kara challenge her. Not on this. "And I say this in the most delicate of ways, but she can't be free with anyone. She'll give you her body -- all passionate and full of wanting in the beginning. And it may even seem as though you have her heart there for a while, but you never really do." Siobhan looked down at her cup, her face registering a faint, sad smile. She was speaking from experience in some respects. "Things will seem fine at first, but she'll eventually shut you out. Emotionally, that is." Her gaze flickered up to Kara's, and she watched as the woman's eyes held hers before averting to the floor. "I should know; I was with her for four years... The only reason I even followed her here was to gain a sense of closure. But then I saw that she needed me, and so I stayed. But be certain... Once I'm healed, I will be leaving. I just don't want to see another woman hurt the way she hurt me."

There was silence in the room. Kara was still staring at the floor. From what Siobhan could tell, the blonde was in deep thought. Had she believed her? Was it enough to give her a reprieve?

"Kara?"

Kara stood abruptly. "The woman couldn't even look her in the eyes. "I should go she," she said.

"Kara, I didn't mean --"

"-- No, it's fine." Kara's eyes briefly met hers. "Thank you for tellin' me."

Siobhan watched as Kara left the room. With a grin, and finally content, she raised her cup to sip some tea. Kara wouldn't bring this up with Lena. The blonde wasn't the type to unnecessarily cause conflict; Siobhan had learned that much.

Night had arrived when Kara felt more than saw Lena standing in her doorway. The room was dark, but she could make out that, like her, the brunette wasn't in night clothes. Lena was indicating silence with a finger to her lips.

In the next moment, Lena was grabbing her by the hand and pulling her upright.

"Come with me," Lena whispered.
Kara saw no reason to protest, stepping into her boots as best she could with Lena still holding her hand. She'd avoided the woman enough. She couldn't muster up enough strength to avoid her any further. "But, Siobhan --"

"-- Is sound asleep," Lena assured. "Which is why we're keeping our voices down and taking advantage of the opportunity." She batted at Kara's busy hand. "And forget the boots. I want you relaxed."

They quietly made their way out back, where a large blanket, cheese and grapes in a bowl, and a chilled bottle of wine sat off to the side.

"What's all this?" Kara asked.

Lena grinned, pulling her along. "I can't let you do all the romantic gestures, now can I? I thought about blindfolding you first, but I felt that might be a little much."

"Lena..."

"I know we need to talk, Kara. And I know we have a lot to worry about in the upcoming days, weeks. But tonight, I just want to enjoy our time together. My time with you."

Kara stared into the brunette's eyes, seeing the pleading devotion staring back at her. She nodded her understanding.

"Sit with me," Lena said, still holding on to Kara's hand as she looked up at the stars.

Kara joined Lena in her gaze.

"Ever think about what might be out there?" Lena asked.

"Can't say that I have." Kara squinted, just now realizing that she was without her spectacles. "They look so tiny."

"That's why I brought this." Lena reached under the blanket and presented Kara with a small, rectangular box. She let go of Kara's hand as Kara observed it.

"What is it?"

Lena smiled. "You're full of questions tonight. Just open it."

Kara did as told, revealing a golden, stick-looking instrument.

"It's a telescope," Lena said. A Spyglass, to be precise. It's to help see the stars better."

Lena adjusted the instrument in Kara's hand and held it toward her face. "Take a look."

When Kara saw the stars via the Spyglass, she couldn't help the grin that spread across her lips. "Wow, Lena! Do they really look like that?!"

Lena laughed, sitting back on her hands as she watched Kara. "Well, through that thing at least. With more powerful telescopes, they're even more brilliant."

Kara moved the telescope from her eye to stare at the brunette. "You mean ta tell me there are more powerful telescopes than this?" She went back to observing.

"There are. Also, take a look at the moon."
"Holy..."

Lena giggled. "I'm glad you're enjoying yourself."

Kara took a moment to stare at her again. She was as lovely as ever. And so was this romantic gesture of hers. There was no awkward tension. No wondering if they should act on their impulses and what consequences doing so would have. It was just her and Lena, enjoying each other's company. And she surmised that Lena had guessed it was exactly what she'd needed. What they'd both needed.

She went back to looking at the stars and moon.

"English astronomer William Huggins made the first spectroscopic observations of a nova in 1866," Lena said. "Spectroscopy is the study of the interaction between matter and electromagnetic radiation. Electromagnetic radiation is something that would take me a few minutes to explain. But a nova... A nova is a transient astronomical event, one that causes a star to show a sudden large increase in brightness and then slowly return to its original state over a few months. Some say it's the birth of a new star. Stars that were too dim to be seen before suddenly become the brightest. All I know is that the wonders of the sky make me think of infinite possibilities." Lena looked from the stars to Kara. "I like to think of there being infinite possibilities for us too, Kara."

Kara could feel the heaviness in Lena's words, and returned her gaze.

Lena moved closer, attempting to wrap Kara in her warmth, but Kara leaned back.

"Have I made you uncomfortable?" Lena asked, eyebrows furrowing into puzzlement.

Kara chewed on the inside of cheek. She shouldn't let Siobhan's words get to her. Even if what the woman said was true, it didn't mean that it had to be the same for her and Lena. It didn't have to mean that at all. "No," she replied, pulling Lena into her.

They stayed like that, looking up at the night sky in each other's arms. If this was to be one of the last few times she'd be able to be with Lena like this, she was going to enjoy it.
Kara opened the front door and saw Mon-El standing there. She could chance a guess as to why he was here, but she'd rather not.

"Mon-El."

"Can we talk?"

Kara looked behind her. With it being the first thing in the morning and Lena and Siobhan inside, it wasn't exactly the best place to talk with her betrothed.

"Outside," he said, as if sensing Kara's trepidation. Or maybe he'd meant outside to begin with. She turned back to him. "Okay."

They walked in front of the stable, where Wrangler poked his head out. Kara picked up a bucketful of carrots and fed him a few.

"I don't remember this being here," Mon-El said, eyes looking over the stable. "I mean, I remember some men laying groundwork, but..."

"That's because I built it...for her." She looked at him. The statement had come out matter-of-factly, and his eyes relayed hurt.

"Oh," he said, sticking his hands into his pockets. He looked so small somehow, like the little boy he used to be. "Look, Kara, I don't wanna go to trial."

"I don't either."

He nodded toward a large tree stump a little ways away. "Can we sit?"

Kara put the bucket down and looked toward the stump. They walked to it and sat awkwardly.

Mon-El raked his hands through his hair, looking to the green at his left as he did. "Remember when we'd go swingin' through the trees like little monkeys?"

Kara chuckled. "Yeah, try as you did, you were never able to beat me when we raced. And your pants would always fall down at some point."

Mon-El smirked. "I hated suspenders." He rubbed at a shoulder as if to feel for the material. "I still do, but there's nothin' I can do 'bout it." He turned to her, pointing a finger at her nose. "Ya never would have beat me had I been wearin' the thangs."

Kara grinned. "You say that now."
"And then there were the times we'd go to the candy or cakes shop, and you'd hog all the treats by hidin' extra in yer pockets."

"Hey," Kara giggled. "You and Lena didn't need as much. I was more active, so I burned more energy."

"Yeah..." Mon-El's lighthearted expression changed as quickly as it came. It was now somber, and the atmosphere changed with it. "How'd it come to this?"

Kara looked to her knees, using her hands to rub at them. She wasn't sure what she could tell him but the truth. "I guess it'd be easy to say Lena is the reason." She meekly pushed her spectacles back up on her face and turned to him, staring him in the eyes. "But it ain't true. I never let ya get close. Not in the way you would have liked. Your ma said I pulled ya along, and she's right that I did. I knew how ya felt about me, but I liked havin' ya in my life. And there was so much I knew I had to abide by, including marryin' ya. I didn't want to lose you or hurt you by sayin' I didn't feel the same." She paused when seeing the dejected emotion building in his eyes. "I'm sorry, Mon-El."

She directed her gaze to the ground, but she could still feel his gaze weighing on her.

"Do ya think you could have grown to love me?"

Kara's grip on her knees tightened.

Their attention averted to horse hooves sounding nearby. They looked up to see Winn moving off a strong breed. He was dressed nicely, as usual, and had flowers in his hand. He waved in their direction before heading to the front door.

Kara laughed. "He's here to see Siobhan."

"At least someone's fighting for what they want," Mon-El said. He'd stood, and his voice suddenly sounded bitter.

"Mon-El..."

He walked away and departed without looking back.

Siobhan stared at the flowers in her hand above the sketchpad in her lap. She sighed as Winn studied the room. "You shouldn't have," she said. And she couldn't mean that any more than she did. She didn't know much about Winn. She knew a little about his family life, but that was it. She also knew he was interested in her, but she wasn't yet ready to push him away. He was the only one giving her the attention she deserved, and there was a kindness to him. He was also quite humorous when he wanted to be. Certainly better than other men she'd been with.

"I heard about your fall," he said, looking to her and quickly taking a seat in the chair near her bed. "I wanted to make you feel better."

"Thank you." Siobhan rubbed at an area under her arm. It was sore, and she'd began drawing again to take her mind off of the pain there and in her right leg. "But a pair of crutches that are actually comfortable would make me feel much better."

Winn looked to the crutches leaning against her bedpost. "You get around with those?" He stood and moved to grasp a hold of them. "Civil War crutches, huh?" He ran his hands along the tips. "Now
that you mention it, they could add some cushion to the top of these, or something." He looked up at her in wonderment. "Why do you need to move around at all, though? Don't you have Lena and Kara helping you? You shouldn't be putting pressure on your legs."

"It's just one leg." Siobhan shrugged. "And it's better than letting someone handle my chamber pot for me." She raised her eyebrows in an explanatory manner.

"Oh." Winn stated, looking a little uncomfortable. "We all have to...do that. Nothing to be embarrassed about."

"Winn," Siobhan chided. It may be nothing to be embarrassed about under usual circumstances, but she couldn't very well have Lena tending to the task if she expected to be alluring in any way to the woman while Kara was still around. And having Kara do it would actually be mortifying.

"Sorry," Winn said. "I can make these more comfortable for you." He placed the crutches under his arms, briefly trying them out. "I always was somewhat of a fixer. I like building on creations and making them better. I can get on improving these now, if you like."

Siobhan straightened her back against the headboard, watching Winn pretend to have trouble using the crutches. He was trying to make her laugh, but a smile would have to suffice for now. "Thank you, Winn."

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Lena observed Kara as they sat beside each other on one of the couches in the living area. The woman was watching her read a book. "So you're meeting with your parents today? Will Alex be there?"

Kara sighed, tapping her fingers on the couch. "Yeah."

"Do you intend to tell them about us? I don't mean the stuff about us living together, which they surely know about, but everything else."

"Walter said I'll need to, didn't he? But I don't think this is the time for it. It hasn't been two full weeks for us yet, and I want to think about thangs a little more. Don't mean Alex won't open her big mouth, though."

Lena could see that Kara was stressed, and it was the last thing she wanted for her. "Come here," she said.

"What for?"

"I need a reason?"

"Just askin."

Lena smiled. "Read with me." She turned the book Kara's way. "It's poetry and similar works, by Henry David Thoreau. From what I can make of his writings, he seemed to be like us."

Kara scooted closer. "How's that?"

"Well..." Lena's smile turned into a wide grin. "It appears he was an anarchist. All the rules and things we have in this town? He surely would have rebelled against them. And there are phrases that lead me to believe he fancied men."
Kara's eyes went big. "What? Let me see!"

Lena laughed. "Here, look at this passage." She pointed to it. "My friend is the apology for my life. In him are the spaces which my orbit traverses. [...] For the most part I find that in another man and myself the key note is not the same -- so that there are no perfect chords in our gamuts. But if we do not chord by whole tones, nevertheless his sharps are sometimes my flats, and so we play some very difficult pieces together, though the sameness at last fatigues the ear. We never rest on a full natural note -- but I sacrifice my naturalness and he his. We play no tune though -- only chromatic strains -- or trill upon the same note till our ears ache." She turned to another passage. "And this one, where he describes marriage to be 'little better than the marriage of beasts.' He labels women 'an army of nonproducers.' He also argues that 'any nobleness begins at once to refine a man’s features, any meanness or sensuality to imbrute them.'" She looked up at Kara, who appeared engrossed in the words. "Of course, there's no way to be certain. Perhaps he simply wasn't keen on sex."

Kara shook her head. "No, this man is a deviant if I ever heard of one."

"Kara!" Lena chuckled, pushing the woman against the shoulder. "We really need to get away from that term."

"Why? It's what we're called."

"Because." Lena lifted the blonde's chin, staring her in the eyes. "The way I feel for you isn't deviant... At all."

She felt Kara recoil and look down. "Kara?"

Kara looked up at her, eyes narrowing as if she was trying to figure her out. "I just wonder about you, that's all."

"In what way?"

The blonde looked away again.

"Kara, what is it? Tell me."

Siobhan and Winn jumped when Lena burst through the door. Siobhan had seen her angry before, but the brunette was seething now.

"Winn, out!" the woman said.

Winn didn't give her any reason to argue. He picked up the crutches, offered Siobhan an apologetic glance, and hurried out of the room, closing the door behind him.

"How dare you?!" Lena charged. "You told Kara that I can offer her my body, but that I'll never be able to love her?!"

"I didn't say that you can't love her!" Siobhan yelled.

This was unexpected; she'd thought Kara wouldn't dare voice these concerns. Just how strong was her bond with Lena?

"I only said that your heart won't fully be hers. And can you blame me? After what happened between us?"
"You aren't Kara!" Lena moved to her, glare unrelenting. "That is the difference."

"A difference that makes no sense. Why her and not me?"

Lena placed a hand on her forehead, as if trying to steady the raging thoughts that must be flowing through her mind. "We discussed this already. In the living area, remember?"

Siobhan threw her sketchpad down. "But I still don't understand." That wasn't entirely true. Lena had explained it to her well enough to get a basic understanding, but it still lacked the logic compared to their four years together as adults. "Kara's a friend you grew up with, in part at least. You loved her as a child. You didn't see her for eighteen years. You showed up out of the blue in the hometown you shared with her. And now you're in love with her?"

Lena moved to snatch up the sketchpad. "You know there's more to it than that."

"Do I?"

Lena dusted off the sketchpad and placed it on the desk. "I don't know what kind of game you're playing, Siobhan, but I won't have you messing up things with me and Kara. From now on, Kara will no longer be tending to your needs. A maid will be here day and night, effective immediately. I will still help when I can, but I think it's best that I don't spend as much time with you either. It seems to only stifle your healing process. And I don't mean your leg." She looked the woman over. "Once you're better, you should move. Or leave Breighville."

Lena headed for the door and opened it; Siobhan watched in dread.

"I'm sorry, Siobhan." Lena looked back at her. "I truly am."

Lena exited the room, and Siobhan felt her heart constrict. She'd never anticipated this much pain. Never.

By noon, Kara and Alex glared at each other from across the kitchen table. Jeremiah and Eliza watched them curiously.

"What's gotten into you two?" Jeremiah asked, passing the bowl of mashed potatoes to Eliza beside him.

"This don't have anythang to do with the rumors going around about Lena, does it?" Eliza queried, pouring gravy on the potatoes.

"She's causin' trouble for our family," Alex said, eyes never leaving Kara's.

Kara bit into a chicken drumstick. "It ain't her fault the town is as dumb as a bunch of rocks and thinks she's foolin' around with Clarence."

"No... I suspect she's foolin' around with someone else," Alex mumbled, raising an eyebrow.

"Oh shut up!"

"Close yer mouth when you eat!" Alex yelled back.

"Goodness," Eliza breathed, placing a hand to her heart as she looked between the two women. "You two haven't fought like this since you were children. Alex, I know Kara being Lena's friend
can make folks look unfavorably on Kara, but it's been that way since they were little. And you've always liked Lena too."

"That was before..."

"Before what, dear?"

Kara challenged her with simply a look, daring her to say more, but also pleading with her not to.

Jeremiah studied his family, folding his arms across his chest in his typical fashion when being analytical. "Alex?"

"I just mean that Lena is being selfish, is all," Alex decided on. "On top of the Clarence stuff, Kara's livin' with her now to get away from Mon-El. It makes her seem uncommitted to her marriage contract."

"Now that is a good point," Jeremiah said, his gaze moving from Alex to his other daughter. "Kara?"

Kara wiped at her mouth with the back of her hand. "Mon-El and I are havin'...issues. And what Lena and I do is none of her business. Lena's not seein' Clarence anyhow."

"Not anymore," Alex quipped.

"You should worry about yerself," Kara suggested, picking up another drumstick.

"I have a family to think about. A reputation!" Alex argued.

"So you keep sayin.'"

"Our lives mean so little to you?"

Kara put her food down, pinning her sister with a look she hoped conveyed her sincerity. "No, they don't... I just --"

"-- Excuse me," Alex's voice rose. She stood and threw down her napkin. "I can't stand ta sit here and be so complicit." She glared at Kara one last time before marching away.

Jeremiah turned to Kara. "Now I don't know what's goin' on with you and your sister. But you know you can talk to us about anythang, don't you?"

"Jeremiah's right," Eliza agreed. "I know word spreads fast in town, but it would have been better to hear about your problems with Mon-El, livin' with Lena, and the rumor regardin' Clarence from you instead."

Kara looked to her parents apologetically. "I know. I'm sorry."

"So you understand that you can talk to us about what's botherin' ya?" Jeremiah pressed. His piercing brown eyes seemed to be searching for something in Kara's.

"I do," she said.

If only she believed it.
Alex walked into the saloon, ignoring the stares and immediately spotting Sara behind the bar.

Sara grinned. "Alex."

"I wanna talk to ya...about people like you."

Ten minutes later, Alex stood in Lar and Rhea's back room. They were off attending to some business, and Sara had pointed to this area to discuss. Sara made loving women seem natural, like there was nothing to it. She didn't know if the blonde was aware of the fact that Kara was just like her, but she needed to know.

"And Kara? How long have ya known?" she asked.

Sara had been leaning against the wall. She moved off of it. "Wait... This is all about Kara?"

"Yes, why?"

Sara's devilish grin returned. "I thought it was about you."

"What?"

"You favor women too."

"I don't!"

"You do. See these pants I have on?" Sara pointed to them. "I had them made so that they would fit snug instead of loose. You haven't been able to keep your eyes above my waist."

"That's a lie!" Alex made a face of disgust. How could this woman possibly think that she was like her? So unholy?

"Which part? The pants or your contradictory gaze?"

Alex raised her chin. "It was a mistake comin' here. You're as corrupt as Lena, I see that now. And I will see to it that Kara is not pulled any further into your webs." She made her way toward the door, but a hand grasped hers.

She didn't have any time to think before Sara was kissing her, lips softer than anything she'd ever felt. She pushed at the woman hard. "You scoundrel," she spat on the floor, wiping at her mouth in an instant. "Rogue! Rake! Cad!"

Sara laughed. "Those are all names for a man."

"You're actin' like one."

"Am I?"

Alex moved close, her fists balling uncontrollably. "You're a vile, vile woman." She pushed past the smirking blonde and out the door.

Kara headed for the overseer building just as Ms. Merriam did. She was at a loss for what business Ms. Merriam had there, but the woman stopped upon seeing her.
"Kara? Anythang wrong?" the older woman queried. "You seem pressed."

"I could the say the same about you." Kara stared ahead. Her destination point was just across the road, but here they stood on a boardwalk.

"I'm just headed to speak with Ms. Luthor about somethin.'"

"Same."

"Is it about the rumor?"

Kara looked to her. "Partly."

"Your sister's takin' this a little too far," Ms. Merriam whispered. "I spoke with Ms. Luthor myself the other day. The girl ain't foolin' with that man -- Clarence." She shook her head. "I've been tryin' to set the thangs right with my ladies and others. Lena can be troublesome, but she's not a whore."

"Thank you for that, Ms. Merriam." And despite her grimace at the word whore, she was thankful. There was no getting around the fact that word had even reached her parents, but if the talk had gotten out of hand to the point of threatening Lena's position in town, Ms. Merriam would know about it and wouldn't be able to stop herself from commenting on it. "But Alex isn't responsible in any way for spreadin' the rumor. She just supports it."

"All the same." The older woman shrugged. "Well, I'll let you handle your business first," she said, nodding toward the overseer building.

"Thanks again," Kara called out, jetting ahead. It was odd seeing Ms. Merriam — Ms. Ethel Merriam — be seemingly supportive of Lena. Kara kept waiting for the other shoe to drop; it was an expression Lena had explained to her, and it seemed fitting now, but she supposed she should count her blessings.

She said hi to James before entering, and all eyes immediately landed on her.

"Um...Kara?" Winn questioned, raising his hand as if in grade school. "What happened the other day isn't going to happen today, is it?"

Maggie pointed a finger at him. "Shush, short stuff."

Sam laughed.

Lena stood and beckoned Kara over.

Kara tried to head down the hall to the stairs, but Lena grabbed her by the hand. "No, not there again." The brunette pulled her to the door at Winn's right and closed it before taking her down the short corridor that led to an open area.

Kara looked around. The room was dark and dank. She didn't like it, which was likely why Lena had chosen it. Things couldn't go like they went last time. How much did Winn even know anyhow?

"This is the interrogation room," Lena explained. "Alex came here once. She made the same face you're making now."

Kara scrunched her nose. "Who could blame her?"

"So," Lena said, moving to stand in front of her. "You're stopping by because?"
Before she could stare the woman in the eyes, a soft hand landed on her arm. Reflexively, she looked upon the brunette's face. Light green eyes stared back at her.

"Is it about Alex?"

Kara felt embarrassed to admit it.

"She's wrong, Kara. Just like Siobhan."

"Not about the problems we're goin' to face," Kara noted.

"Do you believe in us?" Lena grasped her other arm and pulled her closer. "Do you?"

"You weren't there when I was at my folks' house earlier. The rumor about you and Clarence? Us livin' together? They hated seeing how angry Alex and I are with each other. I didn't tell them about us, and neither did Alex, but still." She yanked away from the brunette, but insistent hands held on. Kara felt tears prickling behind her eyes, but she held them at bay. How many times was she going to cry in front of Lena? She couldn't keep showing such weakness.

"I know your parents. I'm sure they were just upset because you two are so close and I'm in harm's way. And Alex... She's upset in her own way too, and I don't mean with you. She's upset with herself because she's in a marriage with Jonathan -- a man she doesn't love -- and here we are going after happiness. She must be wondering where her own happiness lies. And as for what's going on between the two of you, I understand it, but you take it too far when you pull me in to prove a point. If you ever use me the way you did in that office again, ever touch and kiss me like that again, I will strip you down to your last stitch and make love to you regardless of the setting." Her green eyes burned with fire. "You are gorgeous, alluring and true, Kara. And I'm not sure how much more of your teasing I can take. Even when it's not teasing, the result is the same. So if you aren't ready to go any further physically, don't touch me like you do. I don't know if that's what you had planned today, but I felt I should warn you."

Lena let go of her, but didn't move away. She took Kara's hand and placed it a little above her breasts. Kara blushed, and even more so when feeling the erratic heartbeat.

"That's what you do to me," Lena said. "It's a good thing, but also quite unnerving."

Before Kara could reply, Lena stepped back and her eyes focused on Kara's mouth.

The brunette's words about taking off her clothes bombarded her mind with titillating imagery. She still didn't know much about sex, especially between women, but that didn't stop her from imagining herself flush against Lena in ways she knew to be erotic. She should step away, given Lena's warning, but she found herself frozen in place.

Lena's eyes flitted back up to hers.

She allowed her gaze to fall away from the woman's probing eyes, to the full mouth and finally to the neck and prominent breasts. It wasn't like they'd done anything here in this room, and yet it was like that even though they hadn't kissed or done otherwise.

"If there's any business you'd like to worry yourself with this evening, the maid will care for Siobhan tonight. So you should be free," Lena said.

"And you?"

"I'll try to take some time for myself."
Lena turned away from her and walked out of the room.

Lena sat behind her desk alone. Since there wasn't much to do and she welcomed the quiet, the others had left with her permission. She pushed the papers away from her and leaned back in her chair. She truly wasn't the right person for the job. She was the biggest hypocrite by far — lusting after a woman and acting on that lust, all the while telling or implying that others shouldn't do the same or similar. In the past, fear had consumed her because of what she was. It hadn't been right. And it wasn't right today, consuming Kara the way it did.

Kara had challenged her sister, but Lena didn't know if the blonde could continue to do so. Earlier, she had nearly scolded Kara about not believing in their union, and now she was the one having doubts.

A knock on the door brought her out of her thoughts. She remembered that she'd allowed James to leave as well, which probably hadn't been the smartest choice, given her occupation. She walked to the door and opened it.

There stood Jonathan Williams. What business did he have with her? His dark hair blew in the wind as he towered inches above her.

"Alex told me everythang," he said, moving past her and closing the door. "As the man of the house, I felt I should explain where she's comin' from."

Lena wanted to scoff. What was it with men and their need to assert dominance? He had a strange walk that somewhat detracted from whatever intimidating effect he might have had. "That's not necessary," she said.

"And I wanted to talk about you."

Lena looked up at him. Talk about her? Meaning as separate from Kara?

He wasn't a bad-looking man, but there was a hardness to his face and it lacked warmth. Lena knew that he could also be unfriendly and uncaring. She remembered what she'd been told about him by Kara, the way he seemed around Alex, and the way he'd acted toward James at the gathering. She took a step back.

"We could remedy your situation."

"My situation?"

"Your unconventional sexual interests." He stepped closer. "With the lack of God and discipline in your life, it's only natural that you would stray and become confused. I can help turn ya right."

Lena felt fear bloom in her chest. Was he proposing what it sounded like he was proposing? He was a married man. Not only that, he was talking about solving a supposed sin by committing another one. She reasoned that it probably shouldn't come as a surprise to her. The man had spent his time with another woman instead of Alex at the gathering, shaming Alex in some respects.

She looked around the room. She needed to get out of here, but she was drawing a blank on an exit. She always exited via the front door and he was blocking it.

"I assure you I am not without discipline," she said.
"But you are without a man. Have ya ever been with one before?"

Lena nearly chuckled. "I have. Didn't like it."

"Maybe he wasn't the right one." He moved close, placing his hand on her face. "You are so very attractive, Lena. With the right man, you could discover that you have no interest in women at all."

"Not possible." She slapped his hand away. He didn't move. So she moved around him. She backed toward the front door, only now just remembering the exit in the back and the side exit via the jail cell. "I will never be interested in men, Jonathan. I would say you should go home to Alex, but she doesn't deserve the way you treat her."

His eyes appeared to turn dark then. She'd had no reason to be scared of Jonathan before, but now she most certainly did.

"Is that so?"

"It is."

He started for her and Lena grasped the doorknob. She would escape before she would fall prey to a man forcing himself on her. She thought of Anna Davies and what it must have been like for the girl. Jonathan was too young to be the man who'd raped Anna, but that didn't make him any less threatening.

"You treacherous bitch!"

"Pardon me?"

"Harlot! If only you weren't the way you are, with your tainted soul callin' out to me, I wouldn't be here." The frown that had formed on his forehead deepened. "If rebuking you in the name of the Lord is what it will take to free this town, I'll have to do just that."

"Are you out of your mind? What are you saying?"

"I'll tell everyone of your blasphemous, slattern nature. Hell, I'll throw a social just for it. This Friday."

"You wouldn't. It would harm Alex and your son by extension."

"You staying in this town is the bigger harm. And there are ways to ruin you without lettin' everyone know of your sexual predilections."

He reached for her before she could react fast enough, his hand going to the collar of her dress and ripping at it. Buttons fell to the floor. Imagery of Kara delicately loosening her buttons contrasted with what was happening now. "I said no!" She jerked away from him, and twisted the doorknob, stumbling backwards outside. Jonathan moved with her.

"The Devil in is you, woman. And I will reveal it." He brushed past her.

"You don't have a clue what you're talking about!" she yelled after him. "I've had it with trying to prove myself to this town. You want to ruin me so badly on Friday? I won't give you the chance!"

She suddenly saw townspeople looking her way, as if she'd gone mad. In a way she had. But knowing them, they might also be looking because they'd just witnessed her alone with a man. That is, if they were aware that the others had left.
"Lena, you okay, child?"

Lena turned toward the voice to see Ms. Merriam, who quickly ushered her back inside and closed the door. "What was this about ruinin' ya?"

"Nothing," she said without thinking. "I mean...something. Jonathan wants to run the Devil out of me."

"Say what now?" Ms. Merriam touched a hand to her collar. "What went on in here? Did he do this to ya?"

Lena chuckled bitterly. Tears began to form in her eyes, and she covered her mouth with a hand out of the sheer horror.

"Come here, child." Ms. Merriam moved to her and wrapped large, welcoming arms around her. "You're safe now."

Lena sank into the woman, the sobs wracking her body. "He might have taken me forcefully had there been no way out."

"Some men are wicked, even here in Breighville. His mother shoulda taught him better. Or his wife."

Ms. Merriam had a point, but maybe it was time to put a stop to all of the threats of exposure. Maybe Jonathan's threats were just the out that she and Kara needed. "I think I'm done trying to prove myself to this town."

"You see what you mean. But still...you should tell Alex about this or Kara."

"No, I can't tell Kara. She'd have a fit." Lena's grip on the woman tightened. "He threatened to expose me as having the Devil in me. Says he's going to tell the entire town." She moved back to stare at her. "If that happens, and the town believes him, then what about Kara? And others who've been associating with me? They'd all be at risk."

"That ain't gonna happen." Ms. Merriam moved some strands out of her face. "If I say otherwise, who do you think the town's gonna believe? Me or him?"

Ms. Merriam had a point, but maybe it was time to put a stop to all of the threats of exposure. Maybe Jonathan's threats were just the out that she and Kara needed. "I think I'm done trying to prove myself to this town."

"You said somethin' like that outside. What are you thinkin'?"

She moved away from Ms. Merriam, inhaling and exhaling deeply. Like a game of chess, the pieces presented themselves to her instantly. She knew what she had to do.

"Lena?"

"Everything will be fine, Ms. Merriam. Now I just need to have a message delivered to Kara."

Half an hour later, she looked over the ball gown she'd acquired from London years ago. It was still in mint condition. For this town, it was far too provocative with its low-cut bodice and the way it would cling to her breasts and expose more than it hid. It was a scandalous dress indeed, but if she was going through with what she had planned, she might as well enjoy herself and her time with Kara.

The dress was flattering on her. The white silk complemented her pale skin and the swept skirt made her waist appear tiny. Red ribbons trailed along the bustled back, and the folded petticoat would
sway when she moved.

It was nearing four o'clock. And seeing as she needed to make time before it any got any later, she didn't have the luxury of giving as much attention to her hair as she would like. Swiftly and efficiently, she pinned up her dark tresses and brushed them back. She created her usual bun, but let wisps of hair hang at either side of her ear. She picked up two red ribbons and wove them into her bun, delighted by the way they matched the ribbons on her dress.

She stared in the mirror and froze. She looked like herself, but in some ways she didn't. She'd gone easy on the makeup except for minor dramatic eye application. Kara seemed to prefer her with little or no makeup on.

She put on her white silk gloves and looked in the mirror once more. There would be consequences to what she was going to do, but she wasn't going to back out now.

Kara stared worriedly at the Gand Brew & Stew business. She shouldn't be here. Not only was it getting late, but being here without an excuse making it clear that she wasn't here to drink or disregard other town rules could spell trouble. People from town would see her here and spread rumors, which she certainly didn't needed any more of. The fact that these people were here themselves could easily be explained away by them saying they heard the rumors from someone else.

Lena had left a message for her, asking her to dress up and to wait outside. Kara had dressed in one of her church suits. And the message had been short and to the point, just like the message Lena had left for her the first day the brunette had arrived back in town. Only this time Kara felt significantly more dread. Why would Lena want to meet here? Was it to talk to Mon-El's parents? Engage socially? What had changed since she'd last seen Lena earlier in the day? She looked around at the spacious area ahead. There was one road in the center of a lot of green. All she had to do in order to be free of this town was walk in the direction leading farther out. She could leave with Lena. But then what about her folks and Alex? And what of other towns just like this one?

Against the occasional neigh of her black stallion behind her, she could hear men talking inside. She also heard a few women laughing. How free those people must feel, she thought. But she wasn't one of them, and would never be.

An enclosed wagon with a male driver pulled up beside her. Lena stepped out, careful not to dirty her gown.

"Lena?"

Kara was floored. She could see that the dress was expensive, but what need any woman would have to don clothing like that in this town wasn't as clear.

"Kara," Lena said, looking her over before heading to the door. "Glad you came. And that you dressed for the occasion."

Kara quickly moved to the door to open it for her. All heads turned their way as they entered. And with Lena dressed like that, Kara couldn't blame them.

"Hello, everyone!" Lena nearly belted. "I'm here with my dear friend, Kara, who's been looking after me as I battle syphilis."

Gasp immediately followed.
Syphilis was one of the few diseases Kara had learned of. Many a traveler had it. It was mainly a sexual disease, and there was plenty of documentation on it. It was highly stigmatizing, as it was seen to indicate one's lack of morality, such as a person without righteous self-control or a man having taken a prostitute. As such, someone afflicted with the disease would usually symbolize sexual deviancy. Kara knew that its origin wasn't clear, but that it produced many different symptoms and made diagnosis difficult. An infected person would develop a painless ulcer, which typically appeared on the genitals. This would soon disappear and be followed by a latency time frame. Secondary stage symptoms would appear at some point. One could be afflicted with rashes, ulcers, pustules that would disfigure the person, swollen glands and foul-smelling discharge. Others were asymptomatic, at least for a time. 

Kara couldn't imagine why Lena would want anyone to think she had the disease, especially given the implications, but she wasn't keen to let this stand.

"That's why I'm unmarried, you see," Lena went on. "Funny thing is...I got it from my husband, who's been dead for sometime." She looked from patron to patron. "Don't worry, though, you can't get it unless you bed me."

Kara grabbed Lena by the arm as people continued to murmur and look at the two like they were infected with the plague. "What are ya doin'?" she whispered through gritted teeth. "You wanna ruin yer reputation or somethin'?"

Lena's eyes blazed into hers. "That exactly what I want to do, Kara. Trust me." She looked ahead to Sara. "Bartender! Where are your employers?" She approached the woman swiftly, Kara steadily following.

"Wow," Sara laughed. She leaned on the counter with a smirk. Her eyes drifted from appraising Lena to looking at Kara for answers.

"I don't know what's goin' on," Kara said.

"What's all the racket out here?" Lar's voice boomed as he came from the back area, Rhea beside him. "Ms. Luthor?" His eyes landed upon Lena and he moved to stand in front of her.

"Ah, Mr. Gand," Lena said, leaning back against the counter. "I just came to let your lovely patrons know that I have syphilis and that's why I'm unmarried. They've heard all about how my husband, who's now dead, gave it to me. And how Kara here is helping with my symptoms."

Lar stared at Lena hard and long. "You think you're clever, don't you?"

"You bitch!" Rhea charged. "We both know that's not why you're unmarried or living in sin."

"Oh?" Lena arched an eyebrow. "It seems everyone else here thinks otherwise."

Lar and Rhea looked to their guests. A number of them seemed terrified. Women had paused in men's laps, and all eyes were on them.

"And if you don't allow Kara and I time in that side room of yours, I'm guessing they are going to feel even more uneasy once I tell them all about the symptoms and the ways the disease is contracted."

Lar and Rhea continued to glare at Lena, but Lena's glare was just as powerful. Lar bowed his head, as if relenting, much to Rhea's chagrin.

"Come on, Kara." Lena pulled the blonde to the side room she'd discovered upon her first visit here.
"This isn't the last of this," Rhea called after her.

Lena stopped and looked back at the woman. "I don't doubt it." She turned to address the rest of the room. "I'm still overseer, mind you. I just need to look over an agreement I have with your bosses. I should be out of your hairs shortly." Her eyes staggered to the man at the piano. "Get around to playing something, will you?"

Lena pulled Kara into the room and closed the door behind them. Kara looked at her as though her brain had turned to mush.

"What?" Lena asked, taking off her gloves and tossing them on a counter.

"What was that?"

"Kara, what are the type of people the so-called good folks in a town like Breighville shun?"

Kara pushed her spectacles back up on her face. "Those who don't follow the rules or are just immoral. Especially sexual deviants, drunkards, and those afflicted with stigmatizing diseases."

"Sexual diseases like syphilis," Lena clarified.

"You want everyone to think you have syphilis? Why?"

"Weren't you listening? If I have syphilis and men know it, it explains why I'm unmarried. If I got it from my husband, it at least speaks to me not having been sexually promiscuous. It still paints my husband in a bad light, but many men blame women for infecting the man. So some might think that my husband bedded a prostitute, but the woman will still mainly be to blame. And as for me, while they won't look at me kindly either, they'll feel some sympathy for a husband who would do this to his wife. They may very well be ignorant to whether you can contract it by tending to me, but I was clear that it can't be contracted unless bedding the person. News of this will spread through the town quickly."

"But you don't have syphilis, and you've never been married?"

Lena laughed. "Correct."

Kara observed the brunette as the woman moved in front of her and gave her a clear view of her curves. Lena always was stunning. Her angular face and haunting green eyes never failed to gain men's attention, and it hadn't failed this evening either. Her figure was one that men obsessed over.

She felt her heart speed up and her palms grow sweaty as she continued to stare.

The sophisticated gown hugged Lena's breasts, allowing for the majority of her cleavage to be on display. A twist pattern rested in the neckline, with only minimal coverage. Her hair was well-done and her shoes adorned silk. She either intended to impress men, or Kara herself. Kara settled on the latter.

"But we already have a plan," she said. "Won't what you did make thangs worse?"

"What I did will make it so that the two of us living together looks less suspicious. It will make it so that no one can come in threatening to have us shunned. Unless, of course, they want to reveal our sexual attraction to each other. But with the way people feel about women's capability of being sexually intimate with one another, it may just be that syphilis, even if considered in a sympathetic light, is thought to be the worse deal. In fact, I'm betting on it," Lena sighed. "The only difference is that your family won't be shamed or run out of town. People will mainly focus on me and staying
clear of me. Maintaining my overseer job might be a challenge, but I think it'll be fine."

"Lena..."

Lena stepped to her. "Are you not the one who talked about getting things under our control?"

Kara faltered. A rhythmic sound started up, and she looked toward the door. She couldn't quite describe it — the melody filling and moving through her like a ghost seeking a temporary home — but she knew what she was hearing. She thought of how her birth mother would hum to her when she was a child. "Is that...music?"

"It is." Lena moved closer to her, staring at her with sad eyes and grabbing her by the hand. She knew Lena hated the fact that she hadn't been exposed to music. "Dance with me?"

Dancing was another thing Kara had missed out on, but Lena guided her every step. They danced a little until sunset and left.

"As you know, the rules don't apply to the saloon," Lena said, entering Kara's property in the woods with Kara moving behind her. "So even knowing that we couldn't have made it back in town before nightfall, that we left just before sunset shouldn't be much of problem. They'll talk about it and how I was dressed, no doubt, but what's any of that compared to syphilis?" She chuckled. "Walter is going to be so upset."

Kara walked to the lamp at the side of the room and lit it. After eating a little at the saloon, they'd rode back on Kara's stallion, Lena having bid the wagon driver a good day once paying him.

"My," Lena said, taking in the area. It now had chairs, a rug, and a couch. She noticed a door at the back and one to the side. "One's a bedroom, I take it?" She turned to Kara, her gaze intrusive.

Kara felt hot. It wasn't easy to think clearly with Lena looking the way she did in that gown, or when remembering what happened last time they were here and how tightly Lena had held onto her tonight during their ride over. She wasn't sure why Lena had overlooked the bedroom the first time. The second time they'd been caught up in each other. "Yeah," she said.

Lena moved to look out the window a few feet ahead, slowly slipping out of her shoes. "Our special tree looked brilliant under the moonlight when we rode past it."

Kara stared. It was more than just Lena's dress. Being alone with Lena — no Siobhan, no nothing — and remembering Lena's kisses and touches in the dusty old office was distracting.

Lena sat down in the chair beneath the window and propped her legs up on a stool a little ahead. Her bustle raised, and layers of the gown slid to the side of her legs. Kara took in a deep breath.

"Should we discuss somethin'?" Kara asked.

"We should." Lena folded her hands in her lap. Her head was bowed.

She couldn't look any more like an angel if she tried, Kara thought. A provocative-looking angel, but an angel regardless. Kara could smell her usual lily scent perfume.

"I've been thinking that any chance we have to be together, we should take advantage of," Lena said softly.
"I have too." Kara walked to her and knelt before her. She took Lena’s gloved hands into her own. Not being able to feel the brunette's bare skin was an annoyance. She thought about ripping the gloves off. "But what you did today... Are you sure it was the right thing to do?"

"It felt right in moment." Lena laughed softly. She leaned forward to place a hand to Kara's cheek. Her bosom was close to spilling over the edge. Kara was half-disappointed it didn't.

"I..." Kara stood, letting go of Lena's hand and walking to sit on the rug in the middle of the floor. "I think you're brave. Not only because of what you did tonight, but because of how you stand up for Hazel."

Kara saw a look of disappointment flash across Lena's face. Had Lena wanted her to stay close?

"Defending a child isn't bravery," Lena said. "It's just right." She smiled wide. "I love that little girl."

"I know that you do."

Kara listened as Lena talked about Hazel with much delight. Her mouth pulled into a grin multiple times. Her hands flailed dramatically with each story of Hazel's development. Her skin glimmered under the incoming moonlight. With the way she was dressed, Kara thought about dancing with her again.

Lena started to become uncomfortable with the unabashed gazing; Kara could tell. She'd smiled Kara's way, shyly or perhaps nervously, as if they hadn't talked many times before. Her stunt today would result in much trouble in the future, maybe the most trouble the town had received in years.

Kara suddenly wished she'd declined the offer to join her tonight. She didn't want to see Lena hurt. But it was likely that Lena would have gone through with it even if she hadn't come.

"I guess I'm rambling," Lena said.

"No, I'm listenin.'" Kara sat up straighter. "Any progress with the investigation?" Kara knew that it was a difficult subject for anyone, but especially for Lena since it was her father the town suspected.

"It would appear that no one knows a thing about what happened to Anna, except for the rumors. It might be best if I go to the town she's said to be living in, and see if I can talk to her."

"Is that wise?" Kara queried. "She might not want to be contacted. She clearly wanted a free life. If rumors about what happened to her start up there, then she's no longer free from her past."

"I'm not sure anyone can ever truly be free after having something like that happen to them." Lena looked down. She appeared sad, agitated about something. Kara thought to inquire about it, but the woman's lips suddenly pulled into a smile.

"I like talking to you like this," Lena said.

"Me too."

Lena was staring at her intently, as if she was only just now seeing the true her. Kara felt the need to order the woman to tell her what she was thinking.

But a part of her felt that she already knew. She'd run away from Lena so many times. Doing so now was pointless. What felt right was a few feet away from her. Lena had always been able to get under her skin and move her. The woman would probably never know how much, unless she showed her.
Kara stood. "What you said about strippin' me down, did you mean it?"

Lena's eyes widened and a blush the same color as her ribbons tainted her cheeks. "I did."

Kara watched her rise.

"But only if you disregard my warning," Lena said.

Kara stumbled when attempting to take a step closer. It would be easier if Lena wasn't looking at her as though she wanted to devour her. "I'm anxious," she admitted, finally able to take that step to draw them closer. "But I want this."

"Why now?" Lena asked, stepping closer as well. "I understand when you needed time, but..."

"I think I needed more time than I even knew. But I'm ready now. The waitin', I see no need for it. Not anymore."

Lena took the last step between them. Kara felt her pulse quicken. She leaned forward and placed her head against Lena's. Lena's hands gripped her arms.

A moan rose from Kara's throat as the brunette's fingers dug deeper into her biceps and she continued to rest her head against hers. Lena's cleavage was staring back at her, and she felt no need to look away. Her fingers curled into her palms.

"Kiss me, Kara. I need to... Just once."

Lena pressed into her. The brunette's mouth was so close that she could feel the warm breath. Lena's dress brushed against her thighs.

She'd been fooling herself. She'd wanted Lena since the day the woman came back to town; she just hadn't known it yet. "The bedroom," she said, grabbing Lena by the hand and then the lamp before leading them into the modest bedroom with the medium-sized bed. "It's the good kind of bed," Kara clarified, placing the lamp down on a dresser as her eyes focused on the mattress.

But Lena wasn't looking at the mattress. She was looking at her. Lena's eyes held hers. The green in them seemed to call to her and ask the deepest of questions. "I trust you," Kara confirmed, thinking back to their passionate time in her cabin. She trusted Lena as much as Lena trusted her, and the realization threatened to sink her to her knees. They may very well regret this moment later on, but not now. Now was no time for regrets or retreats.

"You won't hate me? If we go through with this?" Lena asked.

Kara moved to her, staring into her vulnerable eyes, then at her quivering mouth. She'd never hate Lena. She hadn't hated her in eighteen years. "No." She covered her mouth with hers.
Kara was taken aback by Lena's kiss. This wasn't the first kiss they'd shared, but it was different. She was being pulled farther and farther into an arousing vortex of warmth, taste and emotions, for which there was no escape. She was steadily losing any sense of intelligent reasoning.

Lena, now gloveless, removed her spectacles, placing them on the dresser, before stepping back to her and ridding her of her ponytail and tossing the band aside. And then the woman's lips again fashioned themselves to hers, prying and demanding with no indication of hesitancy or the requirement of a request. Last time, the brunette had baited and taunted her into relinquishing. Now the woman pressed forward, challenging her to stay in tune and to not get left behind. Lena's tongue slid between her lips and met hers. She felt Lena drag a hand toward the opening of her trousers, the fabric moving so that it grazed the welcoming wetness there. The hand stroked and excited her more than she could have imagined, before falling away.

Kara hugged her close. She wanted that hand to return. But most of all, there was nothing and no one else she wanted to hold onto more. She also knew that if not gripping Lena, she would be brought to her knees. She would sink to a place where only furor and passion existed. And she wouldn't begin to know what to do — how to climb back up again. She might never be able to. Or want to.

Lena's fingers moved along her arms, down her back, and finally along her waist, pulling her closer and pressing warm hips against hers. The brunette was full of want, terrifying and alluring. She couldn't feel as much as she wanted to through her trousers and the layers of Lena's dress, but the woman's form was unmistakable. All soft and curves. Was Lena as aroused as she was? She wanted to see, or to touch. But to be so bold, she didn't know if she could be. Taking control in Lena's office hadn't been planned. But now, with Lena leading like this, it was out of her skill set.

"Kara," Lena breathed. Her whisper sent shivers down Kara's spine. It was like an invocation or plea, as if her passion was more than could be contained or was enough for them both and needed release.

The brunette's lips moved from hers and left a trail of kisses along her cheek, jawline and neck until nimble fingers loosened her top shirt buttons and warm lips met the top of her breasts too.

Kara's fingers dug into Lena's arms. It wasn't easy to catch her breath. Lena's touch seared every area it landed on, causing her heart to nearly flip against her rib cage.

Lena's tongue met the valley between her breasts as fingers continued to loosen shirt buttons before moving to rid her of her suit's jacket. Kara's eyes fluttered at the sensation, followed by a labored moan ripping from her throat. Over and over again Lena kissed and licked at her skin, biting softly and occasionally harder, teasing her with unspoken vows.

As she resigned to the belief that she would combust with rapture, Lena's mouth worked its way back up her chest, to her neck and finally to her ear. To see Lena so free and uninhibited like this,
she wondered how much of it was Lena independent of her and how much of it was Lena drawn to her by desire. She'd contributed to this buildup between them, running from Lena the way she had. But after seeing how far Lena was willing to go for her, for them, and the looks the brunette had given her outside the room minutes ago, there was no way she could turn down being with this woman this time.

It was about more than discovering the most sensual parts of herself. It was that Lena was here with her in the now, and she didn't know how many more chances like this she would get again. She was unable to take back all the times she'd pushed Lena away, but she could try and make up for it in this moment. The town might find out and shun her, but, as Lena's tongue swept under her jawline, she felt it didn't matter. The town considered people like them deviant, but nothing felt more normal.

Lena's lips again took hold of hers. The brunette kissed her long and hard, as if ensuring that this part of her was satiated. She felt her fingertips tingle, and her breasts felt ripe with need, as if they were begging to be devoured. Her nipples hardened against her shirt. It was too hot. She wanted Lena to soothe her scalding skin.

She pulled Lena tighter against her, and opened her mouth wider to allow their kiss to deepen. Her hands moved from Lena's back to the brunette's head, her fingers slipping into the dark stresses that felt so much like silk to the touch and loosening them of their bun. She moved her breasts against Lena's, wanting closer contact, to feel the friction of their nipples meeting. Lena's hands gripped her shoulders and then ripped at the front of her shirt. She heard buttons collapse against the floor, but couldn't be bothered to dwell on it. She'd expected Lena to unbutton the rest slowly, but the woman had clearly lost patience.

Nervousness crept in, but she kept it at bay. She didn't need anxiousness or fear overtaking her. She needed Lena. Her eyes fluttered closed, her mind bombarded with thoughts of how much Lena meant to her. And of how Lena's neckline felt even softer than the pale hands roaming her body. She touched there, just at the collarbone, marveling at its structure.

"There's been no one else?" Lena asked.

"No one else?" Kara's eyes flitted open.

Lena's breath was close, eyes probing. "No other who has been with you like this?" She moved up on the tip of her toes and placed soft kisses to Kara's neck. Kara sighed with pleasure.

"No."

"Then..." Lena whispered, so softly that Kara wasn't sure she'd heard her. "No one else has touched you like this?" Lena ran a hand down the center of her bare chest, and she jumped at the sensation. The brunette seemed to be admiring her torso. Airy fingers trailed along her abdomen, and green eyes widened. Lena pulled down her suspenders and her trousers along with them. The material pooled at her ankles, leaving her in nothing but her underpants.

Kara felt exposed, but fought against the instinct to cover up. Lena surveyed her as if she were some sort of masterpiece, but also as if wishing to see everything better. Long raven hair framed the woman's face. Hungry eyes radiated in the barely lit room. The energy enveloped her and flared along her skin, increasing the throbbing and wetness below her waist.

Lena's mouth found her again, this time her abdomen. It was as though the brunette couldn't decide which part of her to touch, because Lena was up and moving behind her as quickly as those luscious
lips had trailed along her stomach. Fingertips now trailed along her back, her shoulder blades, her spine, all over. Then Lena was in front of her again, pushing her back toward the bed.

Kara held onto her, stepping out of her pants as efficiently as she could. Alluring eyes with impossibly long eye lashes held hers. "Let me hear you say that you want me," Lena demanded.

Those words sent a tingle throughout Kara's core, and she couldn't help but comply. "I want you."

In some way, she felt at home. Embraced and talked to in this way by Lena. Being naked in front of Lena was meant to feel vulnerable, she thought. It was meant to be intimate and private. There was only her and this woman. All that was relevant was the way Lena looked at her and cherished her, and the fact that the brunette had never stopped thinking about what they'd shared and had come back to town just for her.

She touched a hand to Lena's forehead, letting her fingers run along the tiny scar at the woman's right eye. The only reason Lena had run into that stray branch when they were little — when she was seven and Lena nine — is because the brunette had been trying to keep up with her. She'd told Lena that she was going to test her speed and run alone to a different and wider area of the woods. It meant she'd be hopping over a number of low-hanging branches and running through or over underbrush. She'd told Lena to stay put. Of course, the girl hadn't. And after all this time, she could still recall how terrified she'd been when Lena's face had crashed into the annoying low tree extension, the swift movement of her legs after she'd heard the distant cry, the blood staining the crinkled brow, and how she'd begged God to heal Lena and make her okay again.

Before picking Lena up, the girl's small frame nothing compared to her heavier and more agile one, Lena had lashed out at her, calling her mean and asking why she'd left her alone like that. A bear or anything could have gotten her, the girl had said. She'd carried Lena all the way back to her home. Upon seeing them, Eliza and Alex had seemed just as horrified as she'd been by all of the blood. Jeremiah had been angry, saying that they shouldn't venture so far out into the woods. He'd been contemplating forbidding them from straying even from the front yard since children needed keeping an eye on. Lionel had said the same. Lillian had practically accused Kara of being nothing but trouble for Lena and charged that Lena had almost lost an eye from the incident. Lex had laughed while hugging Lena tightly and saying that it would only make her stronger. And Lena had taken days to forgive her.

"Kara..." she heard Lena say, "...your mind seems to have gone elsewhere."

"Just thinking about when you got this blasted scar," she responded.

Lena winced, as if remembering that day as clearly as she did. "It was all my fault. If only I hadn't --"

Once her lips reclaimed Lena's, the woman's body pressed firmly against hers. "I shouldn't have left ya. I'll never leave you again," she whispered. She parted her lips and maneuvered her tongue inside of Lena's mouth. One of Lena's legs rubbed along hers, and encouraging hands grasped at her back.

The brunette responded to her kiss with just as much ardor, and again only the present mattered. The moment Lena's fingers gripped her hips, pressing their pelvises as close as possible, she knew what everyone meant about the sexual aches of men and women. She needed friction, something to alleviate the need steadily building between her legs.

Lena moaned into her mouth. She felt them moving backward, then her body being lowered onto the bed. She moved on her arms until she was positioned at the head, Lena crawling over her, not giving her even an inch to spare. The brunette settled between her legs quickly, and the lower part of the woman's dress met the wet, throbbing part of her. She jerked.
Lena studied her. "Is this... teasing to you?"

"I, well..."

"Good." Lena's face took on a predatory expression. "It's the least you deserve for teasing me the way you have." The brunette began to loosen the strings to her underpants. "Every woman's first time is painful," she said, looking Kara in the eyes. "Initially."

Kara nodded. "But it will feel better after a bit?"

"I can make it so, yes."

Lena again tugged at the ties of her underpants, eyes staying focused on hers. The woman undid the ties slowly, as though savoring every quick intake of breath she offered in response. And then she felt her underpants being tugged away from her hips, and she allowed it until they were off entirely. She stared down at her sex as if she hadn't seen it before. In some respects, she hadn't. She'd never paid it much mind, which was odd given the attention she paid it now.

It wasn't the same this time. This time she was sharing the experience with someone. And her cheeks felt hot at the thought.

"Don't be afraid," Lena whispered.

"I'm not."

"You are... but it's fine. I'll make it better, I swear."

Lena's mouth met her throat, and fevered kisses trailed from there to her collarbone, to her breasts. A hot tongue covered her nipple, and she grasped at the sheet. This feeling, it was the most amazing thing, she decided. Lena drew hard on the tip and suckled. Her eyes widened and closed, and opened again. She cupped the woman's face in her hands. "How can you... I... Lena...."

Her head fell back as Lena drew more of her breast between ravenous lips. Her hands sunk into long, dark locks, gripped shoulders, then fell away. She didn't know where to place them. She couldn't think of anything beyond this feeling. Lena suckled and wiped the plush tongue back and forth against her stiff nipple.

The brunette was making her feel so much with only a mouth. Suddenly, she made the mistake of shifting and felt a shock below her waist when her sex brushed against Lena's body, making her overwhelmingly impatient. One of Lena's hands grasped her other breast, pawning it, squeezing it, weighing it. Her throat constricted. Lena's body was so warm. And the voice. The woman's voice was so provocative with low, breathy moans. Lena's lips circled her breast, moving to the curves, to the underside and finally to the top. A hand played with her other nipple, the thumb swiping back and forth slowly before meeting with the forefinger to take the bud in between and delicately squeeze.

"Lena..." she whispered.

Lena's grip on her breast tightened. She reflexively bucked forward. The brunette didn't let up, instead moving to blow on the wet nipple. She shivered.

Lena reluctantly loosened her grip and rose on her hands, staring down into adoring eyes. "You make me feel some kind of way, Kara."

The woman's words seemed to hold more meaning than they were letting on, and it made Kara think
back to their time at the quarry. Did Lena want to say more? The words were endearing regardless, and she thought to reply. But before she could, Lena's mouth latched onto her other breast. And like before, the woman's hand teased the other nipple. The pleasure was just as paralyzing.

Lena's lips descended on her abdomen, worshiping the muscles there. The contact tickled, and she giggled. She felt as much as saw Lena pause, and wondered if she'd made a mistake. Would Lena not continue, like had happened last time she'd let a laugh escape her lips during an intimate moment between them? She waited with bated breath, only to see Lena's eyes darken with lust and a smile grace the brunette's features. A hot mouth continued exploration of her stomach. When it reached her waist, she considered halting its descent. For Lena to go any lower felt sinful. Forbidden.

And yet, with one light brush of Lena's hand to her inner thigh, she knew she couldn't protest. Lena looked up at her. Fingertips grazed the blond hairs of her sex, and she parted her legs just a bit.

Lena's hands moved along the front and back of her legs. Fingers again grazed her female place, and she jerked with what she realized was eagerness. The fingers halted and then directly touched her there, but only briefly.

Pleasure raced through her veins. She wanted to grip Lena's hand and move it there again, but she didn't know if she should. Her indecisiveness seemed to have resulted in Lena returning to focus on her breasts. She sighed somewhat contentedly, eyes shutting closed. She could settle for that right now. She could —

She gasped, and her eyes immediately opened. Lena was touching her there. Right now. She looked down between them. Lena's eyes weren't on the settled hand. Lena's eyes were closed, parted mouth focused on one of her nipples. She couldn't tear her eyes away. Lena's tongue flickered out in an achingly slow fashion, licking and swiping. As she watched, the woman used a finger to poke the tip of her nipple, holding the digit just like that for a time. Witnessing and feeling it all made Kara's heart beat that much faster. Lena repeated the action over and over again until she succumbed in delight and let her eyes flutter closed.

Kara bucked and felt the pressure of Lena's hand. There was no forgetting about that hand again now. It was like every finger had a role to play. The middle one moved up and down, and slower with each stroke. Abruptly, it met with a portion of her, a nub perhaps, that felt like a delicious bolt of lightning had struck her entire pelvis. She paused, wondering if she would feel it again.

She did. Over and over again, Lena stroked that area. This couldn't be right. There was no way something as sinful as this could feel so good. But Lena's finger was relentless, insisting in its own way that this — all of it — was very right.

She could pray, she thought. That would surely balance out some some of the sinning.

"Jesus," she whispered. She couldn't seem to make her brain come up with more coherent words. Saying the Lord's name in vain surely wouldn't do. "Mary and Joseph," she tried again.

Lena looked up at her. "What are you doing?"

"Praying."

Lena laughed. "Doesn't sound like it."

"I am."

"Why?"
"Because this is sinf--" Lena swiped at the area again, and her thighs parted shamelessly.

"Go on then...pray."

If she didn't know any better, Lena was smirking, but the room was darker, the lamp's light slowly dimming, and whatever smirk that was there was gone in an instant.

Lena's finger circled against her repeatedly, rousing her nerves in a way she'd only felt once in a tub by herself. She felt the familiar sensation building to the point she would explode. Only it was more intense, different, and better this time. She tried to control it, to get some advantage somehow, because being at someone else's mercy made her feel so powerless. But it was all for naught. She was in Lena's tantalizing trap.

"Lena... I feel." Her brow was perspiring.

"I know."

Lena stroked the wetness between her legs, seemingly intrigued by the increasing moisture there. Kara again thought to pray. But when Lena stroked her in the same way again, she abandoned all attempts at prayer. The only thing that concerned her was Lena's touch. She never thought that anything could feel this wonderful. Her whole body buzzed with delight. Her breath was short and quick, and her mind essentially mush. She was lost in the sensation of fingers moving back and forth, up and down.

Heat consumed her, and her hips bucked forward. She whispered Lena's name, or maybe she didn't. She wasn't sure. She breathed in the scent between them, the musky scent of her sex filtering throughout the room, and she felt heady. What did Lena's private scent smell like? The thought left her as Lena's breath blew against her cheek and encouraging whispers found her ear. Lena's fingers picked up their pace, stroking and circling until all she hoped for was sweet release.

But Lena's hand suddenly paused, and she begged for the woman to continue. The brunette started up again, faster still, but not any less softly. The fingers stroked and stroked, taking her farther and farther. Her muscles clenched, tightening repeatedly until finally erupting into a ball of energy that expelled swiftly and without pity. She felt her head fall back against the pillow, her body taken over by a wave of euphoria.

Lena was still touching her, still moving with her even as she felt like shattered pieces slowly being made whole again. Lena was still there even as she could finally think to utter words again. Even as tears streamed from her eyes.

And then Lena was kissing her forehead and moving close to hold her.

Kara could hear the thumping of Lena's heart as she rested against the woman's chest. She could hear her own heartbeat as well. Contemplatively, she looked up at the brunette. "That was... It felt..."

"Nice?"

"More than nice!" Kara said enthusiastically, immediately feeling embarrassed by her tone. She didn't know why she felt offended by Lena's description, but she did.

Lena chucked. "I was trying to be modest."

"No need ta." Kara held her close, basking in her warmth.

Lena wiped at her tears and kissed her brow. The fingers she knew she'd never forget worked their
way into her hair, and then she felt the woman lift her chin, staring her straight in the eyes.

Lena sat up and the aforementioned fingers moved to the back of her dress, working at the ties. Kara watched as the woman's cleavage loosened. She grasped Kara's hand and placed the open palm to her chest. "Touch me, Kara."

Kara felt herself panic. She wouldn't even know where to begin. But then she remembered that Lena was everything to her and the brunette had just shared an intimate part of herself, the most intimate side anyone could ever share. They'd shared it together.

Her fingers began to move under Lena's, and the woman let her own hand drop away as she sat up. Lena's skin was as soft and smooth as it ever was. She let her fingers slip beneath the fabric, to cup the brunette's breast the way hers had been cupped. Lena moaned, a tongue slipping out to swipe over slightly swollen lips.

And Lena stared. Lena stared at her as though daring her to continue. It was even more erotic than when Lena had touched her, if that was even possible. She allowed her eyes to close as she continued to touch, to squeeze, to relish in the softness. She felt her arousal renewing. Lena's lily scent filled her nostrils, and she was reminded of wanting to know what Lena's other scent, her natural scent, smelled like.

Kara found herself using both hands to cup Lena's breasts, before finally moving to sit on her knees and pulling away the top fabric, exposing Lena's full bosom to the air. She couldn't stop the soft gasp that escaped from her throat. Like all of Lena, Lena's nipples were a sight worth memorizing. The room was darker still, and she cursed herself for picking out such a sorry lamp, but she could see that the small rounded flesh was rosier than hers. She watched as the newly exposed skin perked up, as if begging for her touch. Her eyes flickered up to Lena's, but the brunette's eyes were closed, indicating that the both of them were savoring the moment, basking in it.

She rose on her knees and ran her fingers through Lena's hair. Her own hair fell around Lena's face, like a curtain, sealing them in their own little world. Her lips moved to Lena's and her fingers moved to work at the hooks and ties of the dress, then the petticoats. Lena's lips parted, and she darted her tongue inside, tasting and teasing the woman. She pushed Lena's dress off pale shoulders and then past curved hips, steadily kissing her as the brunette moved to accompany her every action. She barely registered pulling off the corset cover and unhooking the corset after that. But untying and slipping off the brunette's underthings so that the woman was only left in stockings, garters and the black and gray pebble necklace brought her back to what she was doing. Her lips latched onto light thighs, nibbling at the rim of the garters there.

Kara felt Lena momentarily go still, and then the brunette pulled her closer and she rose to greet her. She pulled Lena closer in turn, by the necklace that meant so much to the both of them. When she wrapped her arms around Lena this time, there was no annoying fabric. There was only bare skin against bare skin. She grunted as their nipples grazed and pressed into one another. Her gaze lifted to find Lena's. The same emerald fire from before blazed in those green eyes.

"All I've ever wanted was you, Kara," a whisper breathed against her lips. And she knew she'd never heard truer words.

Lena moved forward so that Kara was on her back again, and quickly discarded the garters and stockings. Kara almost whimpered at the sight. She'd wanted to do that. But all was forgiven when Lena watched her from above, on unsteady knees, chest heaving. Just like in her cabin, the woman had never looked more beautiful.

Her eyes feasted on Lena's bare form, the fullness of the breasts, the taut stomach, the curved hips,
the dark hair between exposed legs. She could see Lena's glistening wetness. Some of it had begun to trickle down the marvelous inner thighs. Lena was as aroused as she was.

She stared long and hard at the brunette's sex, then looked up at her. There was a smirk to those gloriously full lips, but the blaze in those piercing and perceptive eyes remained. "Can I touch you?"

Lena didn't answer, only watched. She could feel the heat from Lena's eyes, and it emboldened her. She placed two fingers against the woman's most private place, watching the slit that presented swollen flesh between it. She wanted to see it better. All of it. Lena's hand moved over hers, bending her hand into a cupping form and guiding her in a slow pumping motion.

It was a unique feeling, with the shivers that ran up her body as Lena's arousal pooled into her palm and the brunette's head fell back with a pouty mouth spewing languages she'd never heard before. She didn't have to ask what it felt like. Lena had done this to her. But there was still something different about doing it to Lena. It felt like Lena was releasing ages of buildup and need, like it was all the woman could have ever hoped for.

Moving to lean on an elbow, she decided to change things up. She tried different paces, moving swiftly, then slowing down. She wanted her fingers between that captivating slit, and so she did that too, watching in awe as Lena's hand dropped away from her own and moved to join the other hand in silken black hair, head still thrown back, lips still muttering unintelligibly. Lena's special scent hit her, and the intoxication of it — sweet-smelling and musky at the same time — stunned her.

She pulled her hand away to look at the arousal soaking her fingers, pressing her digits together and liking the consistency. Then Lena's eyes were on her again. The brunette was watching, as if waiting for something. What was she waiting for?

Then Lena did the most unexpected of things. The brunette bent down and took her fingers into her mouth. The same fingers she'd used to touch such a sacred place. The same fingers that had been coated in arousal. Kara felt her brain fail to compute. Her sex throbbed again, achingly so. Had Lena wanted her to...to taste her?

In an instant, Lena pulled her up against her own body. The brunette's jaw was firm, her eyes almost glazed. "You're driving me mad."

Kara felt herself redden. Lena had no room to complain. The woman had just driven her mad minutes ago.

"I want more of you, Kara. I want to be inside of you. And...you inside of me."

Kara nodded, her throat suddenly feeling a little too dry. "I want that too," she croaked. She was blushing fiercely now, she knew it.

Lena eased her back onto the bed, and she momentarily thought about flipping their positions. Lena leading was as delicious as could be, but she wanted to lead too. She didn't know much, but she could be guided. She could learn. All thoughts of leading were chased from her mind when Lena settled between her thighs. Quivering lips pressed to hers. She tasted something tangy on Lena's tongue, and she wanted more of it, but Lena's mouth pulled away from hers just as quickly as it'd found it and targeted her breasts instead.

Lena's fingers probed at her sex before slowly pushing forward. She shifted somewhat, unsure of what to do next. As if reading her mind, Lena held her hips still, then coaxed her legs to spread wider. Cautiously, painstakingly, Lena entered her. She felt her insides, her walls, stretching to assist the woman. Nothing could have prepared her for this. This closeness she felt. It was like Lena was
an extension of her.

She looked up at Lena, taking pleasure in what seemed to be two fingers steadily easing inside of her. She took pleasure in the contrast of their bodies, how hers was all lean and toned, and how Lena's was all soft and endless curves. She watched the expressions on the brunette's face, how they contorted and how the gorgeous eyes closed. How the brilliantly white teeth bit down on the plump bottom lip. She wanted to bite that lip, to kiss it. She settled for tackling the pale throat and especially the mole she'd often dreamed of licking.

Then Lena halted. Kara felt light pressure building at the opening between her legs. And then Lena thrust deeply. She bit back a curse, her mouth temporarily latching onto Lena's shoulder, teeth sinking in. The thrust had been more shock than pain, but pain was indeed there.

Lena's eyes abruptly met hers. "Are you okay?"

"Yes," she managed. "Don't stop."

Lena said something under her breath, but Kara couldn't make it out and Lena didn't repeat. The brunette began to move in and out of her.

Their hands roamed everywhere, and their bodies seemed to meet at every endpoint. Breasts to breasts, legs sliding against the other's. And their tongues couldn't get enough. Kara ran palms along Lena's back, and along the woman's bottom, squeezing like she'd wanted to times before.

As the brunette thrust again and again, she couldn't help but want to do the same to Lena. She worked a hand to the woman's sex and copied both Lena's ministrations and what she'd done to Lena earlier. Lena moaned loudly, her back muscles flexing against Kara's other hand, and her breathing increasing. Kara played with her slit, stroking there, intent on finding the spot Lena had toyed with when doing the same against blond curls. She knew she'd found it when Lena grunted almost ferociously and bucked against her.

Lena cupped one of her breasts and toyed with her nipple. Kara knew what this was about. The woman didn't want to relinquish control. Kara would make her.

Before she could, she felt the tingling between her legs change into a surge of pleasure. Lena was doing something inside of her that was causing her to lose whatever ground she'd gained. Three fingers had suddenly entered the fray, and one was curling to the side. It felt so good she almost stopped fondling the woman's sex. But she was determined. She slid her fingers down and found Lena's entrance. She entered her without mercy, pumping in and out of the woman with the same passion Lena continued to afford her.

Lena's walls immediately clamped down on her digits, and the brunette's lips moved to her neck. Lena lifted herself to squeeze her breast.

The pleasure between Kara's legs intensified, and so did Lena's thrusts. She closed her eyes at the different sensations and bucked against Lena, wanting and aching for more.

Her legs spread wider.

"Kara..."

She opened her eyes at the utterance of her name. Lena was looking between them, staring at fingers buried deep beyond small blond curls, and tanned fingers buried deep inside of her.

Lena's eyes flickered to her blue ones and their gazes held. The potency between them scorched
them to the bone, and she flipped their positions in one swift movement, a surprised sound coming from Lena's throat, and their fingers remaining in place. She used her thumb to graze Lena's most sensitive spot. Rubbing the nub gently and lightly, she could tell she was sending Lena closer and closer to the edge. Lena's mouth captured hers and the brunette's free hand sunk into her hair before grasping at her back and feeling her muscles, and then her ass.

As Lena's mouth pulled away from hers, she could see that the woman wanted to look away. It seemed as though Lena had never been this vulnerable, this exposed, with anyone. Even so, she could see that Lena couldn't bring herself to look anywhere but at her. She had to offer all of herself to her. Every last inch. The brunette's legs drew back, bending at the knee so that Kara could see everything.

And she did. It was dark in the room, but she could see enough, and it sent another jolt right between her thighs. She thrust into Lena just as Lena continued thrusting into her, thumbs stroking over tense nubs. They thrust even as their muscles contracted, even as the familiar and yet unfamiliar waves of pleasure took them over, and even as they called out each other's names.

Kara collapsed against her, and caring and attentive fingers sunk into long, golden locks. She felt Lena stroking her brow, then her temples. Slowly, she looked up at the brunette. "I love you, Lena."

Something in Lena's face shifted. Her expression said it all. It was more than what words could convey. It was the same look Lena had offered after receiving the necklace all those years ago. And like then, tears prickled at intense green eyes. But still, the words came: "I love you too, Kara. I think, more than you'll ever know."

It was only after they'd stretched out alongside each other, snug under the cover, that Kara let herself take in everything and think back on what had just transpired between the two of them. They could never go back after this, and she didn't want to.

Lena held her close. Like earlier, she could hear the brunette's heartbeat as her head rested against the woman's chest. She chanced a glance in Lena's direction and saw that the woman's eyes had again closed. She closed hers as well.

"I've finally caught up to you," she heard Lena whisper. She thought to question it, but she was so tired. She could always ask later. Right now, she wanted nothing more than to sleep in Lena's arms. And to forget the outside world.
Regarding Lena's last sentence in this chapter, I debated whether or not to include it because I considered saving it for later, and I didn't want to taint the first chapter with a sexual meaning to "catching up to Kara." It's certainly not sexual for Lena as a child. It's just that, as an adult, it's manifested in a different way. And as indicated, it will later be explained. I also debated having them exchange "I love yous" at this point because that's something my mind kept scripting to happen later on, which is why you see the struggle of Lena wanting to say it earlier on in this chapter, but holding back and instead choosing to go with words Kara used at the quarry. In the end, I obviously couldn't resist. As for the POV of the chapter, I felt it was important to have it be from Kara's POV since it's her first time, and also to better convey the emotional impact instead of jumping back and forth between minds or the gender pronouns being confusing. There's enough in Kara's interpretations of Lena's actions to see what Lena's thinking. And Lena's POV will be present in the morning-after scene. For this chapter's love scene, I obviously didn't throw in every possibility. Some things are to be saved for later. The story's still in progress, after all. Thank you all for reading and commenting.
Chapter 13

She kept still. If she fooled herself into thinking she was still asleep, then she wouldn't have to face reality. She could cherish what they'd done, what they'd meant to each other, for just a little bit longer. Their lovemaking had made it so that things would never be the same again. She had once considered that sex was the same for everyone, as long as desire and passion were involved. But that wasn't the case. What she'd felt with Siobhan their first time had been primitive, like a base need she hadn't had any control over and like her body had been subsequently screaming for an outlet for everything she'd been holding in. Their following interactions had been driven more by lust and convenience.

But with Kara, the yearning had been as complicated as it had been unbearable. She couldn't remember ever wanting someone so desperately — for them to touch her the way Kara had touched her, or to touch them in turn. Never had she seen a body so muscled and yet so soft. So foreign and yet so familiar. Nor eyes so captivating; those eyes had spoken of unconditional love and everything they could achieve with that love. The excitement of it all had elicited her desire in insurmountable ways, fueled by a connection that was soul-searing and deep. She'd thought that sex had to be serious and devoid of laughter. It's why she'd pulled away from Kara after their initial kiss. But last night, they'd laughed. They'd cried. She'd been so entranced by Kara that her only thought had been to devour the woman and to be devoured by her.

Now, however, she was back in the present. The scary and uncertain present. And that came with its own challenges.

The sudden sound of scuffling across the floor caused her to open her eyes. Relief washed over her as she realized Kara was still in the room. But she still had to face the blonde. Preparing herself for any possible rejection, she sat up.

Kara stood in front of the window to the left staring out of it. Her hair was still loose, soft blond curls framing her shoulders and trailing down her back. A sheet covered her body. Tan bare shoulders, the top of a muscled back as the sheet dipped, and a strong thigh peeping out of the sheet's lower slit were the only skin visible. To Lena's mind, she looked like a Greek goddess. And even more so when she turned to the bed and stared before smiling. Lena could feel heat threatening to overtake them again.

She pulled the coverlet around herself and walked to her. She didn't know why she was hiding her bare form, except perhaps for the fact that being naked in front of Kara was still new and they hadn't gotten as great a look at each other as they'd wanted to the night before. All of it made things feel a little awkward. She surmised it was the same for Kara as well. Maybe more so for the latter, given her teachings about the shame of being bare.

Almost instinctively, she wrapped her arms around Kara and the woman looked back out the window. She inhaled the intoxicating scent of her, their bodies effortlessly relaxing against each other. "I thought you'd be gone," she admitted.

"When pigs fly," Kara chuckled, pulling Lena closer to her. "I've just been standin' here thinkin'
about thangs. At first, I thought about wakin' you 'cause I was hungry. And then I thought about wakin' you 'cause I was hungry for...somethin' else." Kara's fingers trailed along the pale arms still encircling hers. "Everything's so different, Lena," she whispered.

Lena watched as the sunlight slowly stretched across the yard. Soon, the whole town would be talking about them and her supposed syphilis. She only hoped it would all be worth it and Kara wouldn't suffer much, if any, backlash.

"Today's gonna be tough, ain't it?" Kara's words echoed throughout the room like an amplified extension of her own voice.

"It will be," she replied honestly, standing straight and making sure to keep the coverlet in place. "You can still back out now if you want, Kara. I... I'll try to understand."

Kara shook her head and turned to her. Light strands shimmered on the blonde's shoulders. Blue, hard eyes looked down on her own. Those eyes seemed illuminated somehow. Lena wanted to touch the woman, to see her bare in the sunlight. She wanted to kiss her.

She didn't have to wait long for the final thought to take fruition. Kara stepped to her, placing a soft kiss to her neck. "Lena, stop." The blonde's mouth worked its way to her jawline. "I told you I'd never leave ya again. And I meant it." Kara's mouth found hers. "Besides...would you really let me go so easily?"

The pressure of Kara's lips against her own, and Kara's hand finding her thigh, yanked Lena out of any momentary doubt she'd had about the two of them moving forward together. She deepened the kiss, teasing Kara in the way she knew Kara liked, and softly spun them so that she was pressing her of her sanity, but Kara's moan served as a reward.

Kara pulled away slightly, clearly out of breath and a grin gracing her features. "How do you do that thing with yer tongue?"

"I could do more with it if you'd like," Lena said softly.

"More?"

"In a more intimate way," another soft exchange escaped her lips. She felt light-headed, drunk off Kara. With her coverlet intact around her body, she raised her arms against the wall above Kara's head, feeling the need to capture the blonde as she stared up into the light blue eyes.

Kara's brow arched, marked by clear confusion.

Lena found it endearing, to be honest. As endearing as she found it alluring. When she looked downward for emphasis and back up at Kara, Kara was her signature red blushing color.

"You mean? You don't mean...? Wha -- down there?"

Lena chuckled. "Well..."

"You're jestin,' Lena."

Lena most certainly was not jesting. Intimacy-wise, there were so many more things to experience with Kara. And she wanted to tell the woman just that. But distressed animal sounds drew their attention to the window. Kara moved to it with a frown. Her horse, free from its rope and bucking
every which way, appeared spooked.

"How'd he get loose?" Kara ran a hand through her hair. The horse fled through the bushes, and deep into the green. "I have ta go get him." She moved to gather her clothes off the floor, still holding the sheet securely around herself.

"What, right now?" Lena queried, clearly disappointed with having Kara depart on their morning-after.

"Would you rather Midnight get lost?" Kara grabbed her suspenders.

"Midnight?"

"It's what I named him. He's never been this far out, Lena. And the woods out there? You know how it is. I have ta go after him."

Kara stood straight, holding her clothes to her chest.

Lena knew she was failing miserably at hiding her annoyance.

Kara laughed. "Listen, I really wanted ta cook ya breakfast and do more of what we did last night -- were just doing. Preferably in the reversed order. But I'll be back as soon as I can." She moved to Lena and kissed her lightly on the lips. "I promise. Meet me back at yer house in an hour or two." Her mouth moved to Lena's throat and lingered there.

Lena moaned, holding onto Kara's shoulders. "You really love that spot, huh?"

Kara chuckled. "Ain't my fault you have the most tantalizing mole, Luthor."

A moment later and Kara had left. Lena sighed against the wall, everything in her screaming that today might be her toughest day yet.

"Why you here?" Maggie focused her gun on the make-shift bullseye tacked on to a tree a few yards in front of her. For two hours, she'd been engaged in target practice. Since she was little, from the first time her father had taught her to shoot, target practice had been a calming pasttime. And her interaction with Alex the other day had given her reason enough to revisit it. She'd been genuinely surprised by Alex's reaction. She'd felt that Alex was aware of the progress they'd been making in their relationship and the depth of it. And that Jonathan was nothing more than a distraction. But she also knew how entrenched societal rules and religion could be. And in that regard, Alex was no different than most people in town or elsewhere. Judging her too harshly for it just seemed unreasonable. Judging her for disturbing precious hours of peace was, however? Now that seemed very reasonable.

"I asked why ya here," she repeated.

"Because I'm not sure where ta go," Alex's quivering voice came in response; the fear and uncertainty in it was all it took for Maggie to look over her shoulder at the woman. Alex looked dazed, like she didn't know why she was there, and like she hadn't gotten a goodnight's sleep.

Maggie turned to her fully, lowering the gun.
"Back home, there's Jonathan. But we don't have much of a marriage. Not sure we ever did. All I really have back home is my pride and joy -- William." Alex wiped at her eyes frustratedly, looking to the sky almost as though waiting for an answer from the almighty himself. "And now, there's this thang with Kara." Her eyes found Maggie's again. "And with you."

Maggie knew she should tread slowly, but she wanted to hear it from Alex's lips. She wanted that acknowledgment more than anything. She removed the hat from her head, playing with the rim before meeting Alex's gaze once more. "And what is it you think this thang is between us? You and me."

"Somethin' that I need help understandin.'" Alex took a step closer. "Will ya? Will you help me understand?"

It was a question Maggie wasn't sure could be answered. If Alex meant she was open to exploring a life with her, one similar to that of a union between a man and a woman, would she ever truly understand? And what life could they have while Alex was still married? Would the brunette be willing to pack up William's things and start a new life together? And if she wasn't open to any of it, did she only want to understand the attraction?

Maggie settled on starting with something small, something that could help bond them and allow Alex to know her better. "Ya see this gun?" she said, holding up the weapon. "It's the Winchester Model 1876. After the more powerful centerfire cartridges came on to the market, a new rifle based on the Winchester function, which had proven itself, was presented. Before then, the primary goal of the Winchester company was creating guns that competed to fire the established rimfire and centerfire cartridge types." Maggie walked to her. "Looking just like the Winchester lever-action firearm and consisting of a squared receiver design, integrated lever system under the grip, full stock, integral magazine tube under the barrel and wood furniture to round the parts out, the Winchester Model 1876 became their prized marketing tool." She held the piece up before Alex's face. "How 'bout I teach ya how to fire it?"

Alex stared at the gun warily. "You want ta teach me how to shoot? Is that somehow supposed to help thangs?"

Maggie smirked. "It's a start."

Alex looked one from the gun to Maggie's face, and back again, before a smile began to form on her lips. "Well, I always wanted ta try one of these." She held out her hand, watching as Maggie placed the object there.

As they practiced, Alex improving with every shot, Maggie revealing the history behind her love of target practice, things seemed to fall into place. Neither of them remembered what they'd been so worried about. Everything had an ebb and flow, and theirs was as natural as it came.

"By the way," Maggie said, bracing herself for what she had to state next. "I think there's somethin' you and your parents need ta know about Kara and Lena before the day goes on."

"Syphilis?" Eliza asked. "But why would she say that?" Her eyes moved from Jeremiah's to Alex's. Alex didn't like being put into situations where she had to explain others' actions. And she knew she couldn't explain Kara's or Lena's. Lena had told Maggie and the rest of her overseer employees the
reason behind the lie, but for Alex to tell her parents would be revealing a truth she felt she had no 
right to reveal. It would also bring them unnecessary stress, if not shame.

"Ma..." Alex began. She fidgeted beside Maggie, who stared into her hat.

"I don't understand." Eliza's face took on an exasperated expression.

Jeremiah, arms folded, scooted backward in his chair and stood. His face was pensive. "I think I 
do."

"Jeremiah?" Eliza looked to him. She was still seated at the table, Alex barely able to meet her gaze.

"Kara and Lena... They have special feelings for each other, don't they?" Jeremiah turned to Alex for 
the truth. She knew he could see it in her eyes.

Eliza chuckled. "Of course they have special feelings for each other. They're best friends. It's been 
that way since they were children."

Jeremiah moved to his wife, his hands rose in front of him slowly, like they were trying to calm Eliza 
down before the panic took over. "Honey... I think ya know what I mean."

"No."

"Eliza..."

He wrapped his arms around her quickly, only for her to beat against his chest. "No. No! It's not 
true!"

"Come," he said, pulling her along, toward the back room. "Let's talk in private."

Alex was certain she'd just witnessed the rare occurrence of her parents being on completely opposite 
ends.

"Apparently, the whole town knows. And you couldn't think to inform me?" Walter stated, 
flabbergasted as he dusted off his shoes on the porch and again pinned Lena with an angry look.

"I know it seems bad," Lena said, ushering Walter inside and toward the kitchen table. "But it'll 
make sense after I explain."

"I don't need an explanation, Lena." Walter placed his suitcase down. "You spun this elaborate story 
so that you and Kara living together would look less suspicious, and/or so that this scandal would 
overshadow the idea of you two being lovers, am I right?"

"That, and someone was threatening to expose me."

"Who?"

"It doesn't matter." Lena took a seat, gesturing for Walter to do the same. "What does matter is 
protecting Kara, her family, and our friends. Do you think it will work?"

Walter adjusted his spectacles at the bridge of his nose. A hand ran through his salt and pepper hair.
"Well, I told you before that the town will not feel as threatened if you present yourselves as women just wantin' to live as friends, without wifely duties that come with husbands. So I assume so. There will still be stigma attached to you. Enough stigma that you might lose your overseer job, but --"

"-- It'll work."

Walter jerked up from the table, standing to sigh to himself. "Goodness, Lena, why'd you even hire me if ya were goin' to do this?"

"It's not like I planned it. Walter, I'm sorry. I'll reimburse you if you want."

He sighed again before looking her way. "And I take it you and Kara have slept together as well?"

Lena shrugged by way of explanation. "Have you seen her?"

Walter raggedly cursed under his breath. He stared at Lena a long time. He stared so long and hard that Lena might have feared for her safety, if she hadn't suddenly burst into laughter, causing her to laugh in turn. "Young love," he said. "I suppose I can't begrudge you that. And where is Kara now?"

Kara moved down the trail quietly. Although Midnight responded well to her, she didn't want to bring unwanted attention to herself. For as many times she'd assured Lena that the woods were safe, there was the occasional black bear or coyote to a keep a lookout for. Both, however, rarely attacked humans. The feral pig was of more concern. And it almost made her wish she'd ran back home and gotten an additional horse just to search for her lost one, or that she had remembered her spectacles as the security blanket they were. But she knew she had to find Midnight quickly. Like she'd told Lena, he wasn't used to the woods. Her other black stallion was the experienced one.

Moving along, she employed all of the tracking skills Jeremiah had taught her in her youth, as well as the ones she'd overheard. To Jeremiah, learning to track was a sacred responsibility because it brought one closer to animals. The person had to respect the process and the animals by not impeding on their space. If one got too close to an animal, the animal might leave its offspring, a nesting area might be disturbed, foraging areas might be damaged, or the animal might die as a result of panic leading it to not watch its step. She had to remember that it was the animal's home, and she was just visiting it.

Midnight, however, was a domesticated animal. He was different.

Kara came upon the edge of a cliff, which overlooked a river. It was where the trampled grass and horse hooves had led her, but it was odd. Midnight was smart. He wouldn't have run off a cliff like some cockroach trying to escape certain death.

She looked out into the scenery, breathing in the fresh air and admiring the way the trees stretched far and wide. She'd made a tracking mistake; that had to be it. Her lack of experience tracking animals must have caused her to overlook something. She would retrace her steps. Figure this out.

As she began to turn around, though, she tumbled head first off the cliff, toward the river below. Had she slipped? When had she slipped? In actuality, it'd felt like she'd been pushed. But who? Had she imagined it?
As her eyes focused on the river below and she landed hard in the water, she made a silent prayer that this wasn't the end. It couldn't be. She had to get back.

She had to get back to Lena.

"Kara should have been back by now," Lena said, pacing in the living area as she looked at the timepiece on the wall.

"Maybe she's trying to avoid the shit storm you created with the syphilis nonsense," Siobhan scoffed, adjusting her crutches while she relaxed on the couch. "If I were her, I wouldn't have come back either."

"Well, you aren't her." Lena halted, offering the woman her deadliest glare yet. Siobhan stared at her as though she'd been doused in hot liquid. Lena sighed. It wouldn't do to take her frustrations out on Siobhan. The woman had already essentially been banished from her life. It spoke to Siobhan's resilience that she was speaking with her again so soon. "Listen... What I mean is that she said she'd be back within an hour or two. It's been five hours."

"Maybe she got lost?"

Lena shook her head. "Kara doesn't get lost. Not in those woods. Something's wrong." She moved to a table and grabbed her open sweater.

"What are you doing?" Siobhan's face scrunched into a query.

"Going to look for her. With some much needed help."

Lena exited the home quickly, saddling up Wrangler and leading him in a gallop down the rode.

It didn't take long for her to locate James, who'd once or twice told her of his love for tracking. With the scandal that had overtaken the town, he seemed shocked that she was there. But ever the professional, he straightened up as if on duty. His expression softened upon hearing that Kara was missing.

Sam's reaction was pretty much the same. And so was Maggie's.

They packed pouches of water, blankets, and utensils to start a fire in case their search dragged into the night. A German Shepherd, borrowed from one of the town's farmers, was brought with them to pick up Kara's scent after smelling one of her shirts.

Lena figured that like everything else in this town, news of Kara's absence would spread like wildfire. If Kara was fine, then at least the news would reach the blonde quickly, and she'd be back in Lena's arms in no time.

"Where have ya been?" Alex asked as Jonathan entered their home, his boots as muddy she'd ever seen them, and William looking bewildered in his arms. He quickly handed the boy off to her and
went to a wash up at a bin.

"Jonathan?"

"I've been off tendin' to business, woman."

"What business? Bargaining with Mr. Ray again? Kara's missin', and I've been worried sick." Alex saw Jonathan stiffen. "Ya said you were takin' William huntin' for a little while."

"And I did."

"It's been hours." Alex sat the boy to his feet. "And why does he look like that?"

"Like what?"

"Like he's disoriented, or confused. Or like he just saw ya pull the wings off a butterfly."

"The boy's just not used to seeing dead animals skinned up close, that's all." Jonathan threw a towel over his shoulder and leaned against the wall.

"Is that all ya have to say?" Alex pinned him with a glare. "I just told ya Kara's missin.'"

"And what do ya want me to do about it?"

"Look for her like others in the town. There's a search party or two going on. Mostly made up of men. What would the town down say if the husband of the missing's sister didn't look for her too?"

Jonathan moved off the wall with a roll of his eyes. "Okay, okay. I hear ya, woman. Just let me get my shotgun."

An audible click brought Jonathan's attention back to Alex mid-step. She had William under one arm, and Jonathan's shotgun in the other.

"Woman --"

"-- I'm comin' with ya. And I'm handlin' yer gun. Don't you dare try ta stop me."

"The scent stops here," James said, looking to Lena, Maggie and Sam. Since they'd began the search, others had joined them, including Jeremiah and Eliza. The German Shepherd barked loudly into the nothingness — an area populated only by the sound of cascading water and the occasional critter.

"No," Lena said softly as they looked out over the cliff. "That can't be right."

"Lena, it's led us here twice," James delicately noted. It was like he was preparing her for some terrible truth.

"I said that can't be right," Lena repeated. She looked to Jeremiah pleadingly, who had a tortured look on his face. Eliza had her head buried in his shoulder. People behind them mumbled.

Jeremiah frowned, stepping from the back and moving to Lena. "I agree. Something's not addin' up,
and we're going to find out what." He placed caring, rough hands on her shoulders. If there was any
time the no-touching rule could be discarded, it was now. "Lena... Kara's smart, especially when it
comes to the outside. And she's strong. We'll find her." He pulled her close and whispered, "I know
how ya feel about my girl," his voice faltered slightly, seemingly choked up with emotion, "and I
approve."

Lena pulled back with shock. Jeremiah simply nodded, his gaze reaffirming his acceptance. Lena
thought to speak, but settled for nodding vehemently and fighting back her tears. This wasn't the time
to discuss her love life. She straightened her back and turned to everyone. She would do what she
had to. And as Alex and Jonathan rode up, she informed them of this as well. She and Jonathan had
their issues, which paled in comparison to the issues she had with Alex. The man had attempted to
sexually assault her, and there was no telling what he'd had planned for exposing her if she hadn't
beat him to sullying her reputation first. But she couldn't think about that now. All her energy had to
be on finding Kara. She resigned to that same reasoning when Mon-El showed up, saying how he
knew they had their differences, but that he was there for Kara. Winn arrived late after checking in
on Siobhan, but was just as determined as they were.

All of them, they would all do what it took to find Kara.

Kara coughed up water. She had somehow latched onto a large piece of curved wood, but the
current was strong. She was headed down some notorious stretch, and was forced sideways against a
murky web of skeletal-like branches of a toppled cottonwood. A narrow opening immediately next
to the high river cliff was the only logical way out if she could free the board from the powerful pull
of the bloated current.

While trying to wrestle loose by leaning in the direction in which the river flowed, her balance
escaped her and her face hit the water. The board turned over and moved into a muddy mound. Like
hands working to clean clothing in a bin, she was being pushed to the bottom against a nasty jumble
of branches. Her back scraped hard against the objects. If she weren't so focused on survival, she
might have screamed.

Kara reached through the water and located the board, turning the curved side back toward her. She
yanked it from the mound and felt the front of it swing around and tug downstream through the
narrow hole in the branches. While the stream swept the board past the web, she pushed off the
bottom and followed the board through the hole into the open downstream water. She emerged to the
surface, taking in deep breaths of air. Then she went under again. Blackness followed.

It was hours later when Kara heard a voice call out to her, but it wasn't the smooth, accent-
challenged voice she'd been hoping to hear, to free her from her murky and wet surroundings. It was
a man's voice. "Are you all right, child?" he asked.

Was she all right? She didn't know. She was conscious, but not quite. Her eyes wouldn't really open.
She felt weak, her back hurt, and her body was heavy. She was bent over something. The board
maybe? She was still in the water, she knew that much.

"We have to help her, papa," a female voice said.

"But we're already so far out," the man argued.

The younger person was no child, but she didn't sound any older than her.
"But, papa."

"I know, I know," the man spoke again.

Kara felt large arms drag her out of the water and onto something solid. A boat, from what she could gather.

She wanted to go home. She didn't want to be here. She fell in and out of consciousness as someone tended to her head and back. She tried to make out where they were, to make her voice take form, but her mouth felt dry and only air came out. Just like other aspects of the outdoors, she had learned to read the river from Jeremiah. He'd taught her to tell which course to take through a rapids, including the downstream pointing V-shaped flux of smooth water that signaled a clear path through the rocks. She'd been taught that rocks lying just under the surface resulted in the water boiling and tumbling and then creating an upstream pointing V, which was usually equal to a caution sign.

She wondered where they were now.

When she finally did open her eyes, feeling somewhat rejuvenated but still sore, she could tell from the darkened sky that more hours had passed, but she had learned the names of her companions. She was told to take it easy by the girl tending to her, Cora. The girl's father, Elmer, gave her a worrisome expression. She didn't even have to ask. They were on a medium-sized boat, not much in the way of craftsmanship, but it looked to have supplies. There was nothing but emptiness around them, no trees in sight. They were adrift. They were adrift, and she knew what they had to do to survive, but it wouldn't be easy.

"Is Kara gon' be all right?" Hazel asked Ms. Merriam, who looked to Lena steadily writing down search plans.

"Only God can tell, sweet girl."

Ms. Merriam had watched William and Hazel the day of Kara's disappearance, and she watched them now. Lena was thankful. But Hazel, as usual, had been too smart for her own good, overhearing the adults, including Clarence, speak of Kara's absence. The girl had also informed William, but he seemed quieter these days, not like his normal self. Now, for example, he sat in a rocking chair looking up at the ceiling.

Lena couldn't blame the boy for being fascinated with Ms. Merriam's ceiling. The woman had somehow gotten a hold of a carpenter willing to carve flower patterns in the most unexpected of places. It was a house, not a cabin like most of the town's other residences, and it seemed to have a flower pattern of some sort for every area.

"Here, how about this one?" Lena asked, walking to Ms. Merriam to show her a map of all of the North Carolina rivers. If Kara had fallen into the water, she had to be in one of the various areas. Maybe she'd washed up on some nearby land. Lena refused to believe she was dead. Kara couldn't be dead. They'd found Midnight a day earlier, and hope was high.

Ms. Merriam shook her head. "I couldn't say, dear. Just know that she's in my prayers." Ms. Merriam crossed her chest for a silent word to God, then offered a supporting hand to Lena.

As much as Ms. Merriam and Father Mable clearly cared about her plight, prayers weren't what Lena needed. She just needed Kara.
The days searching for the woman were long and arduous. Every day, she rounded up search parties to look for Kara by land and by boat. Her job as overseer took a backseat, and she put in as much time as she could to selecting the people best fit for the job and the best-trained dogs. But there were so many rivers and North Carolina was a big place. There also weren't enough search parties, since a number of people feared her rumored disease. She had unwittingly sabotaged her own rescue effort.

When she contacted Lex for help, he did as any caring brother would and provided her with extra people, but time and again their trip was delayed due to a few aspects of North Carolina's transportation system, such as the road system, still being faulty.

Lena had learned during her years abroad that when someone went missing, a search party was needed as soon as possible. After the first two days, chances of finding the person alive significantly dwindled. In a time like this, she would report the matter to the sheriff, but she was in charge. So she sent letters to every law enforcement station in North Carolina, informing them of her situation. The more people involved, the likelier Kara would be found.

She wouldn't let the townspeople fear of her let her give up either. She knocked on her neighbors' doors, asking everyone who answered to help participate in the search parties, and to contact any relatives and friends they had in other towns or areas of North Carolina to help if they could. She accepted help from any person who offered, except for small children. Teenage boys pitched in, and she allowed this also, so long as they stuck with the adults.

She suspected foul play as well. She had to. Their town was not free of such sin. They'd had a rapist, for goodness' sake. They might still have one. That rapist might even be among the search parties. It was a sobering thought, she knew, but one that reminded her of her vow to do whatever it took. She told anyone who would listen that Kara might be hiding on someone's property for protection, or that she might be being held against her will. She encouraged them all to check every last inch of their homes, others' homes, and their lands. Not for herself, but for Kara.

Lena funded as many supplies as needed. Food. Water. Lanterns. Lamps. Blankets. Boats. Whatever the people needed to search sufficiently. Some nights were colder than others in the tents she shared with her employees and the Danvers family, but colder was her heart day after day, week after week. As she watched Eliza cry in Jeremiah's arms, Mon-El drink himself into oblivion, and Alex transform into almost some relentless warrior intent on only completing one mission, she found herself growing darker. No longer did she smile. She didn't even cry. She hated being touched, with Hazel's sweet hugs being the only exception the few times she saw her after traveling from port to port after looking for Kara via ship when the chance arose.

Siobhan grew stronger week by week, and bore witness to her fits of rage. In one instance, she used her arm to clear an entire counter filled with glasses, watching as they clashed and shattered against the floor. Without thinking, she'd picked up a shard and accidentally cut herself before staring at it. Siobhan, witnessing the incident with horror, had ordered the maid to clean up the mess, then tended to her wound afterward.

Even when most others had given up hope of ever finding Kara alive and the search parties stopped, Lena didn't. There was no way she ever would. On a daily basis, she visited their special spot under the tree, Kara's home in the woods, and the quarry were they'd shared that one majestic day. These areas made her feel closer to Kara; they were also the spots she finally allowed herself to weep.

She would keep searching. She would search forever if she had to.
As time passed, Cora tended to the cuts or scrapes on Kara's back, arms and legs as best she could, using ointment and fresh cloth to stave off infection. Discussion of the things they'd need to do to make it had long taken place. Elmer had already known quite a bit, but theirs was an endeavor that would take the work of all three to pull it off. Fresh water and food were essential. With tools for fishing and fresh water, they would be able to survive for a long time on the boat. If the boat remained in good condition, they could survive for months adrift at sea.

Kara prayed every day for a reprieve. At night, they had overhead cover that could keep them dry and blankets to keep them warm, which is how they prepared for the winter ahead and staved off cold weather illness like hypothermia. When hot, the same coverage for shade was used to avoid sunburn, passing out, or dying from the heat of the sun. Finding drinking water was the biggest challenge. Water was everywhere, but they couldn't drink a drop; saltwater would only make them ill and hurry dehydration and death. They didn't have much fresh water; so they made do by collecting rainwater with a hat and a tarp, allowing the first drops of rain to wash the salt off the tarp. By design, the water would at times run into a tin bucket. The bucket itself would be enough to collect the water if they knew how much they'd need to get them through the next several days or weeks. They drank at least a liter of water a day and fished when possible.

Possible storms were always a threat because the storms could capsize or sink the boat. One such incident came early on. They managed it by crawling up onto the overturned hull, grabbing the keel and leaning back, using all of their weight against the centerboard as a lever to flip the boat over. Once it was upright again, they savaged anything they could and crawled aboard and scooped the water out. Their food supply, which was mostly raw fish and the occasional turtle, which Kara found too adorable to personally consume, was lost to the sea. And so they started over, stocking up on fish and fresh water when they could. Although there were open-ocean predators to keep an eye out for, most of the threat from sharks were in the shallows and near their targeted food sources. Sharks usually didn't hunt people; so it was one less thing they had to worry about if their boat capsized again.

Eating fish raw carried the risk of parasites and bacteria, but trying for a fire with twigs and the sun was risky. If it got out of control, they could all perish. Saltwater fish was safer to eat raw because the water helped to kill the parasites and bacteria, but they longed for a cooked meal every day, and bigger fish if such was the only meal they were to eat for who knew how long. Small fish gathered beneath the boat, likely out of curiosity or because it provided them shelter. Whatever the case, the animals were easy to catch. Elmer trolled a handline rigged with a hook. A torn piece of red cloth from his shirt was flashy enough to act as a lure. He jigged the lure at different depths below the surface, being careful not to snag it on anything. Once a fish was caught, its guts were used as bait to catch more fish. Because a handline required skill and knowledge to achieve the best results, he taught Kara and Cora how to use it just as efficiently as he did. The difference between an experienced professional handliner and amateur was predicated on a combination of variable tactics. Kara was thankful he was there.

When their clothes became encrusted with salt crystals, they washed them via seawater baths. This was partly to rid themselves of unnecessary residue, but also in the rare case that they needed to use their clothes to collect rainwater. The salt would make any water it came in contact with undrinkable. Bathing their skin and relieving themselves proved awkward at first, but they crafted a privacy system, alerting one another of when their turn was at hand. Any wounds they got were cleaned. Cora knew that the first gallon of water collected was high salt content, which they stored separately and used to clean wounds or to wash their hands or food before eating.

There was little, if anything to keep them entertained, except for Cora making funny faces and daring Kara to dance with her in the rain. But the stars came in handy; if not as a guide, then as a way to tell stories and allow for escapism. Cora had turned 21, and was apparently fascinated with locating the
same number of stars — to match her age — in a fantastical order. She said it was something she and her father did every year on her birthday. Elmer grumbled something about this hardly being a day for celebration, and that his little girl deserved more. But Cora just grinned at the sky as she stretched out beside Kara. All Kara could see was just how much Cora was anything but a little girl. She was pretty, with long brown hair and big gray eyes. She was also from Portugal, but only her father had a foreign accent, and their names didn't seem like Portuguese names. It didn't matter, though, Kara thought. Cora's eyes lit up with excitement as they looked for famous patterns of stars called the Big Dipper or the Plough in the constellation Ursa Major, and words Kara had come to know as Spanish fell from her lips. It was lovely. Kara needed to get lost in something, and Cora's eyes were as good as any distraction.

But she couldn't shake images of Lena. She needed to get back to Lena. That thought had kept her alive before Elmer and Cora had found her, and it was keeping her alive now. There was so much more they needed to explore together. Lost at sea like this couldn't be it.

As she mentally drew a line connecting the stars at the end of the Big Dipper's bowl, then stretched that line out five times its length to arrive at Polaris or the North Star, which couldn't be overlooked since it was the brightest star in the Ursa Minor, or the Little Dipper, she remembered the Spyglass Lena had given her. She would get back to Lena Luthor. Back to the infinite possibilities the woman had spoken of.

*Bermuda*. It seemed like ages later when Kara heard that word. "Bermuda" is what a man had told her once she, Elmer and Cora had finally made it upon shore. They had drifted all the way out to Bermuda. To Kara, it was merely a tale she could recount to Lena when she saw her again. Merely a tale. Nothing more.

She didn't know what she had been expecting when she road back into Breighville after departing from the station, but she hadn't been expecting this — for the town to look exactly like it did before. There was the same thudding concussion of the blacksmith's hammer reverberating among the half-timbered homes scattered about, bouncing off the sides before echoing back into the confines of the workshop. There were still birds startled from their perches, flinging themselves into flight. And there was still a dog running up to his master.

All of the eyes focusing on her as she walked up the hill, however, was a new experience. It was as though everyone knew who she was. Cora smiled shyly beside her, taken off guard by the attention. They stopped upon hearing men yelling her name; they were alerting the town, one by one, that Kara Danvers had returned. Children scurried about, telling others, making it so that a crowd had gathered around her before long.

And then Kara saw her. Lena Luthor stood several feet away, looking just as lovely as Kara remembered, and staring at her as though she'd risen from the dead. In some respects, Kara reasoned, she had. But the reunion wasn't as Kara had pictured it. Lena didn't move forward, with tears springing from her eyes. She didn't embrace her and tell her how much she'd missed her, or that she loved her. Instead, the woman stood there, hand tightly grasping Siobhan's, who looked at her with the same shocked expression. From behind them, a child emerged.

It was Hazel. Streams of tears ran down her face. She moved forward slowly, her expression indicating skepticism, like her eyes couldn't trust what they were seeing. And then acceptance took over. "Kara!" she screamed. She ran ahead, arms wide open.
Kara knelt down and embraced the child tightly, blue eyes meeting Lena's green perturbed ones. Hazel didn't exactly look the same, and the girl didn't exactly sound the same either. But Kara wasn't surprised.

After all, it had been two years.
Chapter 14

Given the comments on the previous chapter, I figured I'd get this out sooner than later. I appreciate all of the kudos and written feedback. Thank you. And as always, you can find me at https://greatshow1.tumblr.com/.

Lena stared. She couldn't do anything else. Her grip on Siobhan tightened, and she felt close to fainting. Kara Danvers, the woman she'd grieved for, the woman she'd loved like no other, was standing before her. Only recently had she allowed herself to believe that survival had alluded Kara and that the woman had perished.

Others had long ago mourned. There had been a funeral for her, which Lena had refused to attend. Jeremiah and Alex had renamed the main blacksmith shop "Kara's Hammer" in honor of her. Siobhan had drawn images of Kara's face, then had them copied via a hectograph, and instructed building owners to have them posted around town so that no one would ever forget the blonde, but also to feed Lena's hope of someone unfamiliar with Kara, maybe a traveler, recognizing and possibly divulging her location. But Lena knew that no one believed. Not truly. No one except for her. That was, until four months ago. Four months ago, she had given up hope after initially vowing she would not. Just four months longer, and she would have escaped the nightmare that had plagued her for two years.

Kara now stood just a feet few away, as alive as anyone else. It was the same time of year — late September — she'd went missing. Looking at her, one would never know she'd been missing or had endured any life-threatening ordeal. She wore leather from head to toe. A brown leather hat, shirt with leather sleeves, brown leather pants that fit snugly around her body, which looked to be of the same build from two years ago, and brown leather boots. Her hair was down, loose like the last time Lena had seen it. And her face was just as youthful as before. But something was different about it. It looked tepid. Wiser. Her eyes were still kind, but they held a hardness to them Lena couldn't decipher.

Their eyes remained on each other even as Kara stopped hugging Hazel and stood to greet her family, who came bustling through the crowd. "Kara?!" Eliza cried. "Oh, Kara!" The older woman threw arms around her. Then Alex, who swore she'd never forgive Kara for having been away. And then Jeremiah, who didn't even hesitate to forgo the no-touching rule. And why would he? This was one of those times it should be ignored, just like the time he'd publicly ignored it two years ago during the search.

They hugged Kara all at once, and continued to hold on to her as though they feared letting her go. Lena could relate. She felt herself moving to do the same, only to realize she hadn't moved at all.

It was only when Eliza took Kara's face into welcoming and shaky hands that Kara looked away
The crowd grew, and others worked their way toward the town's returning member. James lifted her inches off the ground with his bear hug, and offered to tend to her luggage. Winn nearly dipped her to the ground after spinning her around as though performing a dance. She giggled; it was music to Lena's ears. Ms. Merriam kissed her cheeks as much as Eliza had, and offered her a basket of fruit. Sam introduced Ruby, whom she'd went after once declaring that Kara's absence and Lena's determination to find her was a testament to how one should fight to be with their loved ones. Sara was there too. She'd set out searching for Kara on her own, feeling that the search parties would drag her down. The only other person of previous substantial importance to Kara, Mon-El, was absent. Lena expected as much. He'd never been the same. None of them had.

Lena panicked when she saw Kara being led away by her family, the crowd following and asking numerous questions: Where had she been? Did she fall into the river? Had she been in danger? Did she simply pack up and leave?

Lena couldn't let her go. Not again.

"Kara!" she called out, immediately seeing Kara pause and turn to her. She also sensed the town finally take note of her and a number of them move away. She didn't care. She was used to the stares and whispers now. The syphilis ruse had worked. Even now, she was wearing as much clothing as Kara was to keep up the ruse, so that people wouldn't see that her skin was mostly blemish-free. But what had been the payoff? Her recent time with Siobhan? It hadn't been what she'd wanted. She'd ever only wanted Kara.

She tried to let go of Siobhan's hand, but the woman held on. Lena looked to her, touching her face softly and letting her eyes convey that she had to do this. She had to go to Kara. Siobhan smiled back weakly before releasing her.

Lena moved fast, working her way through the crowd, even as someone yelped in disgust or pushed her. She moved until she was face to face with the woman she'd always desired. "Kara... Where have you... I... I have to know."

Kara's eyes moved to Siobhan's, a subtle frown marking her brow, and then back to Lena's. She nodded in a way that Lena had never seen before. She didn't quite seem like the Kara Lena remembered, which Lena reasoned was more than understandable.

She took Kara's hand into hers, staring down at it in awe. It felt rougher than she recalled, like its surface held layers and layers upon stories about how it'd gotten that way. Lena was just thankful that it was real. Solid. So many times since Kara's disappearance she'd imagined Kara's hand reaching out or her grabbing it like this.

She walked ahead, tugging Kara along, but a brown-haired woman, with big gray eyes, and who was perhaps of Latino origin, approached. Had the woman come with Kara? She didn't remember seeing her, and she wouldn't have cared that she didn't if it weren't for the way the woman was looking at their joined hands. She heard Kara call the woman "Cora" when relaying that her family and friends would take care of the woman while she went to go talk.

Lena couldn't concern herself with this. She again pulled Kara along.

Alex started to follow, but she immediately paused, realization dawning on her that she was not to intrude. Jeremiah and Eliza moved to either side of her, all three watching the two women walk ahead.
"Aren't you going to say anything?" Lena asked. They'd walked back to Lena's home, side by side, not saying a word. Lena could tell that Kara had been surprised to see copies of her face plastered on just about every building along the way, and pleased that Wrangler was still alive and well, but the blonde had remained silent. It was a strange feeling, being caught between wanting to fling herself into Kara's arms and being scared that doing so would result in her waking up from a beautiful dream and returning to a life where Kara had never returned at all.

Kara's current demeanor wasn't the most welcoming. The woman stood in front of a desk, back turned, one hand helping to support her weight as she leaned against it, and the other toying with the end of a lamp. "Are you with Siobhan?" Kara's voice was thick, angry-sounding. There was no warmth in it, and it lacked the southern twang Lena had come to love.

"Kara..."

"I said... Are you with her?" It was spoken softly this time, a stark contrast to the same words just moments ago.

"I..."

The lamp went flying across the room. "Damn it, Lena!" Kara turned to her, eyes ablaze with fury. "You moved on with Siobhan? When was this? A day after I went missing?"

At first, Lena felt a pang in her chest so deep that she thought she'd collapse. It subsided to be replaced by anger. If a vein had begun to throb on her forehead, she reasoned it shouldn't be shocking to discover it there. "How could you even think..." The pang was back, followed by a longing that threatened to drain her empty. She held up a finger. "No one... And I mean no one kept hope alive for as long as I did for your return! I searched for you for months! For nearly two years!"

"And yet you somehow managed to bed Siobhan in your free time." Kara flailed in a way that was very characteristic of her past self, but Lena couldn't even find that refreshing.

"Kara, it's not... I swear it's not the way you're making it sound," she said, taking a step forward. Kara warned her with a look to stay back. "Just listen to me. Please."

"Why should I?"

"Because you followed me here? Because of what we meant to each other? Still mean to each other? Because you obviously care or you wouldn't have come along?"

"That's funny. I remember you dragging me along."

"Kara --"

"-- How could you?" The woman's voice was soft. Accusatory. "Was I not worth waiting for?"

The tears streamed from Lena's eyes before she could think. "You were more than worth waiting for," her voice broke. She couldn't breathe. Her hand went to her heart. Kara was looking at her as though she'd committed a heinous, unforgivable act. And maybe she had.

"When everyone else had given up hope, I kept it alive!" she fired back. She didn't know why she was screaming. She just needed Kara to hear her. "They didn't believe, but I did!" She took a step forward. "The pain... Kara, it was unbearable. Search party after search party, only to come up with nothing. Empty lead after empty lead. People going on about what a great person you were without
truly knowing you, or as though you had perished. And when father died, I didn't have you. I had no one, except for... But I wanted you, and I didn't have you. You said you'd never leave me again, but you weren't there."

"It's not like I left on purpose, Lena!"

"I know that!" Lena pounded against her chest, not sure if she wanted her heart to continue beating loudly within her rib cage or for it to leap out at the woman before her. "I broke, Kara. I... I felt like I was drowning in a sea of tar. I tried sealing myself off from the world, but Siobhan wouldn't let me."

She grasped at either side of her head, her fingers tightening in her dark stresses. Walking farther to her end of the room, she looked for anything to rest her eyes upon and to relieve her from Kara's relentless gaze. "And I hated her for it," she admitted with a spin back toward the blonde to face those hard, blue eyes as her hands balled into fists at her sides. "It was only four months ago that I -- That we --"

"-- I broke too!" Kara moved to her then, teeth baring in an animal-like way. "You speak of drowning in a sea of tar! I almost drowned times over! You have no idea what I went through. None!"

Lena watched the tell-tale sign of tears forming in Kara's eyes. The woman stepped backward, head focusing upward in anguish.

"¿Cómo pudiste con Siobhan?" she heard the blonde mumble in Spanish. And then the words were repeated, except louder and in Portuguese: "Como você pôde com Siobhan?"

Kara was speaking in languages she'd surely had no experience with before. But how? Was it Cora who had taught her?

The blonde's eyes were suddenly back on her, mouth repeating the same line over and over again: "How could you with Siobhan?"

Lena thought to answer, but a series of questions, alternating between Spanish and Portuguese, came next: How could you with anyone? Didn't we mean anything to each other? Why'd you stop believing, Lena? Why?"

An onslaught of daggers piercing her skin, right to the core, is what it felt like to be bombarded like this. She gasped, covering her mouth with her hand. She didn't recognize this stranger, speaking in a foreign tongue. It angered her. "¿Cómo pudiste con Cora?!" she charged.

"With Cora?" Kara laughed bitterly. "With Cora?! I didn't sleep with Cora, Lena." Kara continued walking backwards until she reached the desk. She again offered her back. Lena could see her shoulders sink before beginning to bob up and down. Her hands went to her face. She was sobbing. "You have no idea what I went through, Lena," she whispered. "No idea."

Lena moved to her. "Kara," she said, wiping at the wetness cascading down her own cheeks. "Tell me. Please."

Kara didn't look at her. She only spoke: "When I think of my time out there, I usually only think of those first couple of months, the goofy faces and looking up at the stars. But the reality... What I had to endure in total... It's so much worse."

A deep inhale and exhale of breath followed.

"I was adrift off the coast of North Carolina, before eventually drifting to the Bermuda. Which area I was in longer, between those destinations, I couldn't tell you. I don't know if I was pushed. Or if I... if
I slipped. But all I initially had was a little bit of food and enough water for a few days. I... We eventually got more, but, after a time, the water wasn't enough. It was never enough. For so long, I had a lot to think about since there was hardly anything to do but think. I regretted every mistake I'd ever made, and I felt I had failed certain people in my life. At some point, I kept a journal. I fished with a handline and collected rainwater to survive. Around day 30, we saw a ship. We had one flare. We lit it, but the ship just went right by. Every morning I had renewed hope, but by each night I was in despair. We saw a few more ships, but none of them saw us. It was so hot at times and the dehydration was unbearable. It was cold other times. There was a lot of physical discomfort from sitting so long, and salt-water sores. The hunger and thirst were constant. By maybe day 100, I was at my lowest, but I never gave up. I couldn't. By the time we were located, I had lost a third of my body weight, and it was eight weeks before I could walk properly again. There were other problems as well. I spent twelve months adrift, and twelve months recovering and helping Cora to recover. I...

The sobs continued to rack Kara's body. Lena enveloped her in a hug she hoped communicated how much she still loved her. "Tell me, Kara. Tell me everything."

Two years ago

Elmer's boat, at 271 inches long by 72 inches wide, was not very big, but it was strong. He had built it himself, for fishing and catching oysters. He and his daughter, Cora, were from the Brunswick Islands, and had been using the boat for oyster collecting, going well beyond their usual fishing spots, when fierce winds blew it off course. Kara was thankful that she had been pulled aboard, but there was barely enough room for privacy. When resting, she and Cora had to lie close at one end while Elmer had to lie at the other, his feet stretching in ways that sometimes either disturbed or assaulted their faces. Sometimes they would take turns so that only two slept while the other kept watch for dangers or a sign of rescue. But without a raised structure, the boat was essentially invisible at sea.

A gale-force wind tore offshore and ran them farther out to sea. Not knowing if they were heading north or south, they hadn't an idea exactly where they were. The stars had to be their guides, if useful at all.

Within days, they ran out of drinking water. Elmer took to drinking his urine and begged Kara and Cora to drink their own. He said it was salty, but sufficient. But the two couldn't bring themselves to do it. Kara warned the man that drinking the waste and urinating, and drinking it again, might have felt like it was hydrating him, but it was actually aggravating his dehydration. They all knew that drinking seawater would be a death sentence. Their mouths ached for the cool liquid, but they fought against the temptation each time. At least salt water had a number of benefits, including keeping their teeth clean and throats from drying out.

Before Elmer could finish teaching them how to fish, they often chewed on the insides of their cheeks. The hunger was that bad. Elmer began to scoop turtles up from the water. He ate as much of them as he could, cutting and ripping at the shells and consuming the meat. He said if Kara and Cora weren't willing to eat the creatures, they should at least drink the turtle blood. And they did.

Because coastal North Carolina bordered the Labrador Current and mixed with the warm waters of the Gulf Stream before leading toward Europe, fish converged from both directions throughout the year. It was this fact that made it so that Kara, Cora and Elmer hoped they would come across various fish, including bluefish, sailfish, dolphin, blackfin tuna, false albacore, blue and white marlin.
channel bass, and wahoo. But they didn't see most of those, and they only had the means to catch a few at a time when available. Unfortunately, the Gulf Stream also allowed for several shark species, such as the dusky smooth-hound, to come through. Sharks didn't hunt humans, it was true, but they became a concern whenever blood and guts from cleaning the fish and cutting into the turtles would mix with the sea.

They finally heard the sound of raindrops several days later while asleep under the tarp. They ripped the tarp off and screamed in joy, collecting as much rainwater as they could, their system for doing so proving efficient. When a storm capsized their boat and nearly threatened to kill them, they indulged in the rainwater again after getting the boat upright. They later limited their water intake, for they knew how precious the liquid was and that they'd be more desperate for it in the future.

Elmer could see that the women needed an outlet for their boredom, and revealed to them a small journal and a pen he kept on him at all times. He advised them to write their dreams and hopes in it. His had been washed away by the storm when they capsized, but theirs could still flourish. Kara told him that his hopes and dreams could still live on as well. He just had to hold on a little bit longer.

After three months at sea, Kara and Cora had become as adept at catching fish as Elmer was, but Elmer's physical and mental health significantly declined. Kara didn't know if it was because he was older than the average father with a 21-year-old daughter, as he was nearing sixty, or because he had put all of his energy into seeing that they survived. He became sick, complaining about how his stomach ached and that he didn't want to eat anymore. He must have obtained a fearsome parasite or many of them, he cried. As a result of eating little following his stomach problems, he lost the fuel he needed, as well as the drive to continue on. Kara and Cora fed him what they could by mouth when he did attempt to eat.

All three made a vow. If Kara and Cora survived, and he didn't, they would go to Cora's hometown of Bald Head Island and inform his loved ones of his demise. They would take care of each other, and also send word to his friends and family in Portugal, where he was originally from. They didn't ponder what Elmer would do if he was the one to survive and the women died. Elmer wouldn't let them. But he did promise to help them during what little time he had left.

"I will not be of this Earth much longer," he said one evening.

"No, you will," Cora told him. "Stay with me, papa."

"I've lived a long life, girl. Let me go," Elmer groaned. His voice was weak and ragged. Kara tried to offer him some water, but he coughed it up. Cora pleaded with him to live and to fight for her and their family.

Cora woke up shivering days later. "Why did he leave me? I told him to stay alive. I told him!"

Kara held her as she cried. Their will to live increased from there. They looked for ships daily. The sun rose and set like hope rising and diminishing. Every ship they saw but didn't see them was like a tortuous mind game. If only they'd saved their one flare for the perfect moment rather than use it that first month in, they thought. Storms continued to attack and nearly capsize them, but they would grip the boat and keep their weight distributed in a way that kept it centered. Elmer had taught them that. Still, they were pushed farther out to sea, but the storms were calmer and easier to combat.

Kara and Cora daydreamed and hallucinated. It kept them from going mad. They imagined being back home, being anywhere but there, having feasts, flying, even being knighted by some foreign king for their unbelievable willpower. They lived in a fantasy world as much as possible. It was better than waiting to die.
Keeping track of the moon, Cora said she knew how many months had passed, but Kara didn't care. She just wanted the months to stop leading to endlessness.

Their boat moved along as they suddenly heard shore birds. An island took form in the distance. Was it real? With their hallucinations, they couldn't be sure. If they tried to reach it, would they go off course? Drift backward? The island didn't appear big.

Leaning their weight to the left to get the boat on a better course, they waited. Within two hours, they drifted near the land. Thirteen yards from the shore, they jumped into the water and swam the rest of the way, mostly using their arms as their legs were too weak. To Kara's mind, Elmer was swimming with them. Elmer had made it as well. A wave washed them ashore, their faces hitting the sand. It was possibly the best feeling in the world.

They moved through patches of puddles and ferns, and vigorous, weedy vines of flowers and fruits. The flowers were scented and the fruit tasted better than any fruit they remembered tasting. They were barely able to stand. All they could do was crawl. They were nearly as thin as the vines themselves, nothing but skin and bones. They crawled until they came upon a home and one of its residents spotted them. They were helped inside, and given fresh water and fed, but were advised not to eat too heavily for fear of refeeding syndrome. They spoke of their plight, and were told in turn that they had drifted on one of 181 islands in Bermuda.

A doctor was sent to them. After a day of being tended to, Kara and Cora were taken by boat to Main Island, and given more aid. They were nursed as much as they could be, but their health steadily declined. Their bodies were full of salt-water sores, their hands bruised, and their feet and legs swollen. Medical professionals said the tissues had been starved too long. The lack of water had made it so that muscles soaked up everything. Their health eventually improved several days later, but they still couldn't walk. They were asked if there was any family they could contact; Cora said no, but later asked to send word to people in Portugal. Kara said she didn't want a special someone to see her like this. She would get better first. It had been twelve months. It couldn't possibly take much longer. She gave the officials a false name. She didn't want anyone to find and see her like this. Lena would wait for her. She was certain.

After weeks of observation, informed by their knowledge of parasitic flukes such as *Fasciola hepatica* in sheep, doctors cleared them of a parasitic infection. Cora had feared that possible parasites would take her the way she believed they took her father. The doctors said that their refusal to eat the turtle meat had likely reduced the risk of such an infection.

The two made a home for themselves on the island, their livelihood consisting of the work they knew before. Even Main Island needed a blacksmith. But sleep usually escaped them. Neither could forget Elmer's death and how they'd pushed his body into the sea once Cora had grieved for days and the body began to smell. Elmer should have been there with them. They suffered from shock for months. Kara was now terrified of large bodies of water, and Cora couldn't even think of sleeping without a tarp over her head so that she felt safe.

It took several more months before they were healed enough, both physically and mentally, to even consider leaving. They sought out a ship and men to sail with in order to reach Cora's home — Bald Head Island in North Carolina. And then Kara's home — Breighville in North Carolina.

Lena stepped back as Kara turned to her, eyes still cloudy after recounting such a harrowing ordeal. Sobs racked both of their bodies. Kara had gone by a different name. It's why no one had located a Kara on Bermuda when Lena had sent letters to the territory inquiring. They'd spoken of two people
having washed up, but nothing more. Lena choked back her tears. Right now was about Kara, what Kara had been through. She could feel the burden of Kara's confessions — the regret and disappointment — weighing on the woman's shoulders. And she wished to relieve such heartache.

But there was something else in Kara's eyes. Hopelessness.

"So, you see, Lena," Kara said. "Cora and I went through all that together, and we never... Not once did we..."

Kara moved to leave.

Lena snatched her back, her own sobs now beyond her control. She threw her arms around Kara, unable to bear the cold gaze any longer. Her face buried into the warm, tanned neck. The blonde smelled like cinnamon and the outside. "I missed you so much, Kara. So very much. God, I missed you!" Her sobs grew louder, only calmed by the strong hands she remembered now caressing her shivering back. "Kara."

The front door opened, and they were soon joined by Siobhan and Cora.

Kara stepped back, eyes again hard. She slowly pried Lena's hands away even as Lena tried to hold on for dear life. "Ma's having a big dinner to celebrate my return... I think it's best that you aren't there," she said, walking ahead to Cora a second later.

Just like that, Kara's southern twang was back. It was more controlled. Less thick. But just the sound of it made Lena long for Kara all the more. Her Kara. Kara was still hers.

Kara's quick footsteps marked her passage to the front door, as well as her exit, and the house grew quiet, with Lena and Siobhan staring at each other. Lena collapsed to her knees, hands going to shield her face as she cried. There would be no happy reunion this day. Not for her.

"And this is what the place looks like now," Jeremiah said, showing Kara around the rebranded blacksmith shop.

Everyone close to her had shown her around after her talk with Lena. They'd wanted to know what happened first, of course, and she'd told them. It had been easier than when she'd recounted it to Lena, but it had been painful all the same. Eliza and Alex hadn't been able to stop hugging her, or asking her about her life since then. She'd said she'd let them know in time. The word time seemed to sadden them even more, and Jeremiah angrily vowed to find out who'd pushed her. He didn't for a second believe that she'd slipped.

Being led around town was odd. She felt like a stranger in her own home. She'd been wrong about everything being the same. The town mostly looked the same, but the occupants had changed. Alex now ran the overseer building. The social rejection as a result of Lena's supposed disease had apparently been additional stress Lena hadn't been willing to take on. And to hear Alex tell it, Lena had been too out of it to carry on anyhow. The brunette hadn't thrown herself into work, but had rather shunned it. Knowing of Alex's wish to do more with her life, Lena had made some contacts and got Alex the position after six months of waiting. Maggie was assigned "co-overseer," at Alex's suggestion. Together, with James, Winn and Sam, they now presided over the town's rules and protocols.

Alex had developed into a no-nonsense type of woman and she now usually wore her hair in styles cropped close to her head. Even with the stigma divorce brought, and the rarity of one being
accepted, she'd sought it out and it had been granted. Women needed adultery in addition to another action, such as desertion for a year or more or physical cruelty, to get a divorce request accepted. Enough people had already suspected Jonathan of cheating. He hadn't hit Alex, but, because he'd wanted out of the marriage just as badly as she had, he'd taken a hit to his reputation by falsely claiming that his temper had got the better of him one night. And to the people of Breighville, it was better that a divorced woman be overseer than a syphilis-ridden one.

Alex and Sam had bonded over their marriageless status, and their children remained their driving force. Ruby, a 14-year-old girl with long dark hair and a bubbly personality, was the oldest of the children, but she bonded well with William, his betrothed Alaina, and Hazel. William and Hazel's bond was stronger than ever, Kara noticed, and William had grown tall for his age. Before long, he would be towering over Maggie. The boy didn't talk much, however. When he saw her, he made the strangest face before saying hello. Kara resigned to not making a big deal out of it. Her return was no doubt a big shock to everyone.

She was less clear on what had transpired between Alex and Maggie, but it was clear that they were a lot closer. They held hands and kissed on the cheek in front of Jeremiah and Eliza like it was nothing. Kara knew her parents could be oblivious to people's same-sex attraction, but something in their gazes appeared to acknowledge the truth. It was definitely different.

"How do ya like the forge?" she heard Jeremiah ask. She again looked to the new layout of the blacksmith shop. The forge was bigger. The bellows, used to pump air onto the fire to make it burn hotter, was fancier. She recalled how operating the bellows was most commonly the task of a younger man who was learning to be a blacksmith. It made her smile, for she harkened back to the days she was essentially an apprentice under Jeremiah's tutelage.

The blacksmith shop had always had a huge barrel of water ready, to use for cooling off the red-hot iron, but the tools seemed better coordinated now. Better aligned. Even the anvil, the large heavy block of metal on which the blacksmith hammered his work into shape, looked like it'd been made from some type of improved material. Everything there looked like extra money had been put into it. "All of this was Lena," Jeremiah said, looking around with a sense of pride on his face. His gaze then found hers again, and he laid a comforting hand to her shoulder. "She honored you as best she could, Kara. In more ways than one."

Jeremiah might as well have punched her. His words were that painful. Giving up on them, on what they could have had together, and moving on with Siobhan hadn't been Lena honoring her. "You wanna get ready for that celebration tonight?" Jeremiah queried.

Kara cleared her throat. "Not yet. There's one other person I want to talk to first."

Mon-El opened his front door with a glass of brew in his hand. His shirt was open and ragged. His hair looked like it hadn't been cut or washed in who knew how long, and he had a beard that extended all the way down to his chest. He grinned wide upon seeing her, his seemingly dead blue eyes lighting up with renewed life. So the rumors about him were true: He would drink night and day, reveling in breaking one of the town's core rules. And Lar and Rhea would assist him in doing so. They thought they were helping. "Kara!" He hugged her one-armed. "I'd heard you were back. Not just back... But alive!" His speech slurred, and he pulled back to stare at her. "Ya look different."
"So do you." Kara let herself in and closed the door behind her. Mon-El plopped down on a couch. He might have updated his furniture, but his place was a mess. There was old food and cans everywhere. And for once, Kara was glad that Lonnie wasn't there. The old man probably would have tanned Mon-El's hide with his cane.

"Ya sound different too," Mon-El said, sipping from his glass.

Kara gestured around the room. "Mon-El, what is this? I disappeared. And, what, you just gave up?"

Mon-El laughed. "I hate ta disappoint ya, Kar, but everythang ain't about you." He got up and moved to look under a bed, retrieving some worn, crusty paper. He bounced to his feet and handed it to her.

At least his agility was still intact, she thought, as she read the paper.

Mon-El raised his eyebrows with a self-satisfied smirk. "You see that? My grandpa was just as deviant as you and Lena were. I found it not long after you went missing. It's a sad letter, ain't it? To some woman about a man he desired. Grandpa left me this house. Some horses, some money, and that damn letter! A letter to a young woman whose feelings he'd hurt because he wanted to be with a man. A man! Can you believe... Jesus! ... All the time I was talkin' 'bout how you and Lena were sinners, and my own grandpa was one."

Mon-El started to laugh hysterically. His eyes widened as though enlightened. "So when you... When you went missing, I figured it must have been punishment... For how I treated ya. I... mean..." His laughter intensified before stopping abruptly. The glass in his hand dropped to the floor, and his voice took on a fragile, almost child-like tone. "It was punishment, wasn't it, Kara?"

Kara's heart ached. She moved to him swiftly, hugging him with everything in her. He'd been drowning as she had. Drowning like Lena said she'd been drowning. Had all of her loved ones taken a dive off that cliff with her? It felt like it.

"Mon-El, it's going to be okay," she said, his head in her grasp as she soothingly stroked it and shushed his silent cries. "I won't let you drown anymore."

An hour later, and she'd cut his hair, trimmed his beard, and encouraged him to sober up. "Come to the celebration tonight," she suggested.

"The celebration is being held at the church?" Cora asked, running her hand along the light blue gown Kara had laid out on the bed for her.

Kara sighed, looking in the full-length mirror in her home. Lena had seen to it that both of her residences had been tended to. The cabin was spotless, but her home in the woods looked the way it did before she left. So tending to the former residence apparently meant just having someone check up on it. "Yeah," she said. "Ma and pa wanted a simple dinner at home, but it turns out that many want to welcome me back. Properly, they say. So ma and pa relented."

"And that was Lena earlier in the day?"

"It was."

"She's so beautiful."
"She is."

Cora turned to face Kara fully, watching as she straightened the collar of her black dress. "And does she know what happened?"

"She does."

"Then why aren't you with her? She is the love of your love life, is she not? You said that --"

"-- I just can't, Cora!" Kara yelled, facing her then. "You saw that other woman too? The one with Lena?"

Cora nodded.

"Yeah, well, Lena's with her now. She doesn't need me anymore."

Cora walked to her, a thoughtful and concerned expression marking her features. "Forgive me, Kara, but from what you've told me of your time with this Lena woman, I don't think that's true. Seu é um grande amor."

Kara released another labored sigh. "Let's just get to the church, shall we?"

Cora assessed her for a long time, longer than was comfortable, then turned back to her own clothing. "I thought you didn't like wearing dresses," she said.

"I don't, but ma likes me in them. And so does Ms. Merriam and Father Mable."

"And the color black?"

"Why not? They've already had my funeral."

A carriage with a fine-spirited horse, Midnight, awaited them outside. Kara felt it was fitting that she show up with the horse associated with her almost-death. It was poetic in a way. Others might have been willing to forget about him, except for Lena who'd set him up with a caring owner, but she wouldn't. She and Cora met Mon-El inside of the carriage as a driver led the way.

It was thirty past five when they arrived at the church. Kara was amazed that she would be there to witness a rare occurrence in which the town allowed a celebration to extend past seven. The usual meeting and greetings followed once they entered, reminiscent of the gathering they'd had two years ago right around this time. Except now Kara had a woman on her arm. Most everyone was okay with their intertwined limbs. Thanks to Ms. Merriam, they'd heard of how Cora Almeida had helped rescue Kara Danvers from certain death, and how the two had gotten through rough times together. But Ms. Merriam was the sole attendee who clearly disliked how cozy they looked. Was it because of Lena? Kara was jarred by how close the two women had become.

"Cora Almeida?" the older woman queried, as if she didn't know who she was addressing. She held out a hand for acceptance. "Ms. Merriam."

Cora smiled wide. "Ms. Merriam, I've heard so much about you."

Ms. Merriam's eyes briefly darted to Kara's. "Good thangs, I bet."

Cora laughed. "Yes, all good things. I promise."

"So...where you stayin'?"
Kara furrowed her brow. What was Ms. Merriam fishing at?

"With Kara," Cora replied.

Ms. Merriam waved her off. "Oh, child, there's no need for that. You can stay with me. I have more than enough room. I could even set you up at a real nice boardin' house."

Kara grit her teeth. It was clear now what the old woman was after — keeping Cora away from her.

"I appreciate the offer, Ms. I do." Cora smiled politely. "But I'd prefer to stay with Kara." Her grip tightened on Kara's arm; Ms Merriam's eyes narrowed on the spot.

"Excuse us, Ms. Merriam," Kara said, pulling Cora along. Had Lena informed Ms. Merriam of her sexual leanings and what they'd shared? Would Ms. Merriam, who always talked of sin and openly shunned people like her, actually accept such a truth? The day was getting stranger by the moment. But if Ms. Merriam did have any grand illusions of her getting back together with Lena, she was in store for a rude awakening.

Everyone was seated when Father Mable delivered his sermon at the podium. "Non-Christian harassment is not the only thing that strickens us, but also the struggles we endure each day," he said. "We are in a battle without a known end, and we dare not dismantle our parapets in the face of such constant assaults upon our faith. We are in a brawl to the death, much like Kara Danvers was two years ago and sometime afterward, and so we must always be on our guard, with a blade in one hand and the instruments of our daily affairs in the other, lest the enemy of our souls falls upon us unprepared."

He went on about surviving sin, as well as life and death. Many felt it was a good sermon, and Kara made sure to compliment him and thank him for having her as the guest of honor. "It's nothing to thank me for. You went through an extraordinary tribulation," he said.

People conversed and ate food served from the kitchen. Sara was livelier than usual, putting on a chipper and excited act even though she hated churches. Clarence was absent, feeling under the weather as usual these days. James and his family were no longer the only black residents in town. He'd befriended a laborer he'd met during one of his searches with Lena. Like James, the man and his family had experienced employment and housing discrimination that resulted in many living in urban so-called ghettos in the Northeast and the Midwest. James had convinced him to move to Breighville because, although it had prejudice as well, it was quiet for the most part and people left him alone. The two men had a lot in common and were thinking of opening up a business together. Father Mable made a point of telling James and his friend that all good souls were welcomed in Breighville. But the same was also said to Winn and a new woman he was courting. Things evidently hadn't worked out with Winn and Siobhan. Kara wasn't surprised.

Mon-El behaved himself for the most part, attempting to pull out a flask of alcohol at one point and having it taken away by Ms. Merriam, who bopped him on the head with her fan.

Everyone wanted to talk to her. By the time she got through talking to just about everyone, she needed a break, excusing herself to the sacristy room of the church. Alex found her in no time.

"What you doin' in here?" she asked, as Kara leaned her head against a wall.

"I just needed to get away."

Alex's face softened. "Kara," she said sadly, walking to her to embrace her. They stayed like that for a good minute, with Kara just slack in firm arms. "I can never get enough of this," Alex said,
hugging her tighter.

Kara hugged back. Something about Alex's hugs was different. "Me neither." She smiled.

"Where's Lena?"

That question was all it took for Kara to break contact. She moved away from Alex to sit in a chair, her face going to rest in her hands. "I told her not to come."

Alex appeared horrified. "What, why? And she actually listened?"

Kara shrugged, looking up at Alex confusedly. "Why wouldn't she?"

Alex quickly pulled up a chair. "Kara, Lena led the charge when you went missin.' She was as devastated as the rest of us and never gave up hope of findin' ya. Lex suggested she come back home, offered her a job in New York, but she declined. Said she wanted to be here when you returned. That she felt closer to you here."

"She's with Siobhan." Kara sat up, her anger threatening to flare up again.

"Only recently." Alex touched her hands to hers. "Do ya have any idea what she went through? The heartache? The loneliness?"

"She said something about that, yeah."

"And did you listen?"

"I went through things too. You know that!"

"But you had someone. Lena had no one...until she let Siobhan in."

Kara scooted back in her chair and stood, back turning to Alex as she looked around the room with no real sense of focus. "Sounds to me like she chose to shun others. She chose to be with Siobhan."

"No, Kara. As you well know, Siobhan was already livin' with her. It stayed like that because all of Lena's energy went into searchin' for you. She barely ate, slept, or did anythang else but focus on you. She would work yer case, go home and up to her room. Siobhan, with the help of the maid, had to see to it that she was properly fed and bathed, before the cycle would start all over again. It got worse after her father died several months following your disappearance. Siobhan was there for her then too. We all tried to be, but she stayed locked up in the house. Naturally, the two bonded. A few months ago, Lena finally started engagin' again. Livin' her life again. She wasn't the same as she was before, but --"

Kara spun to Alex. "-- Why are you tellin' me all of this?"

Alex stood. "Because you need ta here it. Have ya told Lena what you told me about how you survived? That you survived because of her?"

"No."

"Maybe you should."

They were interrupted by a sound in the shadows near an intersecting door. Alex held up a finger to her lips to indicate that Kara be silent too as she inched backward. Within moments, Alex had pounced on a lurking figure, using a swift maneuver to work her way behind the broad back and pin one arm there.
"Ow, woman!" came an annoyed voice.

"Jonathan?" Alex queried, immediately letting him go. Kara was floored. Since when was Alex capable of that?

"You lurk in the shadows now?" Alex asked.

"No," Jonathan barked, twisting farther away from her, rubbing at his wrist. "I just wanted to speak ta Kara. You in the habit of harming innocent people now?"

"There ain't a thang innocent 'bout you, Jonathan Williams," Alex challenged. "And I'm on high alert ever since my sister returned after two years and the vermin who pushed her is still out there. Maybe here."

"Alex..." Kara's mouth hung open and closed. "Where you'd learn to --"

"-- Maggie and Sara. We can discuss that later." She turned back to Jonathan. "What business you have with Kara?"

"Can't a man just say hi to his long-lost sister-in-law?"

"Ex sister-in-law," Alex corrected.

Jonathan frowned, then turned to Kara. "I just wanted to say that I'm sorry 'bout what happened to ya, and it's good to have ya back." He stalked to the front door of the room before stopping to look over his shoulder. "And don't worry 'bout William. He can be a peculiar boy."

He exited the room, and Alex moved to peep out the door after him. Kara moved with her. They saw Jonathan take a seat beside Mr. Ray. "They seem to have gotten closer," Kara said.

"Yep. They've known each other ever since Jonathan was a boy, but now they talk daily. I wonder if Mr. Ray plans to offer up his niece to Jonathan as a new wife. Alaina's mother seems to have tired of him."

Kara's eyes drifted to Cora, who was talking to Mon-El. They appeared quite engaged in whatever conversation they were having. At least now Kara knew why Cora hadn't yet followed her inside.

"There they are," a female voice sounded off behind them.

They turned around to see Eliza entering through the intersecting door. Jeremiah and Maggie followed. Maggie immediately moved to Alex while Eliza and Jeremiah moved to hug Kara.

"Sorry," Eliza said, pulling back to rub her cheek. "It's just we can't stand ta have you out of our sight for long."

"It's okay," Kara replied. She understood. Alex had just done similarly.

Eliza and Jeremiah turned to watch Alex and Maggie embrace lovingly. Kara looked between both couples. What was this?

Her parents turned to her. "We understand," Jeremiah said. "If you have feelings for Lena the way Alex has feelings for Maggie."

Kara's eyes went big. "Pa?"

Eliza took Kara's hands into hers. "We know. It took me a year to reconcile with it -- that both of my girls favor women -- but God must have made us all different for a reason." She looked across to
Alex and Maggie. Alex was beaming back at them. "When it comes to love, ain't we all the same?"

Alex shrugged at Kara. "I've been meanin' to tell ya."

Maggie winked at her. "I'm part of the family now," she said with a grin.

Kara felt like her head was going to explode. Jeremiah and Eliza pulled her in for another hug, and laughed, followed by Alex and Maggie doing the same. She would likely die from hugging overload; she knew it.

Her confusion didn't lessen when her loved ones and friends showed her the headstone — her headstone — in the graveyard a few miles from the church. They were going to abolish it. Kara wished for the distance in time hampering her understanding of her old but new surroundings to be abolished instead.

"This room needs some sunshine," Sam said, opening the curtains in Lena's room.

Lena groaned on her bed, covering her face with a pillow and turning over.

"Lena, you've been sulkin' and hidin' out in this room for two days now since Kara's been back. Think about that. Two days to her two years. How could you go two days without seein' her? You have ta get up."

"Where's Siobhan?" Lena mumbled into the pillow.

"Down stairs helpin' the maid prepare breakfast."

"Why don't you go down there and assist her?" Lena knew that her words came out harsh. She also knew Sam was right. She had been hiding. Hiding from intense, accusing blue eyes and the shame they indicated she should feel. She did feel it. Kara had never given up on her. She'd been the one to let go, while Kara had steadfastly believed. But Sam was wrong about her not having seen Kara in two days. She'd gone out multiple times to see the woman, including on the night of the celebration. From the trees, she'd watched Kara's body language significantly deflate upon seeing her own grave. How surreal it must have felt. How awful.

Lena didn't even realize she was crying until Sam moved to her to throw the pillow aside and coaxed her to sit up. "You have to go to her."

"She doesn't want me around," Lena sobbed.

"Yes...she does."

"How do you know that?"

"Because I've seen you two together. Since you were little, remember? It was Kara who taught you to stand up to me and others when we called you 'little pint,' wasn't it?"

"Yes," Lena laughed, wiping at her eyes.

"Then --

"-- Sam... Don't you think I want to go to her? I can't."
"You can," Siobhan's voice sounded off from the doorway. She looked to Sam. "Can I have a moment alone with Lena?"

Sam stroked Lena's hair, then kissed her forehead. "Sure," she said, getting up and exiting the room.

Siobhan closed the door.

Lena looked to the covers. She couldn't bear Siobhan's disappointment as well.

"Lena, look at me."

When Lena did, Siobhan sat on the bed beside her. "I was never under any illusions about what this was. I knew that if Kara ever came back, I would lose you." Siobhan looked to their joined hands. A soft smile spread across her lips. "If we're being honest, I never had you."

"Siobhan."

"And if I ever let myself think that I did, you not being able to go beyond chaste kissing was always a sore reminder."

"I didn't mean to --"

"-- I know you didn't." Siobhan looked back up at her. "I said I would be patient, and I meant it, but it still hurt. It hurt mostly because I was certain you'd never get over Kara. And you haven't. You think you gave up on her, but the truth is...you never did. You have a big heart, Lena. The town saw that when you refused to believe Kara was dead. I saw it when you forgave me after my confession that I purposely hurt myself on the staircase like an idiot in an attempt to keep you close to me."

Siobhan cut herself off, pondering before playfully hitting Lena on the head. "I mean, what were you thinking forgiving me for that, huh?"

Lena laughed, sniffing back tears.

"I repeat: You have a big heart, Lena Luthor. And I'm grateful to have experienced your love and forgiveness, and the way you changed me these past two years. The way we changed each other, and grew."

Lena nodded her understanding.

"But we both know I'm not the love of your life." Siobhan said it matter of factly, like it was the most obvious statement ever.

"But I promised you I'd try."

"And you did." Siobhan touched a gentle hand to her cheek. "Now be free."

Lena saw Kara standing in front of their lake in the woods. Her back was to Lena and her shirt was off, but it was clear that she hadn't gotten in. She seemed to be contemplating whether to enter the water. Her back, the flawless back Lena remembered the day she'd gone missing, was now somewhat marred.

Lena thought about Kara's retelling of what'd happened out there in sea, and her chest spasmed in response. "Kara," she said.
The blonde’s back stiffened.

Lena walked to the woman slowly. She could see the rise and fall of broad shoulders become heavy. Did Kara still not want her there? Her fingers met the warm back, the raised scars as she traced over them. Kara jumped before calming down. Lena could have sworn that Kara had sighed contently, but then the blonde moved away, quickly putting on a long-sleeved shirt.

Kara stood several feet away when she glanced around and eyed Lena. She wore all black, and form-fitting leather pants again.

In some puzzlement, Lena watched the intimidating figure. Though she roweled her memory with cruel spurs of will, she could put no past face of Kara’s to the woman who stood before her now. Yet there was an elusive familiarity there. "Here," she said, pulling out the spectacles Kara had left behind.

Kara looked at them like they were a foreign object. "You keep 'em. I don't need the thangs anymore." Again, Lena heard a bit of Kara's southern accent. And again, it made her heart leap. But Kara saying she didn't want her birth father's spectacles anymore made her stomach drop. The Kara she knew would never want to be without the glasses. They were the woman's only remaining thing left of her birth parents, other than the signatures of the marriage contract for Kara and Mon-El.

Lena decided against pressing the issue, and tuckd the spectacles back into her sweater. She then met the searching eyes analyzing her. "I want to talk, Kara. I want to --"

"-- I don't."

"Are you sure about that?" Lena took a step closer.

Kara took a step back. "I'm sure."

Lena sat at the edge of the lake, slipping out of her shoes and tucking her feet under her dress with a deep inhale and exhale of breath. "Well, then, I guess I'll stay seated here all by my lonesome."

Kara let out a frustrated sigh. She sat down pointedly, her face wary and clearly signaling distrust.

Lena looked up at the sky. A smile tugged at her lips. "I'm 30 now. But I don't feel 30. You don't think I'm old now, do you?"

Kara may have stifled a laugh. Lena wasn't sure. "Old? No. You look the same, Lena."

Lena's eyes focused on her. It was the opening she'd wanted. "Then if I look the same, and I sound the same, why don't you treat me the same?"

"You know why."

"Because I betrayed you?"

Kara didn't answer. She narrowed her eyes as though suspicious of whatever trickery was in front of her.

Lena turned to her fully. "What if I were to tell you, Kara Danvers, that I never stopped loving you and that I didn't give up on you? I didn't betray you?"

Kara stood then. A hard scoff followed. "Damn it, Lena, you're playing with me."

"I'm not." Lena stood up as well.
"You are! You and Siobhan had a connection before I was gone. That connection strengthened once I was gone. You moved on with her, when I never would have moved on with anyone else. What more is there to say?"

"Will you not listen to reason?!"

Kara placed her hands on her hips, and Lena's eyes strayed there. The hip placement was a very Kara thing to do. "Not when the reason makes no sense!"

"You haven't let me make it make sense."

"Because it won't," Kara said exasperatedly, a hand going to her forehead to massage it. She moved up along the water's edge and back. Her gaze again found Lena's. "I just need time. Okay? Can you just give me that?"

Time? But they'd already lost so much. Lena didn't want to give her time. But what would refusing mean? Would it result in pushing Kara away?

"Okay," she relented. She slipped into her shoes and stared for a long moment, eventually backing away and watching Kara watch her leave.

Time is what Kara had requested, and it's what she'd received. After a week of avoiding Lena and getting Cora situated, set up with a home and a job helping at a local bakery, she was ready to talk. She bid Cora goodbye for the day and road to Ms. Merriam's. With the way Cora had been bonding with Mon-El lately, she knew she wouldn't be missed for hours by the girl.

Ms. Merriam opened the door with a grin on her face. The old woman must have known why she was there. Everyone in town knew that Lena often visited Ms. Merriam when not at the Luthor residence. Ms. Merriam didn't care about being associated with such a leper of the community. And with as influential as the woman apparently still was, Kara figured it made sense.

"Well, don't just stand there all gloomy and whatnot. Go on and have a seat," Ms. Merriam said. "Have ya eaten yet?"

Kara entered and just looked around. "No, ma'am."

"I said have a seat."

Kara did as told, straightening her back against a comfy sofa.

"I'm old, but I'm not blind," Ms. Merriam stated. She looked Kara over until Kara felt uncomfortable. "You're in love with Lena. And Ms. Lena is in love with you."

Kara wiped her hand across her brow. "Does the whole town know now?" she heard herself think out loud.

Ms. Merriam chuckled. "No, hun. If they did, they wouldn't be too happy 'bout it. I suspect just a few who have had the opportunity to observe ya two real close, like I have, know the true meanin' of your relationship."

Kara sighed. She didn't want to discuss this with another person. "Where's Lena?"

"You sit right there for a bit. I'll make breakfast."
Kara squirmed in her seat, fiddling with the woman's spectacles on the stand beside her. She tried them on, chin rising in a dignified manner. The glasses were quite distinguished for a modest town like this. Why was Ms. Merriam being so roundabout? And when had the woman started wearing spectacles?

It was half an hour later when she washed up at a pump in Ms. Merriam's yard, then slicked her hair back and pushed the spectacles up on her nose. The smell of bacon, ham and bread bombarded her nose as she reentered. Two plates and a jug of tea sat on a small table in the kitchen.

"Eat up," Ms. Merriam said, gesturing toward the food.

She didn't have to tell Kara twice. Kara dug in, savoring every morsel.

Ms. Merriam's eyes lit up watching the younger woman wolf down her meal. "You know... There's another reason I'm so familiar with what you and Lena are goin' through," she said. Kara looked up at her. "Many years ago, I was in love with a man. I know it don't seem like it, but I was. And I thought he loved me too. That was, until I saw the way he eyed another. But the other wasn't the stunning beauty I expected. It was another man."

Kara's chewing slowed. She scooted back in her chair, licking her fingers clean, before giving Ms. Merriam her full attention.

"It came to the point where I just couldn't be around him anymore 'cause it hurt so much. But not before he wrote me a letter confessin' his feelings for the man he cherished. I was gutted, ya know? Stricken to the bone. I was also angry, and my hatred for those like him -- those like you and Lena -- took hold. I didn't want his letter. I sent it back to him and told him to hang on to it as a reminder of the sweet and loyal woman he could have had, for there was no way he could ever be with that man anyhow."

Ms. Merriam was more emotional in this moment than Kara had ever seen her, and it was spellbinding.

"I had to let him go. But it's different for you two," Ms. Merriam assured, leaning over the table, the creases at the side of her eyes wrinkling further. "It's why I couldn't let ya go after her on an empty stomach."

Kara felt an instant sense of dread she hadn't felt in ages. "Go after her?"

"Lena's leavin' for New York this mornin.' As I cooked, she was surely packing the rest of her thangs. Should be headed to the train station right about now."

Kara jumped to her feet. "What?!" she screeched, snatching off the spectacles and placing them in her pocket. "No, no, no."

Kara was out the door before Ms. Merriam could finish telling her that it was only a business trip. But Ms. Merriam figured it was just the push the two needed. "You can keep them glasses, ya hear?" she yelled after her.

Kara road Midnight as fast she could to the railroad station among the dense forests, situated in an area that was originally partially cleared for farm land. Since the train station was located in the heart of a vast pine forest, it became a shipping destination for such products as lumber, tar and turpentine. Lena used to love venturing this far out to pretend that they were going to leave on some grand adventure.

Kara's mind flashed to the moment she saw Lena's horse-drawn conveyance departing twenty years...
ago. She remembered how scared she felt, how helpless. She couldn't lose Lena again. She wouldn't. Not after losing her for another two whole years.

She pulled up to the station just as the brunette was about to step onto the train. "Lena!" she screamed.

Lena halted, one hand on the railing and the other placed to her chest. She looked like she'd been startled silly. "Kara?"

Kara hopped off her horse and marched straight to the woman. Lena's eyes blinked rapidly. "Take me with you."

"Pardon me?"

"I said take me with you, damn it." Kara flailed her arms around. "You said all that stuff last time about how ya felt about me. And, before that, what we meant to each other. And now you're just gonna run out of my life again? Did you mean anythang you said? God, Lena."

Lena moved away from the train and gawked. Kara huffed and puffed, and huffed and puffed some more, her mouth forming into a noticeable pout.

Within seconds, Lena was giggling.

"I... You...," Kara stammered. "Stop laughing." She stomped her foot.

Lena waved her hands around, her laughter growing louder. "I can't."

"I said stop it. That you would laugh at a moment like this? Unbelievable."

"I'm not leaving you, Kara," Lena said, the last round of chuckles dying slowly in her throat. "Lex needs me for some trying business transactions. Said he'll be interacting with immigrants of various nationalities, including those of Spanish descent. And since I'm fluent in a number of languages, while Lex, having focused on other matters when we were growing up, isn't..." Lena let her silence finish her sentence, and nodded toward the train. "My bags are already on there. You needed time, so..."

"Like I said," Kara spoke as if what Lena had just relayed was irrelevant, "take me with you." She moved closer. "We have a lot to talk about, I know that, but I'm not letting you leave without me."

She moved closer still, taking Lena's hands into hers. "Take me with you," she whispered.

Lena looked to the train. If she was fighting back tears, she wasn't doing a good job of it. She turned back to Kara, her smile wider than any river Kara had transversed. "Always."
Hey, all. This chapter was going to be very long, over 13,000 characters or close to 14,000 characters, but I decided to break it up. As you know, the story is coming to a close, and splitting up this chapter gets us one step closer to that end without me feeling like I need to stretch things just to get to the chapter 20 I've had planned all along. The split also helps you to not feel exhausted from reading the chapter's journey, although I know a lot of you love when this story's chapters are very lengthy. Oh, and I stole most of Lex's loft from the Internet. Anyway, thank you for all of the support and for taking this ride with me thus far. As always, you can keep up with me and/or shoot me a message at https://greatshow1.tumblr.com/.

The train ride was a new experience for Kara. But to hear Lena tell it, it wasn't a typical train ride anyhow. Not because they were on a railroad car coupled together and hauled by several locomotives, but because it was a Pullman train car. The Pullman Palace Car Company had been founded by George Pullman in 1862. He built luxury sleeping cars which featured top-notch customer service, beds, carpeting, upholstered chairs, card tables, draperies, and libraries. The hotel and dining cars were just as impressive.

Their car had sleeper berths for the passengers and dining facilities aboard. The plush velvet seats converted into snug sleeping berths. By day, the upper berth was folded up overhead. By night, the upper berth folded down and the two facing seats below it folded over to offer a bunk. Thick curtains allowed for privacy and also covered the windows. Chandeliers hung from the ceiling, which was painted with elaborate designs. And washrooms existed at each end for men and women.

Kara thought it may take weeks to get to New York. But times had changed. After the Battle At Little Big Horn, where Colonel George A. Custer's Seventh Calvary was annihilated by the Sioux led by Crazy Horse, the majority of the fighting had ceased by 1877, which enabled railroads to continue building. After construction on the transcontinental railroad was completed in 1869, Americans had the means to travel by land from the Atlantic coast to the Pacific coast, or from the Pacific coast to the Atlantic coast. Before that, such a trip took more than four or six months, especially on horseback such as via stagecoaches. The trips were also dangerous, because it meant trekking over rivers, deserts, and mountains. The alternative option was to opt for a six-week sea voyage around Cape Horn, or sail to Central America and cross the Isthmus of Panama by rail, but this meant being at risk for exposure to deadly diseases such as yellow fever in the crossing.

Kara had heard men discuss it before, but she listened as Lena carried on about it having taken about seven days and cost $65 for a ticket on the transcontinental line from New York to San Francisco in 1870. It cost $136 for first class in a Pullman sleeping car, $110 for second class, and $65 for a space on a third, or "emigrant,"-class bench. And it was much the same now. Kara knew that Lena had improved the railroad system leading from Breighville, mainly to assist in the search for her, and that work on it had began soon after her disappearance. They were now, in part, experiencing the fruits of that labor. But their traveling luck was still mostly due to the transcontinental line. The amount of
time it took to travel by train depended on train speed, the number of locomotives or attached railroad cars, as well as whether the person had to spend the night in a transfer city, etc., but a North Carolina resident could now travel by rail from Wilmington to Sacramento, California in five to seven days. North Carolina to New York was shorter. There were stops they would need to make along the way, but she and Lena would be in New York within two days; three at the most.

For passengers who refused, or didn't have the means, to pay the premium fares, the trip was significantly less speedy and comfortable. Most of the first-class passengers traveled the line for business or pleasure, but third-class passengers were commonly emigrants desiring to start fresh in the west. A third-class ticket could be purchased for only $40 less than half the price of the first-class fare. At this price, the passenger received no luxuries. Their cars, which were fitted with rows of narrow wooden benches, were crowded, noisy, and uncomfortable. The railroad commonly attached the coach cars to freight cars that were constantly pushed aside to make room for the express trains. Because of this, the third-class passenger's ride west could take ten or more days. But the travelers rarely complained because even several days spent sitting on a hard bench seat was better than several months walking alongside a wagon on a trail.

Although Kara and Lena had access to a car with a kitchen at one end from which meals were served on removable tables set between the drawing-room seats, it was scheduled for only one trip each week. There was no doubt that this was that week when the following notice was delivered to passengers: "This train does not stop for meals. Supper is now ready on Pullman’s palace dining car attached to this train." The transcontinental railroad otherwise usually fed its passengers at dining stations along the way, allowing them thirty minutes to obtain their food and leave before continuing their ride.

The dining room had seats for at least thirty-six people. It took a staff of about seven and occasionally as many as sixteen waiters, cooks, and busboys. The tables were adorned with fine linen, china, and silver, and all created just for the railroad and inscribed with its logo. The cars were usually carpeted, furnished often enough with fine draperies and light fixtures. Menus could offer as many as eighty different dishes, featuring fresh meats — including fish and poultry — baked goods, fruits, and vegetables.

On their first day aboard, Kara enjoyed the food and drink, but she enjoyed Lena's company more. She'd missed Lena for two years, of course, but being in her presence again, watching her joyfully explain all of the intricacies of traveling and the history behind the foods they were being served, was spellbinding. They hadn't talked much about their two-year "separation" and the issues they needed to work out, but Lena had immediately let her know that there'd been no sexual intimacy with Siobhan. The admittance had been an awkward moment, and going back into town so that Kara could quickly pack and they could let their loved ones know they would be departing for New York hadn't made it any less awkward. But they were enjoying each other's company for now, and that was enough at the moment.

"We have a sofa to ourselves," Kara stated, digging into her chicken salad, "and a table and a lamp. And the berth... It has two windows looking out of the train, and that long mirror. My goodness."

Lena chuckled. "Yes, I saw." She took a bite out of her roast meat. Although her eyes focused on her meal, Kara could feel those eyes stealing glances ever so often.

"And this chicken salad stuff?" Kara chewed contemplatively. "Divine."

"So you are enjoying yourself then?" Lena looked at her, voice somehow seeming vulnerable.

"You have to ask?" Kara grinned, slurping up her cup of orange ice.
Lena let out another infectious laugh. "I guess not."

They took more bites of their food in meticulous fashion, each chew more contemplative than the last. After it seemed Lena had run out of traveling topics to talk about, they continued their meal in silence. It was nice, even if awkward.

Their trip not being meant for dining stops apparently wasn't enough to discourage certain adventurous passengers from having requested just that, unbeknownst to Lena at the time. They wanted to experience as much of the trip as possible, which meant that Kara and Lena had to experience it with them. The food on the stops, as stated by the travelers who participated in the detours, varied from wretched to mediocre. But it was a part of the "grand trip."

For the first dining stop, the food was ill-cooked and poorly served. And despite making it to two different stops for dinner and supper respectively, the two meals essentially tasted the same. For both dinner and supper, it was antelope chops, buffalo steaks, biscuits, sweet potatoes, boiled Indian corn, with hoe cakes and syrup, and tea. Kara and Lena could only assume that breakfast would have been the same as well. Lena even resorted to looking at her pocket watch to tell whether it was dinner or supper they were eating. The meat was rubbery and tough rather than tender. The sweet potatoes weren't so sweet. The tea tasted as though it was made from the leaves of the sage-brush—literally sage tea. The biscuit was made without soda, but with a lot of alkali, blending with the great quantity of alkali dust they had already consumed. But Lena did compliment one of the chefs for serving an orange which diversified one of the meals. Kara and Lena decided right then and there that they would stick to the train food.

Their first night on the rail, Kara could feel Lena's eyes on her as she sat back against the upper berth reading a magazine. They had settled for slumber minutes ago, after washing up and closing their curtains. Lena was on a bed a little lower than her, made from the plush seats that could be converted for bedtime; it extended a little outwards from her berth, rather than being directly under it, which allowed them to view each other.

"You are to sleep in your leathers?"

The question wasn't one Kara expected, but maybe she should have saw it coming. Ever since her time at sea, she'd made it a habit of sleeping in her day clothes, and she knew everyone would find it odd. Everyone except for Cora, that was.

Kara shrugged, deciding it was better to not make eye contact. She'd seen earlier that Lena was in a lace nightgown that didn't leave much to the imagination. Did the woman always dress like that for bed time these days? "It offers me warmth," Kara stated, still refusing to make eye contact. And it was true to a degree; it was a comfort thing, much the same way Cora sleeping with a tarp over her head was.

"I suppose it is a little chilly," Lena replied.

Kara was aware that she could get off the berth and ease into bed with Lena; erotic tension was still there between them. And beyond sex, they were tied together in profound, emotional ways. She could simply hold Lena, or allow Lena to hold her, as she'd held Cora and Cora had held her during their healing process. But once in bed with Lena, she knew it would go farther than that. For two years, she had longed for Lena both emotionally and physically, but the daydreams and
hallucinations which had kept her alive while in the Atlantic had been more sexual in nature than not. The thoughts had comforted her the most because it meant physical contact with Lena, touching every part of the brunette, and she could always go back to their night in the woods before all the chaos happened. That's how she'd been able to be with Lena while at sea. But to be with her here and now, truly rather than in mind only? She still wasn't sure of the connection between Lena and Siobhan. And she was currently on a train; people were close by all the time. They barely had any privacy. The last thing they needed was talk about how deviant the two women in that section of the train were. She needed to talk with Lena, but it would have to wait until they were truly alone.

She turned over, away from the brunette, on her berth. And the two remained silent for the rest of the night.

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The second day of the trip, they heard passengers complain about another stop. The people had been served a chicken stew, and it had tasted excellent, but they'd learned afterward that it'd included prairie dogs—a so-called new version of chickens without feathers.

Kara and Lena were thankful they'd stuck to the delicious train service.

Between stops for meals, the travelers were diverted by a procession of wildlife along each side of the track, with opossums, raccoons and coyotes being the most commonly seen. Fleet-footed animals often approached very close to passing trains, seemingly racing with the cars, and often winning. Although the train owners discouraged it, excited hunters sometimes fired upon these animals with rifles and pistols from the open windows of the cars.

Some rodents were close enough that the travelers could see them sitting at the entrances to their burrows. Wolves and bears were also present, with one passenger certain that he saw a pack of wild dogs moving along parallel with the railroad, until he learned that they were coyotes. Grasshoppers and crickets were unfamiliar; every now and then, they came upon the tracks and caused the locomotive wheels to temporarily falter.

In one of the cars, it was traditional on Sundays to hold religious services. Kara could leave Breighville, but the religious teachings instilled in her remained. Most of the teachings at least. During an Episcopal service, a Reverend delivered a sermon and a choir sang. She enjoyed it. Lena didn't attend.

There was the occasional poker game, but the majority of them were extremely serious. One car was filled with rich stockmen and some upper-class women. In the small quarters of the men’s cigar room, a highplay poker game saw gold pieces and bills as the stakes. One player was dressed so finely, with diamond-decked fingers, and was so careful with barbering, that Lena identified him as a gambler right away. She said that poker-playing professional gamblers existed on just about all transcontinental trains in the 1870s. Neither Kara nor Lena played any of the games, but they watched. And Kara learned.

The train ride didn't go as fast as expected and the stops hadn't helped. After three days of noise, dust, and locomotive smoke, they arrived in New York at ten o'clock in the morning. The first action of the travelers who could afford it was to register at a hotel and seek a quiet room and a warm bath. Lena would have done the same, but Kara could see that her own awe at their surroundings caused Lena to allow her to indulge.
Lena sent word to Lex that they might not be meeting up with him until much later in the day. And Kara and Lena took to some sightseeing via a horsecar.

Kara learned that they were in the Upper West Side. A good portion of it was still under construction, as just a few years back, in 1873, the Upper West Side was open land marked with occasional menacing rock outgrowths, shanties, vegetable gardens, lowly taverns, and frail eighteenth- and nineteenth-century country mansions. But along the way, Kara also saw a lot of buildings, far larger than any she'd seen in North Carolina. And railings. A lot of railings. A number of people walked the streets or were pulled by horsecars. And the people were finely-clothed in suits and dresses Kara was sure cost more than all of Breighville.

Before long, they were in West Village, a neighborhood in the western section of the larger Greenwich Village neighborhood of Lower Manhattan. From what Lena told her, the neighborhood was known for its colorful, artistic residents and the alternative culture they formed and upheld. The residents were what many called "progressive in their attitudes." They were known for advocating radical ideas like women’s suffrage, anarchy, and free love. Lena noted that it's why she'd chosen to live in this part of the state; Kara understood.

Changes in the built environment were a testament to the ever-increasing presence of the poor and working classes. So far, the 1870s also witnessed the rapid expansion of hospitals, which were primarily religious and ethnic institutions that had evolved from almshouses. The hospitals were there for the poor mainly by offering warmth, shelter, regular meals, and basic nursing. Some of the major institutions opened in the 1870s, including hospitals like the Presbyterian Hospital.

"The Tenth Street Studio Building is situated at 51 West 10th Street between Fifth and Sixth Avenues," Kara heard Lena comment beside her as the driver pulled them ahead. "The building was commissioned by James Boorman Johnston and designed by Richard Morris Hunt. I'm telling you, Kara, its design was revolutionary. It has a domed central gallery. And its Hunt's studio is the first ever architectural school in the United States. It's pulling in artists from all over to exhibit and sell their art."

Kara watched Lena explain with glee, a bright-eyed and utterly charming mess, and she was failing to remember a time Lena looked so excited. Was all of the current enthusiasm because this was being shared with her?

"The culture of this neighborhood... Its art and all that... I take it that's why you lived here with Siobhan?" Kara asked.

Lena's smile quickly faded. She looked as though she might be causing offense to even speak of Siobhan. "Yes," Lena said, looking down before again looking her in the eye and then back out the right side of the horsecar.

As they moved ahead, they witnessed vine-covered homes and shade trees marking 23rd Street. The Sixth Avenue elevated railroad was still being sculpted, but the 23rd Street crosstown horsecar line had existed for a year thus far.

"The workweek generally runs from Monday through Saturday," Lena said. "Sunday is the city's day of leisure, and the change in mood is easily noticeable. On Sunday morning, it's like New York puts on its holiday dress, you could say, for the stores aren't open for business and the streets are pretty much deserted."

"Good thing it's Tuesday then."

Lena laughed. "Indeed. Oh, and around ten o'clock, it's not unheard of to see New Yorkers go to
church on Sundays; most prefer to do so on Fifth Avenue, so well-to-do residents can show off on the city’s most fashionable street afterward. This has transformed into a loosely-structured parade, however, with the fashionable walking the streets in the early afternoon on Easter Sunday. They walk up and down Fifth Avenue, from Madison Square to Central Park. This year’s Easter is obviously past, but...

"Fifth Avenue is the most fashionable street?" Kara didn't know much about fashion, but her interest was piqued. She had seen a whole different lifestyle in Bermuda, and had learned much there.

"It is," Lena replied, turning to her. "I can show you."

They ended up on the aforementioned avenue. While there weren't crowds of people out, there were men dressed in sober black suits; others wore a gridiron shirt and a sonorous necktie. The women wore coats and dresses of every color. One lady wore a hat consisting of a contraption of flowers and lace at least one-foot high. Kara was certain that the woman and Ms. Merriam would get along fine.

A few minutes later, and they were inside a nearby clothing store in a back room. Although, as the store owner said, they were both women, a divider separated them as Kara tried on men's clothing. She had been amazed by the male attire in the neighborhood, and Lena insisted on treating her, but didn't want to try on anything herself as to keep the moment about Kara. The brunette also complained about still being a bit grimy from the ride over and preferred a bath first. Kara, however, was used to grime.

"How do I look?" Kara asked, stepping out from behind the divider and straightening her lapels as she upturned her nose in the air. The spectacles Ms. Merriam gave her sat on her nose in its most refined way yet.

Lena giggled, covering her mouth with gloved hands. "Like the most dapper person I've ever seen."

Kara wore a black jacket that was semi-fitted and thigh-length. The black waistcoat was buttoned high on her chest, the gray pants fit her perfectly, the shirt was patterned gray and white, and the shirt collar was stiff and upstanding, with the tips turned down into wings. Instead of a necktie tied in a bow knot, she wore the four-in-hand and later the Ascot tie. She leaned on a cane, nose still upturned in the air. "You're certain?"

"Yes," Lena laughed. "And the glasses Ms. Merriam intended for you... Well, they really top it off."

"Intended for me?"

"You didn't know?"

"That cunning old..."

Lena moved to her to stroke the side of her face. "But what have you done to your hair?"

Kara's locks were parted in the center and bunched wildly at the sides with those sides tied into two large poofs. "What, you don't like it?"

"No," Lena giggled, waving her hands about.

"But the owner said men part their hair here."

"Not like that, they don't. You look like a poodle."

Kara snorted.
"As a child, you could get away with it maybe, but..."

"Oh, yeah?" Kara challenged, grabbing her top hat, which was apparently falling out of fashion, but came along with the attire anyhow.

Lena nodded, not wavering in her assertion, her arms folding across her chest.

"Then how about I leave you to pay for this? I was going to chip in, but now you will be without my dollar, madam." Kara stomped off, feigning disappointment. Lena's laughter grew louder.

"Hey!" the store owner called after them; Kara ran out the front door.

Lena quickly moved to the owner, paying her. "My apologies," she said before hurrying after Kara.

"You!" Lena pointed a finger at the blonde.

Kara shrugged; Lena pulled her close. For just a moment, they were in their own little world again, as though time hadn't passed since that night they'd unleashed everything they'd been feeling for each other. Lena's eyes slowly dropped to her lips, but then there was nothing. She let go, and the spell was broken. They finally seemed to take notice of the people and horses milling about.

"They look at me, at what I'm wearing, but they don't stare for long," Kara said, perturbed. "Even on the train, people clearly wondered why I wasn't dressed like you."

Lena ran a hand along Kara's lapel. "That's because they've seen far weirder things in this community." She moved to get back on the horsecar. "Come on."

Although Kara didn't pay for her new attire, she did pay for the occasional meal during the sightseeing. They tasted delicacy after delicacy, foods Kara had never even dreamed of, including some sort of meal consisting of flat bread, tomato sauce and cheese. It was Italian food, Lena had said as they sat down at a table outside in front a restaurant for their first food stop. She knew Lena must have wondered where she'd gotten the money for some of the expensive meals she was buying, but the brunette didn't ask.

"You've been like a child in a candy store all day," Lena said, staring at her with what Kara could see was adoration.

Kara looked down at her pasta, embarrassed, twirling the noodles around the fork. "Sorry."

"No, don't be," Lena insisted, grabbing Kara's free hand with a smile. "To be free. Kara, to enjoy yourself the way you've been doing. This is what I've always wanted for you." She looked around at the landscape, the businesses, transportation, the people. "For both of us." Her eyes suddenly met the blonde's, and she dropped the tanned hand immediately, as though singed, as though she hadn't meant to state that final sentence.

Kara stared at her curiously, blue eyes seeking elusive green ones. "Speak your mind."

"I will," Lena stated, smiling faintly. "Just not here."

Kara felt the need to press on, but she remembered how it was only a few days ago that she also held off broaching topics they needed to discuss. "You talk about curious minds. You should have seen
Cora when we first took the time to explore Bermuda. She wanted to know about any and everything."

Lena smiled. "Sounds like quite the experience."

"You bet," Kara said, tipping her hat and smacking her teeth with part annoyance and part fondness when hearing her southern accent temporarily creep up. It still surprised her whenever it came back.

"I love when it that twang comes out," Lena offered, as if reading her mind.

The brunette's eyes were heavy on her. Lustful in a way. Kara bristled.

"Yeah, Cora...." Kara continued, trying to remain on the subject. "She even had this phase where she wanted to know about kissing. And then, well, she wanted to know about...more." Kara silently cursed, blinking rapidly. Why had she brought up kissing and sex? Was it because of the way Lena was looking at her?

"And you weren't prepared to inform her," Lena said with finality. She was now leaning on her elbows, her hands clasped in front of her mouth.

"How would you know? You only had me once," Kara stated. She'd meant it jokingly, as even displayed by her smirk, but it had been blurted out in a way that sounded spiteful. The narrowing of Lena's eyes and tightening of Lena's jaw was an indication of that. The brunette looked off to the side, her profile as stunning as ever.

"We should get moving," Lena suggested, standing and excusing herself from the table. Kara silently cursed again.

Dinner was served at one o'clock at day in New York; servants had the rest of the day off. After dinner, people enjoyed more promenading, which meant a drive in Central Park, or if the family was working class, a picnic in the park or skating session on one of the frozen lakes in the winter.

Kara and Lena's next meal was the Lobster Newberg. It was a luscious creation featuring multiple crustaceans in cream, cognac, sherry, and cayenne pepper.

They visited Washington Square Park, the heart of the Village. It served as a gathering place for neighbors, students, artists, dogs with their owners, great chess players, and street performers. It had originally been a horrible gathering spot, as it had been a hanging ground and a potter’s field, but it had become graceful by 1827.

Continuing up Fifth Avenue, they came upon 8th Street. It was filled with head shops, galleries, clubs and cafés. This path of Fifth Avenue was also lined with elegant mansions, lavish hotels, and churches. At 7 E. 10th Street, they viewed the Lockwood De Forest House. De Forest shipped teak bay from India. The block of W. 10th Street between Fifth and Sixth Avenues was breathtakingly beautiful, as it was lined with elegant townhouses in a various styles, including English Terrace Row homes with cast-iron communal balconies on the street’s south side.

West of Sixth Avenue, they saw the Third Judicial District Courthouse, a lively Victorian Gothic building with a 172-foot clock tower. It had church-like touches, but without religious affiliation, and included stained-glass windows and a fountain decorated with birds and animals. The first and second floor reading rooms were courtrooms where cases were tried.
Behind the courthouse was a women’s prison. Lena said if they got close enough, they would hear inmates yelling profanities down at passersby. Behind the Library on W. 10th St. between Sixth and Greenwich Aves. stood the Patchin Place, a private cul-de-sac with 10 brick row houses. It was established in 1848.

Halfway along the block, they crossed Gay Street on the left. It was a small, curving street that was originally a stable alley, and housed African-American servants. It eventually evolved into a primary place for Jazz musicians.

At the corner of Christopher St. and Waverly Place, Kara and Lena came upon the triangular Northern Dispensary. It was established in 1831, and provided healthcare to indigent residents. One famous resident had been Edgar Allan Poe.

Kara and Lena explored for four hours. Neither seemed tired or willing to call it a day. And although Lena assured that there would be plenty of time to see more, there was one last thing she wanted Kara to see before they headed to Lex’s estate.

"The Statue of Liberty," Lena stated, as the two stood side-by-side in Madison Square Park holding each other's hands. "Well, what's the beginning of the statue anyway. Clearly, there's more to be built, but one can't come to New York without seeing this."

They stood there staring up at the torch-bearing arm of what Lena was certain would eventually become one of the greatest and most inspirational monuments ever built. Kara chose to believe her. The arm was quite spectacular, after all.

They spent a few more hours there, enjoying each other's company. There wasn't much talking, but it was nice.

By sunset, they were in the horsecar again. The Bowery brightened up wonderfully. And, after nightfall, the street was ablaze with a thousand gaslights.

After being let into Lex's home by the hired help, Lena insisted on washing up, and she and Kara were immediately attended to by the servants, who showed them to separate rooms at Lena's request and drew baths for them. The two dressed quickly, in attire they'd brought with them, and were led down a hall to a room.

Lex lived in Tribeca, a neighborhood in Lower Manhattan, on Duane Street. He owned a loft mansion — the one they stood in now — and other residences elsewhere in the city.

Since Lower Manhattan was the central borough for business, culture, and government in the city, it made sense to Kara that Lex and Lena chose to have residences there. Lex was a businessman, just like Lionel. But unlike Lionel, Kara learned that he didn't work for Standard Oil. After his father's death, he'd declared that the business would fall one day soon and that he wouldn't let it drag the Luthor family name down with it. Already halfway into politics as a staunch Democrat, he stepped into it full force, using the wealth and influence he'd inherited from Lionel to quickly work his way into the New York State Legislature as part of the Senate. He was currently aiming to be a Governor, Lieutenant, or Lieutenant Governor, of New York. He was also helping to prepare for an investigation looking into whether or not the Erie Railroad and the New York Central Railroad were giving rebates within the state, and whether or not a lot of the traffic came from Standard Oil. The New York State Legislature hoped to have the investigation underway the following year. Kara found it somewhat amusing that both Lena and Lex had sought to govern lands, but there was
something to be said about following in a father's footsteps.

"Sister," Lex's voice boomed in the room once Lena had entered. Kara wasn't sure why she didn't promptly follow Lena inside, but it somehow felt more respectful to give them some time alone. "I was beginning to think I might never see you again, so occupied you were with your guest," he jested. "This plain garb you have on, though, it doesn't speak to your enjoyment. Not one bit."

It wasn't until Kara heard Lena question "Guest?" that she entered. To say that Lex was shocked was an understatement. Had Lena failed to mention her to him? She stood in the doorway, watching as Lex stared wide-eyed and Lena grimaced.

"I'm so sorry," Lena groaned, turning to Lex, who held her in his arms. "This must be the stupidest thing I've done." She held a hand to her head in embarrassment. "I didn't get a chance to write you a letter of Kara's return. I was in a stupor of sorts. And even if I'd written you a few days ago, it might not have reached you in time. But I still should have been tactful by not having you see her like this and --"

"-- Kara?" Lex stated, stepping forward, seemingly not hearing Lena. "Kara Danvers... As I live and breathe?"

"Ye...ah?" Kara said slowly. She'd never seen this man before in all her life. She remembered the boy. But the man? He was tall, had a slightly muscular build, and was well-dressed. He also had no hair to speak of, but there was an elegance to him that most men, from what Kara had seen, lacked. His voice was strong, but it cracked when querying her.

"Lex..." Lena said, attempting to soften the blow. It was too late for that.

The next thing Kara heard was low, joyful laughter. "My god, Kara!" he yelled. And then Lex was scooping her up into a bear hug. His grip was insanely strong. Not even James's grip could compare.

Why men loved bear hugs so much was something she'd look into at a later date.

As they ate and drank at a dimly lit table while sitting on lavish sofas, they filled Lex in on everything that had happened since Kara's return. They also discussed old times, Lex often laughing at their childhood hijinks. They discussed business and what Lex had brought Lena there for, and that he'd had some people he'd wanted her to meet before deciding to send them home once it got too late. They would talk tomorrow, he said, but he swore he would not turn out like William M. "Boss" Tweed, who had caused near municipal financial ruin.

Tweed had worked his way up in 1851, after being elected to the Board of Alderman. Following early political success on the Board of Alderman, he moved through numerous municipal positions, gained control of the seventh ward in the City's Lower East Side, and was essentially considered the first "Boss of New York" when he was crowned the grand sachem of Tammany Hall in 1863. But his politics were dirty. He bullied his way on the boards of a number of influential city companies that worked for the city, extorted significantly inflated rates for the companies, which increased his wealth. His shady tactics came to light in 1871. Both The New York Times and a series of cartoons by Thomas Nast exposed him. He was sentenced to jail in 1873 and fined for his abuse of municipal power. He died earlier in the year, in April 1878, of pneumonia. But because he was responsible for so many changes to the built environment, mainly the development of the Upper East Side, and used his position in the Department of Public Works to bring about the building and coordination of miles of high quality sewer, water, and gas lines along with roads, his legacy wasn't all bad.
Like others, Lex offered respectable concern to Kara for all she'd been through. But the man seemed to love to tease Lena about everything, including "not jumping Kara's bones" as soon as Kara was back. Nothing was off-limits with Lex, apparently.

"And so everything between you two is fine now?" he asked, sipping a glass of wine as his hawk eyes analyzed Kara intently. He sat beside Lena, and Kara felt exposed on the other end as brother and sister surveyed her. Lex waited expectantly for answers, and Lena looked back and forth between her and Lex, red-painted mouth attempting to form words but failing as though Kara held all of the cards. Kara supposed she did.

"We're getting there," Kara smiled awkwardly, unfolding her legs and setting her glass of wine down on the table.

"What is there to get to?" Lex challenged, his glass discarded as he sat with his legs wide open and his arms hanging over his thighs. "You love my sister, do you not?"

Scary. Lex was scary, at least when he stared at a person like that, Kara decided. His stern gaze dared Kara to come up with a rebuttal, to disagree with him. And it threatened to eat her alive if she did.

"Okay..." Lena interrupted. "Lex, how about you show Kara around?" She stood. "I'll accompany, of course. The place is so big, and today's been quite the sightseeing day for Kara already. One last tour before we call it a night?"

Lex stood, straightening his suit, his eyes still on Kara before moving ahead. "Follow me."

The mansion was of the highest luxury standards, made up of an exceptional and unique limestone. It was 23,100 square feet, with approximately 30,000 square feet of usable interior space. It had six floors above grade and two floors below grade, built on 41 feet x 109 feet lot. The ceiling heights ranged from 12 to 17 feet; it had huge windows and multiple skylights that touched all areas so that the place could welcome in sun or moonlight. Lex used some rooms as offices and said he would set Lena up with one of them while here. The building also included a loft penthouse with approximately 11,000 square feet of living space on the fourth, fifth and sixth floors with a fully landscaped rooftop deck and terrace encompassing 2,775 square feet. It had a 2,650 square feet private exercise area in the basement. The wash rooms, which were kept immaculate, included body-sized bathing tubs made of marble.

"How long has he been bald?" Kara whispered as she and Lena tagged along behind Lex while he continued to explain their surroundings.

"Shhh," Lena scolded, her voice just as low. "Don't let him hear you ask about that. He's very sensitive about it. But, if you must know, he started losing his hair in his late teens."

"Oh," Kara mouthed.

"Most people don't live downtown because they love heading on toward the endearing sounds of horsecars and hollering investment bankers," Lex said. "Some want the urban activity, diversity, and charm -- the quirky bars, the peculiar antique shops, the family restaurant that could be there for generations. Those people aren't me. I just like the quiet. Mother lives here with me at times, but she loves attention more."

"Don't I know it," Lena mumbled under her breath.

Kara had forgotten about Lillian. "And where's Lillian now?"
"She has a place some blocks away from here." Lex turned to them. "She's expecting Lena to visit her, not the other way around."

Lena scoffed. "That woman."

Lex and Lena shared a knowing smile.

Lex cleared his throat. "Well, if that is all, dear sister, I will bid you two a good night. Lena and I have a busy day tomorrow. And seeing as it's already half past nine, we should get some rest. I assume you can find your rooms again without me?"

"Yes. Thanks, Lex." Lena moved to him, offering a kiss to his cheek. "We'll be looking to settle in at one of my places tomorrow."

Kara arched an eyebrow. One of?

Lex appeared displeased. "But --"

"-- I know we're welcome to stay here for as long as we want, and there will be more than enough privacy, but still."

Lex sighed, an endearing smile gracing his features. "Very well then." He stroked her chin.

He approached Kara, offering his hand for a firm shake. "Kara." He nodded and then left them to their own devices.

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When Kara and Lena found themselves in the same room — Kara's room — an hour later, it wasn't by design. After days on a train together, they were simply used to sharing the same area. They had gotten into a bedtime ritual. Normally, they would wash up first, but they'd already done that before talking with Lex. So Lena looked over some papers while Kara read a magazine.

Because there was more space here than while on the train, Kara also took to exercising, a routine she'd picked up in Bermuda in order to regain her physical health and strength. While there, she'd read material on sports and gymnastics. She didn't have the means to do all that she'd read, but she could lift weighted objects to put strain on her arms, she could stationary jump, balance her body in different poses, and pretend to throw the stone shot put.

Kara knew Lena's eyes were on her. After the brunette had finished looking over the papers, she'd crawled into bed, but Kara could tell she wasn't asleep.

"You learned all of that across the sea?" she heard Lena ask.

"Yeah," Kara said, grabbing a towel and wiping off with it. She was still in her leathers, as usual, while Lena was in one of her barely-there nightgowns again.

The brunette was just lying towards her, one elbow propped as her head rested in her hand.

Kara moved to the desk near Lena and blew out the lamp before getting into her side of the bed. There was only one bed.

The silence became deafening as they lied there. They'd been in this predicament before, but never to this degree of unease. What could they say? Maybe they should have talked about their issues by now? Why hadn't they? Was it because they were too busy having too much fun earlier in the day?
And now it was so late?

It felt like hours had passed before Kara was confident enough to call out to her bed partner. "Lena?" she whispered. "Lena, are you awake?"

She felt the weight of the bed shift and lower before Lena's body was close against hers; Kara shivered.

"Lena..."

A finger pressed to her mouth as she sat up and Lena sat up beside her. Their faces were so close. She could feel Lena's breath on her lips. And then the hot, wanting tongue right before their mouths met and barely a kiss was the result.

But Lena stopped, her head resting against Kara's. "I should go... To my own room."

Kara didn't want that. She wanted more. She reached for Lena, to pull her closer, but Lena was quick. The woman was out of the bed in an instant, and Kara heard her pulling on a robe. Then the door opened.

"Lena, wait."

Lena was gone.
When Kara awoke the next morning, Lena had already left. As expected, the brunette was off doing business with Lex and his associates. Per the note she’d left behind, she was helping tie up some loose ends regarding their family’s Standard Oil involvement over the years, as well as international trade. Lex also wanted her help securing a higher spot on the Senate, but they felt that could wait.

Kara didn’t have to worry about food or cleaning her clothes; the maids tended to any need she might have. They even provided different options to clean her mouth, mainly via toothbrushes and toothpaste. The toothpaste in a jar, which was pleasant-smelling, was familiar to her. She and Lena used it back home, while many others still chose to use tooth powders. Some swore by peroxide and baking soda, or even brushing with pure, unadulterated Morton’s salt. Kara just stuck with whatever worked and tasted best.

She waited until noon, not long after Lena had returned, before opting to visit with her. When let into Lena’s office, which Lex had set up near the back of his mansion, Kara was allowed the rare treat of hearing Lena speak some unfamiliar language to a group of foreigners before shaking their hands and watching them excuse themselves from the room.

Lena was dressed in a more formal attire. She wore a plain, masculine-style jacket with what looked to be a tie, and a dress with a cuirass bodice; the attire had elbow-length sleeves, was very tight-fitting, long-waisted, boned, and descended over her hips, molding her body like a corset.

Kara swallowed uncomfortably. "Say, um, what language was that?" she asked. She had almost failed to notice the chip hat the brunette was wearing; it covered her usual bun.

Lena turned to her, smile fading slightly. "Bengali."

"You'll have to teach me some time." Kara noticed a big man with cropped black hair in a suit in the corner, hands clasped in front of him.

Lena nodded for the man to leave, and he did so without incident. "Just some protection Lex assigned to me," she explained.

Kara watched him go. He didn't seem like the talkative type.

"So," Lena began, moving behind her desk, which was placed in front of a wide-stretching window with an amazing view of the outside, "what brings you by?" She sat down and immediately began looking over papers, grabbing a pen before looking up at Kara expectantly.

That look reminded Kara of Lex, of how at home Lena seemed here. But the atmosphere between them was odd. Why would Kara need anything to "bring her by"? What was she supposed to do while Lena worked up here alone? And how could their kiss last night not be enough for a visit? Were they to ignore it?

"I, ah, thought you might be hungry," Kara supplied, holding up a small bag she'd been hiding behind her back. "Lasagna. That's what the diner I got it from told me anyhow. Didn't you notice the tantalizing aroma?"
Lena smiled. "You've been out again."

Kara walked to her, feigning cluelessness. "Well...just here and there. It's not the same without you."

Lena laughed.

Kara held up the bag again. "Let's dig in?"

Lena stood from behind the desk, a curious expression marking her features. "I'm surprised you didn't buy four of those."

"Hey!" Kara's mouth dropped open in mock offense. "I'll have you know that I can restrain myself just fine. If the occasion allows."

Lena moved to her, taking the bag from her hands. Inadvertently, their fingers touched and the act appeared to bring a blush to Lena's face. "Yes, Kara, let's eat. Thank you."

They discussed the sites they'd seen yesterday and the work Lena was expected to do over the next week.

"So that's why you and others offered money when we were on the Statue of Liberty’s balcony?" Kara asked, taking a bite out of her lasagna.

"Yes." Lena took a sip of the ice tea a maid had brought her. "Raising money for the rest of the statue is a must. We can't just have the arm, and no body, there for all eternity. The Statue of Liberty is meant to be a symbol of French and American friendship." Lena sat the glass down, her hands flailing animatedly. "Seeing as Americans weren't excitedly jumping on the bandwagon to raise money to complete the statute, its designer, Frédéric Bartholdi, sent the arm to the States to inspire monetary donations. New York, Boston and Philadelphia vied for the arm before it landed here. For just 50 cents, people can climb the ladder to the balcony on the torch."

"And you didn't tell me this while we were up there admiring the landscape because?" Kara queried.

"Because I wanted you to have a good time without worrying about paying for anything."

Kara scoffed. "Lena, I have my own money. And it was just 50 cents."

"Even so," Lena said with a smile, picking back up her glass of tea to take another sip, her eyes roaming Kara's exasperated features.

"And what did you think -- that I was just giving away money for nothing?"

"Never know with you," Kara sighed.

They laughed, Kara concluding that the conversation was a nice change in pace.

She finally learned of all the six different foreign languages Lena spoke. She already knew of the first four: French, Spanish, Portuguese, and Bengali. But Hindi and Chinese were also part of the repertoire.

"I'm looking to learn more," Lena said. She had compiled a list of the top languages in the world, and was determined to add Japanese, Arabic, Punjabi and Russian to the list. German wasn't a top priority, she assured. Kara was just amazed that conquering any of them was a main goal. It'd been challenging enough for her to learn Spanish and Portuguese, and Kara still couldn't write much in those languages. And yet here Lena was fluent in six. Just what plans did the woman have for her
life to want to know so many different dialects?

After a while, Lena had moved to gaze out the large window overlooking the land below. "I miss Hazel," she lamented.

Kara walked to stand beside her, enjoying the landscape view, but enjoying the way the light and shadows played over Lena's face more. "I know Clarence hasn't been in good health lately, but I'm sure she's fine. You did make Ms. Merriam promise to look after her while we were away. And Clarence may have started off weak. You know, following his life in the woods. But he put on muscle and became strong. I'm sure he'll recover."

Lena turned to her, eyes crinkling with subtle hope. "You may be right."

Kara could only smile at that. How she hated seeing Lena's spirit weighed down. She offered a hand to the brunette's shoulder, and the woman visibly relaxed, leaning her head against it. "Thank you, Kara."

For the rest of the meetings and assignments that day, Kara had been allowed to help Lena with Spanish and Portuguese translations. Once all of the work had been taken care of hours later, they visited Lionel's grave. Lena spoke to him as though he were still alive, letting him know that Kara was there and how grateful she was having the blonde in her life. She said she and Lex would be okay, and also noted how sorry she was for failing his legacy in Breighville.

A visit to Lillian's wasn't far behind.

"Hello, mother," Lena had said as Lillian stood in the doorway gazing at both Lena and Kara pitifully before letting them into her luxurious home. The woman had only been wearing a robe, but it was fancy, as were the large golden earrings she wore. Like Lex, she knew of Lena's sexuality. But she clearly hadn't accepted it as easily as Lex had. She spoke of how Lena would have been much better off if the brunette had just "pushed through her issues" and found a husband. Lillian bemoaned that at least Lionel had been rich and had left them with a fortune so that neither she nor Lena would have to worry about means to support themselves. As women, it just wouldn't do to be poor. Lionel had never allowed a marriage contract for Lena back in Breighville, which spoke to him always having intended to get them out of the country somehow.

Lillian not working wasn't a surprise to Kara. She'd barely worked when she lived in Breighville. Kara remembered her poor cooking and cleaning all too well, and how it'd taken Ms. Merriam to straighten her out somewhat in that regard. According to Lillian, however, bossing Lex's associates around was work in a way.

"So, Kara," Lillian said, crossing her legs as she sat in a plush chair a few feet away from them; they had taken a seat on a sofa. "I assume you have some means to support yourself? You won't be leaching off my daughter, will you?" Lillian took a drag of what Kara had learned was a cigarette. The smoke coming from that tiny stick-like cigar made her want to grab it from Lillian's mouth and step on it. Breathing in that stuff couldn't be good for a person.

Instead, she pinned Lillian with a look of distaste and pushed the glasses back up on her face.

"God, mother," Lena scolded.

As Kara assured Lillian that she could take care of herself, as well as Lena, she considered that this meeting wasn't that different from the first one she'd had with Siobhan. Both women had looked at
her as though she was merely dirt at the bottom of their shoes, both felt she wasn't good enough for Lena, and both questioned her style of dress. Needless to state, Kara and Lena didn't stay for long.

Afterward, Lena had said she needed something to clear her mind, to lighten them both up. The visit with her father had been emotionally draining, and the visit with Lillian had nearly sucked the life out of her. Kara suggested one of the establishments known for their "bohemian" atmosphere. They visited a bar in Greenwich Village, which was also where Lena had set up residence for them earlier in the day so that they were no longer staying with Lex. The bar was staffed by effeminate men, but also a few masculine women, and was apparently popular with writers and artists. It was dimly lit for the most part, so Kara couldn't make out how well put-together it was to any great degree, but it offered good food and good music. Music was something she still wasn't accustomed to; it filled her with energy just to hear it.

She pulled Lena on the dance floor, and the brunette laughed as the upbeat tempo took them on their own little adventure, with Kara doing wiggly moves that seemed to humor most, but the laughter faded when the music slowed. Lena was suddenly very aware of the closeness of their bodies, Kara's breath hot on her neck.

The brunette pulled away after that, insisting that it was getting late. They went home, to Lena's loft, settling within their rooms. The loft wasn't as big as Lex's, but it was nice.

To Kara, the day had gone well, even if there was still unspoken matters they needed to sort through. But after she'd knocked on Lena's bedroom door, Lena had opened it and pointedly stared at her before simply telling her to go back to her own room. The door slowly closed.

If Kara could pinpoint when the avoidance began, it was that night Lena shut the door in her face, bringing back memories from when she'd avoided Lena while trying to make things work with Mon-El.

The days passed by fast, and Kara barely saw Lena. Lena would get back late at night, around nine, and head to her room. Kara thought about how Lena hadn't wanted to return to the New York residence she'd shared with Siobhan, which was understandable. But Siobhan might as well had been there with them now, just like she'd been with them before, given the barrier that existed between them.

Kara racked her brain for answers. Why was Lena acting this way? Had she made Lena feel badly somehow? There was no getting around the fact that she hadn't been as open as she should have been, but she'd felt they were making progress. She wasn't the one pulling away anymore. Lena was. Time and time again.

Every time Kara tried to visit Lena at her office, she got some excuse about Lena being too busy to see her. Then she was told that Lena didn't want to see her, or anyone else except for Lex and his associates, for that matter. The big man, who acted as a protector to Lena, had made that clear in a menacing tone. Kara had been tempted to kick him in the family jewels when he barred her from seeing Lena that first time and took the bag of food she'd brought. The brute had even proceeded to eat it in front of her. But Kara knew when to pick her battles and to pick them wisely. The next day he snatched the bag from her and ate her food, she pushed the spectacles up on her nose and told him that she'd spat in it; it'd been prepared especially for him, with other extra delights inside. When he threw the meal down and wiped at his mouth in pain, Kara silently thanked Cora for introducing her to the hottest peppers ever.
Afterward, as Kara walked into a lobby-like area, a man's voice called out to her. She turned to find Lex standing in a doorway, one hand in the pants pocket of his fine tailored suit. "Have a seat," he said, gesturing toward any number of chairs at either side of the passage way leading out toward an exit.

Kara adjusted the pouch on her arm and looked around warily before doing as told. Lex sat beside her. "You know," he said, looking out in front of him at some of the potted plants on elaborate animal statues a feet away, "it took you 'dying' and coming back just to get my sister here. That's not to say she wouldn't have returned if you'd never been through your ordeal. Only that I'm grateful she's here now. I feared she'd never be whole again. But with you..." He turned to her, staring her right in the eyes. His eagle gaze was back, but softer. "Make no mistake about it, Kara, she is whole with you. You're the other half, and always have been. I can't presume to know all that you two have been through," he sighed, "not being able to love openly and whatnot, but I do know that the kind of love you two have is genuine. It's a kind of love my father never had with my mother." He touched a hand to her shoulder. "So I'll be there if you need me. Just make sure you are always there for Lena. She's going to need you more than ever in the upcoming weeks or months, however long it takes.”

Kara raised an eyebrow at those last words. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Lex stood abruptly, straightening his suit before heading for the double doors ahead.

"Lex?!

When he didn't answer, Kara changed her tactic. "Did you really mean what you just said about being there for me if I need something from you?"

Lena sat up straight in the chair in her office with a labored sigh. She was more than aware that she needed to stop avoiding Kara. How to do that, however, left her befuddled. It was clear that Kara needed more time. And with the way Lena felt whenever in Kara's presence, it threatened her composure. Her patience. In the past, waiting hadn't been nearly as hard. She'd understood what it took to come to terms with one's sexuality. But the distance between them now, it wasn't about a young and inexperienced woman learning to love another. It was about recent feelings of deceit, subsequent trust issues, and inevitable doubt. Kara had doubt in her heart concerning Lena's feelings for her, and Lena couldn't state that she didn't have doubt in her own heart regarding Kara's feelings for Cora. She believed what Kara had told her about the time spent with Cora, but people weren't always in tune with their true emotions.

Fear also played a part. The deep-seated fear Lena had of losing Kara again. The kiss they'd shared a few nights ago had been sensual and everything she remembered about getting flustered by Kara's touch. But the last time they'd been intimate, she'd lost her.

All she could think to do was work as much as she could and hope for a day soon when Kara wouldn't hesitate to talk to her. Being willing to engage in physical intimacy, as Kara had seemed willing to nights ago, wasn't the same as giving Lena her heart. Although seeing Kara break out of her shell, submerge herself into a wealth of knowledge, and light up with a fascination these past few days had been everything Lena could have dreamed of, Kara still barely talked to her about the things that mattered. She wanted to know about every minute Kara spent in Bermuda. But, other than the summary of hardships, Kara had only offered her crumbs.

The scuffling of feet across the floor caused Lena to look up from her papers. "Lex," she said,
holding the pen up against her cheek, "I didn't hear you come in."

"I just got through speaking with Kara."

Lena furrowed her brows. "About what?"

"Lena," Lex paused cautiously, stopping in front of her desk, "I have to be honest and tell you that helping me here in New York is not the only reason I sent for you."

Lena sat back in her chair, resting her hands before her. "What other reason is there?"

Suddenly, a light-haired man in his late thirties entered. Lena remembered him as "Brian," one of Kara's blacksmith co-workers. Two years ago, she'd asked him about Anna Davies's rape at the beginning of the investigation. He'd been stern with her, not really interested in conversing much at all.

"You've met Brian Hemmey," Lex said, gesturing beside him.

"Ma'am," Brian stated, tipping his hat toward her.

"Two years ago, I sent him to Breighville to gather as much information as he could on what transpired the night of Anna Davies's rape," Lex continued, stuffing his hands into his trouser pockets. "The night our father took the blame for that heinous act. Brian was tasked with learning about each and every one of the residents, as well as with locating and contacting Ms. Davies. When Kara went missing and you were left spiraling... And then with father's death... I called it off. I couldn't risk putting you under further stress by having you discover that a strange fellow was looking to solve a case, one dear to you and one you felt you had failed."

Lena stood, mouth agape. Lex pulled out a folder and threw it on her desk. "And you couldn't have informed me of this early on, in the beginning?" She opened the folder, looking through it.

"My investigation began before yours. With you there, I figured the case would move along well enough. You'd be told of the rumor sooner or later, and I knew you wouldn't let it stand. Regardless, Brian was to remain akin to a fly on the wall. Inconspicuous. People would be less suspicious of a non-Luthor looking into the matter."

"And who told you?" Lena looked up at him.

"I was older, Lena. Of course I'd heard of it." He moved to her. "When Brian found Anna, she didn't reveal much. She was still horrified of retaliation. And it had been too dark for her to get a good look at her attacker. But she did offer some clues. There were two of them, Lena. And one was much younger. The younger one held her down. And the older one, the one who did the vile deed... Anna said he had a butterfly-like birth mark on his forearm and that she remembered green-colored or grassy shoeprints around her when she regained consciousness there on the ground the next morning."

"And who told you?" Lex removed his hands from his pockets and leaned over Lena's desk. "I will not let that bastard get away with tarnishing our father's legacy. This stain will be removed. I guarantee you that."

Lena arrived home a little past nine. She'd only felt like collapsing in bed and thinking over the day. Or better yet, falling fast asleep and putting everything out of her mind. But as she made it down the hall, she found her door ajar and her room very well lit. Inside, Kara lay curled up on her bed. The blonde's stresses were loose on her pillow, the woman's muscular body covered with only the
sheerest silk and lace. One bare foot was visible hanging over the end of the bed, free from the confines of a blue, translucent robe. Tanned hands were tucked under a rosy cheek.

Yearning crashed into Lena like a wave into sand. She quietly closed the door and sat her work bags down. Her legs nearly went out from under her due to the sight before her. Kara was in her bed? And in distinctly feminine clothing, which contrasted well against the woman's taut form? Hot desire worked its way through Lena's core.

The impulse to join Kara and affirm how she felt for her was an idea she should turn away, she knew it. She had to flee.

But then Kara roused and there was no turning back. In that moment, smelling Kara's scent and seeing her body without the usual leathers wasn't what was most alluring to Lena. It was that Kara had been daring enough to risk being turned away, and to wear fabric she normally wouldn't wear in what appeared to be an effort to seduce.

"Kara," she whispered.

Kara's eyes fluttered open and met hers. Lena momentarily wondered if the blonde was drunk and had stumbled into her room in a stupor. But Kara, clearly very much aware of where she was, grinned. "I dozed off, I guess," she supplied innocently.

"What are you doing here?" Lena queried. "Why aren't you in your own room?"

Kara sat up, moving the hair out of her face. Her features were challenging. "Why do you think I'm here?"

Immense self-control is what it would take for Lena to not take a step forward, and so she employed it. She wanted to pull Kara into her arms and bestow upon the woman everything she had to offer. But she couldn't bring herself to give into whatever temporary desires of Kara's needed squelching. If she was going to be with Kara, she wanted Kara all the way onboard.

Kara stood up slowly. "I'm here because I want to be here. Because before me stands a remarkable woman I've let down more than once, and I want to show her that I'm not going to let her down again. That I'll die trying to not fall on the same mistakes."

The thin, dainty material and lace obscured not a thing. Lena could see the shape of Kara's breasts, the tautness of her waist, the strong curve of her hips, and the female place between her legs.

Kara's eyes locked onto a questioning green gaze. The light blue in her eyes appeared to transform into a blazing cerulean. A craving played on the blonde's lips and made her even bolder. She undid her robe and slid it off her shoulders, leaving her in a sheer shift. Narrow bands held patterned lace to her bosom. The robe glided undisturbed to the wooden floor beneath them. There was no dim lighting, no toga-like fabric, to obscure Kara's form this time. And it was magnificent.

"I'm before you now, Lena, because I want you," Kara continued, her tone unfaltering. "Because out on that sea, all I thought about was you. You kept me alive. You, Lena."

Lena had been certain that she could resist Kara, just like she had nights ago. She'd been certain that doing so would shield her from any more pain fate dared to inflict upon them. But she couldn't.

She closed the distance between them willingly and swiftly, pulling the shift over Kara's head and throwing it to the side. "I've only had you once, you said." Her voice was angry, but she didn't care. "Now I shall have you many times, and you will never mock me for time lost again."
An inferno churned within Lena; she began to lead Kara backwards toward the bed, but Kara scooped her up into strong, sturdy arms and led the way for them. Lena wasn’t a religious woman, but she prayed that Kara would not relent in the possessive nature that was now on display, for the blonde would either take her this moment or she would perish.

She let one hand sink into Kara’s hair as the other hand gripped the blonde’s shoulder. Kara lowered her onto the mattress, stroking her face. "I never meant to make you feel mocked for having time stolen from us, Lena. And I never will again. Let me show you how much you mean to me."

Kara stretched out beside her. The blonde was firm and smooth, and everything reminiscent of sunflowers and warmth. Lena could compile numerous words to describe Kara's beauty, and they wouldn't be enough. As she stared up at the woman, Kara ran knowing hands over her. From her neck, down to her collarbone, arms, fingertips. Further still, the hand reached for her belly, trailing airy fingers from there to her hips and then her thighs.

Lena didn't remember Kara being this skilled. Her body reacted to every contact, her muscles jerking in anticipation where Kara stroked her, her hands reaching to glide along Kara's biceps and abdomen. Everywhere she touched, she was rewarded with hard, silky skin that felt like heaven in her hands. She'd expected Kara to feel rough; she didn't.

Kara got on her knees. It was clear that Lena's clothed state displeased her. But even so, Kara gazed at her with wonderment, like those penetrating eyes were looking upon a queen. Lena couldn't deny the woman anything; so she began to unbutton her jacket.

Without uttering a word, Kara pulled Lena closer by her tie. Then flipped long, blond locks to one side, exposing a shoulder and a tantalizing neck. Lena rose on wobbly knees to taste there, eager fingers still working on loosening her clothing as she wrenched a moan from Kara's throat.

Kara pulled back, touching the necklace that Lena still wore after all this time. It sat there right above the valley of her breasts like it was a second skin. "God, I love you," the blonde whispered.

Lena couldn't wait any longer. She completed the task of unbuttoning her jacket and ripped it off. She pulled her shirt from her dress and tugged both of them off, followed by her underthings until every last stitch of clothing was crumpled on the floor. Her hands reached for Kara then — long, pale arms encircling a light-colored head as light pink lips sought a welcoming mouth.

Kara's mouth parted instantly. Her lips pressed hard against Lena's, hyper tongue sliding against an equally enthusiastic tongue. Her fingers caressed Lena's chest and arms, gliding up and down swiftly before resting at the brunette's waist. Lena wanted to guide Kara's hand farther down, to the place she ached most, but she was sure she'd come undone if she did. And she wanted to savor this moment. To savor everything.

Kara reached for her face, holding her head within protective hands, before swiping a plump tongue along her lips, dampening the area there, and drawing her lower lip between ravenous teeth until her breath quickened. The blonde placed kisses to her chin, cheeks, nose, then nibbled on her lips again. The kisses moved from there to her neck, and finally her breasts, where Kara bit lightly, causing Lena to jerk forward and to feel Kara's body tremble with pleasure.

Before she could think, Lena felt herself being lowered to the mattress and Kara settling between her legs. Her thighs parted on their own accord. Kara moved so close that she felt a slick heat meet the dark curls of her female place. She jumped in both shock and pleasure. It'd never occurred to her that two women could touch this way. Or maybe it had, but to actually try it? The heat there burned with an aching delight. She sought to grind, to get some sort of friction, but Kara scooted back, moving to kneel over her once more.
"Kara," she breathed, grasping at the woman's shoulders, trying to pull her closer.

Kara ignored her plea, instead looming over her to graze a nipple with full lips. The aggravating woman traced an imaginary path from mole to mole with the hot tongue Lena was becoming all too accustomed to. Lena could only watch as her small rose-colored nipple stood erect and was inhaled by a devilish, attentive mouth. Her eyes closed and her head fell back as that mouth worked its wonders. Kara blew lightly on the tip, and did the same with the other. That luscious tongue swept across and under every curve, tasting and indulging.

Lena felt Kara's fingers trace along her belly and across her hips. As those fingers descended upon her slick folds, she thought about how, after their first time making love, the area's technical term was a word she'd meant to teach Kara. How she'd blushed at the thought of hearing *vulva* roll off Kara's enticing lips, in English and any other language she dared to make known to the woman. She thought about how, for so long, she had been the one leading in the bedroom. But now Kara was teaching her things. Kara was leading.

Her hands tightened on the coverlet, but Kara grasped them and brought them to wanting breasts. Lena complied with abandon, weighing Kara's flesh in her hands and moving to suckle the hardened nipples.

"Kara," she whispered again. Her legs wrapped around the blonde's waist, and she ground against her. Up and down, back and forth, her slickness met Kara's — a mishmash of blond and dark curls. She ground against Kara's midsection, as solid as it was, when she made contact with it too. She wanted to grind against everything that was Kara. Long fingers slipped inside of her, within her walls, and she clenched down on them with unbridled lust. She saw Kara's eyes flutter closed, lips quivering as those lips tried to bite back a moan to no avail. The huffing and puffing, and moaning, escaping their mouths was as intoxicating as anything else. But Lena wanted to see Kara's eyes, to look into them. And so she cupped the blonde's face. They stared at each other as their hips worked in one fluid motion.

"I..." Kara took one of Lena's hands and kissed it slowly, then feverishly, never breaking eye contact. Lena was so distracted by the attention that the woman was paying her digits that she almost didn't notice Kara repositioning their bodies so that Lena was straddling a strong thigh. A deep, guttural sound was ripped from her throat. The friction was...

"Jesus," she breathed.

Kara grinned. "So now you're the one praying."

Lena's mouth set firmly. Kara did love to tease her so, which didn't change when Kara's hands went to her hips and moved her in a grinding rhythm against the firm thigh right before asking in a southern twang, "You like it when I speak this way, don't you?"

Lena's teeth sank into her bottom lip, her eyes shutting at the sensation, at the accusation. She could feel her cheeks burning. What kind of question was that? She wouldn't dignify Kara with a response. She loved Kara's accent, she did, but to insist it aroused her? No, she wouldn't respond. She'd simply —

"Yes!" she screamed as Kara ground her hips down again, harder than the last time. She moved at Kara's slow, agonizing speed as the heat between them increased. Kara's mouth returned to her breasts, and her hands buried in the blond locks as she called out the only name that mattered.

Over and over again, Kara lavished her breasts, playing with her until they were both covered in sweat. Kara's thigh became as wet from Lena's slickness as their bodies became from the
perspiration. As if sensing that Lena might be brought over the edge soon, Kara lowered them again and placed kiss after kiss to her belly. Her hands reached for the covers again. And Kara kisses steadily moved lower.

She jerked when she felt Kara’s lips there. Kara worked between her legs. It was an act she’d imagined times before, but never did she think Kara would be the one to initiate. Last time, the blonde had thought she was joking at the mere mention of cunnilingus, and now two insistent hands were pushing her legs apart, exposing her fully. Kara’s tongue worked its way up to her tiny area of pleasure. *Her clitoris,* she wanted to whisper in Kara’s ear, to see how red Kara would turn or if there would be an erotic awareness in the woman’s eyes.

Her thoughts about Kara’s prowess left her when the blonde’s tongue circled that special spot, teasing it and softly drawing it into a hot mouth. She watched as Kara listened with rapt attention to her breathing, ragged gasps and belligerent moans. She felt Kara’s body quiver and shake with pleasure in tune with her own. Her body tensed as she neared her orgasm and Kara spoke of how sweet she tasted.

Kara released her thighs suddenly. But when her legs stayed open, the blonde continued to lap up her juices, sliding fingers between her sensitive and swollen slit, and then inside of her. Another tremor roaring through her body nearly sent her to the moon. She felt Kara placing kisses to her hips, working back up to her face, but she halted the blonde. It wasn’t her own scent she wanted on her tongue. "Kara...I have to... I have to taste you too."

Kara smiled, and Lena felt her chest flutter. If she could discern anything from that smile, it was that Kara was as eager as she was. They flipped their positions so that Kara could lie on her back, but not before Lena could survey that splendid back. She touched and kissed every one of the scars there, hoping that they weren’t as deep as they seemed.

"Lena," she heard Kara utter before settling between Kara’s thighs.

Lena tasted Kara’s sweet saltiness, licking each and every corner of her folds. And she knew she could spend eternity loving Kara like this. She took Kara over the brink and back, just as Kara had done to her. And when Kara hugged her as tears fell from her eyes, and kissed her cheeks, tasting those seemingly never-ending droplets making their way down her chin, she rested in Kara’s arms, the rhythm of their hearts beating in sync.

She vowed to never let Kara ago again. Never.

The sound of crackling flames brought Lena out of her slumber hours later.

Kara, a stick in hand, and still naked as the day she was born, sat on a lush rug in front of the fireplace. The room was now dimly lit, the lighting having faded. It offered a warm glow over Kara’s features. Lena walked to her, not bothering to throw on a robe. "I think I'm going to have to tie you down if I ever want you beside me when I wake up."

Kara chuckled.

Lena moved beside her, immediately kissing her shoulders, neck, and back. "I love you," she whispered.
Kara returned her kisses just as fervently. "And I you."

Lena's fingers trailed along Kara's arms as Kara's eyes looked her over, clearly taking in her bare state. "You surprised me, you did, but it was a most wonderful surprise."

"I'm glad," Kara said, putting the stick down to nibble on Lena's chin. "I would have hated to take my services elsewhere."

Lena laughed. "Cocky now, are we?"

Kara made a pinching gesture with her fingers. "Just a bit. I read the James D. McCabe guidebook -- 'Lights and Shadows of New York Life' -- in my spare time...when you were shutting me out."

"Ah," Lena said, trailing kisses along Kara's jawline. "You mean the women who walk Broadway and the streets running parallel to it. They are street walkers. Prostitutes."

"Seem like decent women to me."

"That may be so, but they are reportedly nearly all thieves, and a significant proportion of them are decoys of the most desperate male garroters and robbers. One of them might lure a tourist to her room. And while there, she and a male partner might rob the tourist while threatening his life." Lena slipped a hand to Kara's abdomen, grasping at the muscles there. "There's also the trick where she lures a man to her room, gets him to discard his clothing on a chair, which is placed only a few inches from the wall at the end of the room. The wall, you see, is fake, and typically made of wood. During the act of intercourse, her male robber will stealthily come out from behind the fake wall and steal the customer's wallet."

"Ah," Kara inhaled deeply at Lena's lips on her earlobe, "I know that. It's in the book. But I had to see a little of it for myself."

Lena suddenly broke contact. "Don't tell me you went down there."

"I did. But I didn't get far before a woman pointed me to a shop and some 'toys' she said I could use with my significant other." Kara got up and walked to a medium-sized bag in a corner. Lena enjoyed the view. "See for yourself," Kara said, plopping back down beside her. "Apparently, they are also therapeutic."

Lena looked through the bag without pulling anything out. "I..." She knew her face must have turned ghost white. "Okay, we'll just leave those in there. If we need any, we can buy new ones... Ones we know are clean."

Kara giggled.

Lena watched the woman curiously. The blonde giggled for so long that it became aware to Lena that the joke was on her. "Ha, ha," she mocked as Kara did her best to regain composure. "So...did we even need to talk about anything? Or were we just procrastinating?"

Another laugh escaped Kara's throat. "Let's see." She turned to Lena fully, pulling the brunette into her arms, "I was never with Cora. You were with Siobhan, but not truly. You missed me. And I missed you." Kara tackled her neck, tickling her with pecks. "So, so, so much."

Lena squealed. "Kara, I'm serious." She pulled back, pointing a finger. "And with what you did to me in that bed, are you sure you weren't with Cora?"

Kara kissed her nose. "Remember what I told you about Cora's curiosity? I didn't know how to
explain all of that to her. So I read some manuals and stuff."

Lena nodded suspiciously. "And stuff?"

"And there was this middle-age woman who taught certain positions...without acting on the sexual aspects."

"What?" Lena slapped Kara on the shoulder.

"I promise it was nothing. I'll tell you about it one day."

"Oh, it was something. So you better. And what was with your change in bed clothing?"

Kara shrugged. "Can't a girl get in touch with her feminine side every once in a while?" She sat back on her arms with a grin, waiting for Lena to buckle under the pressure.

Smiles stretched brightly across their lips, but as their smiles faded, Kara held her gaze. "Lena... We could stay here if you wanted."

Lena let her eyes settle on the fire, the crackling sounds offering some comfort.

Kara seemed to pick up on her line of thinking. "But you'd miss Hazel?"

Lena nodded. "And it's not like you wouldn't miss your family too."

"It's not the same, though, is it? Hazel's like a daughter to you."

"She is." Lena watched as the fire crackled some more. "I was so afraid that your heart might be elsewhere, despite what you said. And then I was scared of losing you again." She turned to face the blonde, watching the way the light played over the golden features. "Kara, you have to know, I was never in love with Siobhan. Not for a moment. I want everything with you."

"Lena, I've been a fool."

"Marry me."

"What?" Lena balked.

Kara moved quickly to get on one knee, pulling out some tiny box from under the rug. "I said marry me." She opened the box, revealing a golden ring with small clusters of diamonds which framed circular-shaped gemstones. "I worked on it in Bermuda, and I worked on it some in Breighville during my anger over our issues. And here as well, in New York, I worked on it a little. So it has a piece of me from everywhere I've been."

Lena looked from the ring to Kara, and back to the ring again.

"Lena, I've been a fool." Kara's words sounded like she was admitting to some great crime. "From the beginning, I've been, and I'm sorry for that. I should have never let you feel unwanted or like you needed to prove something to me, or that you'd die if you didn't save me from the mental prison I was in. I wasn't seeing clearly then, I know it. But I do now. The days of you chasing me are over."
Kara held the ring a little higher, taking in a deep breath. "All I ask is that you trust me when I say my heart is with you and only you, and that you let me do the chasing now. Let me chase you for a bit? Will ya do that? I promise you I'm worth it."

Lena wiped at the tears streaming from her eyes. She wiped at them like crazy. "Yes, Kara. God, yes." She pulled Kara into her arms, hugging her tighter than she'd hugged anyone. "I will marry you a thousand times if you want." Lena could feel Kara breathe a sigh of relief. "But first..." She pulled back and brought their lips together. "I want more of this."

The church was as foreign to them as the priest. Kara grinned at the fact that Lex had pulled off her request in spectacular fashion. Although he hadn't been able to free himself of his work and duties to attend, he'd sent Brian, another male associate, a priest, maids, and a group of so-called wedding planners to see to Kara and Lena's every need. In addition to ensuring that only a select few knew of the upcoming nuptials, Brian and the associate named Del were to make sure that Father Mable was offered a vacation from the church. Although Kara knew Father Mable cared for her, there was no way he'd ever accept two people of the same sex marrying. Lex's priest would therefore fill in for him. Father Mable had graciously taken the gift of seeing another part of the world, Kara having convinced him that it was only due to how well he'd treated her and that everyone needed a break from their stressful work life. Offering him this was better than bringing back a souvenir, she had said.

Securing the church's surroundings had been the next step. It meant they'd get a nosy person here and there wondering why so many people were at the church, and that these people were to be kept from entering. Some of them might deduce that a wedding was going on, but as long as they didn't know who were to be married, everything would be fine. Brian and Del stood at the entrance and exit respectively. But their job wasn't limited to wedding detail. They were aware of Kara's fall off that cliff miles away in this very town two years ago and that it had likely been a push. Suspecting that Kara, or perhaps Kara and Lena, were still being watched, and that this might be tied to the Anna Davies investigation meant two things: If Kara had been tracked and pushed off that cliff, the culprit wasn't done with her. And anywhere Kara and Lena went, the culprit likely wasn't far behind.

Kara stood in front of the alter trying to keep her palms from sweating. As she had deduced, Lena hadn't wanted to marry anywhere but here in Breighville, so tied to this place they were. Their guests included Alex, Jeremiah, Eliza, Maggie, James and his family, Winn, Sam, Ruby, Ms. Merriam, Sara, Clarence, Hazel, Cora, Mon-El, Siobhan, and Lena's lawyer Walter. Everyone who supported them. Everyone who mattered.

Walter had expressed concern about William attending, given the bitterness between Alex and Jonathan and that the child might be loyal to his father, but Alex assured that he was a mama's boy and not weaker for it.

Lena had been worried about Clarence's health, but he looked better than expected, the red near his eyes she'd seen before heading to New York no longer visible. She was also cautious of Mon-El attending, but Jeremiah and Eliza had assured that he no longer held any ill will about losing his betrothed. He was at peace with that union not having been meant to be. He seemed happier than he'd ever been whenever around Cora. It showed times over when he helped Jeremiah and Eliza tear up the marriage contract that had previously bound him to Kara. They threw the pieces up into the air with glee as Lena grasped Kara's hand and looked ahead to the priest with pride. This marriage wouldn't be legally binding, but it would be theirs.
Diamonds and pearls covered Lena as she stood in her white Worth gown, a wedding dress of high elegance and expense from Paris. Such gowns were exhibited at the Philadelphia Centennial and shipped all over the world. It included intricate cascades and banding, and a long train. As a whole, it came with a coat lined with the same material as the dress. The trousseau, which translated to "a dozen of everything," featured a be-ribboned negligee called a "combing jacket." Her hair was done up in a top knot, with surrounding small golden combs for ornaments.

Kara was dressed in a charcoal frock coat, a burgundy vest with a pocket watch, dress shirt, high collar, silk puff tie, black brushed cotton trousers, black elastic Y-back brace suspenders, and a black felt derby hat to top off her slicked-back ponytail. She also wore her father's spectacles again.

Lena took in a deep breath. She was getting married. Even seeing what was taking place before her, mere days after Kara proposed, the reality of the situation hadn't quite set in. It all felt like a dream she might wake up from at any moment.

But Kara's hand in hers was real. Behind her, Ms. Merriam was seated with Hazel and Clarence. She could hear the girl's excitement and curious questions, including why William, who stood beside the soon-to-be spouses, got to be the ring bearer and not her. Sprinkling flowers around hadn't been nearly as challenging for the girl.

It had all happened in a whirlwind, Lena thought. One moment Kara had proposed, and then they were at Kara's parents' house, gathering the closest of friends and allies and informing them of what they'd planned. Alex and Maggie vowed that they would be next to get hitched. The two were behind her now, weeping along with Eliza and Ms. Merriam.

"Dearly Beloved," the priest began after a long speech he'd given about love and unions that transcended restraints, "we are gathered here today in the presence of these witnesses, to join Lena Luthor and Kara Danvers in matrimony commended to be honorable among all; and therefore is not to be entered into lightly but reverently, passionately, lovingly and solemnly. Into this, these two persons present now come to be joined. If any person can show just cause why they may not be joined together, let them speak now or forever hold their peace."

They looked around for any objections. When none came, the priest pressed on. "Who supports this couple in their marriage?" he asked.

"We all do," the room said in unison, Jeremiah significantly louder than the others, causing everyone to look at one another and chuckle.

The priest nodded toward the couple. "Well, then."

Lena looked to Kara, squeezing the blonde's hands. "Kara...you mean more to me than words can ever convey." She wiped at her tears, feeling more confident about her unplanned vows as the minutes pressed on, as she saw Kara's warm gaze. "From that first moment we met, by that magical lake in the woods after Sam had just called me short stuff," she giggled, hearing laughter from Sam and others in the background,"you enchanted my heart. You saw this quivering mess of a girl, older but no bigger than you, and you chose to befriend rather than belittle. To uplift her." Lena released one of Kara's hands to caresses the blonde's face, to wipe at the beautiful tears streaming there. "What others thought of me, it didn't matter to Kara Danvers. To Kara Danvers, Lena Luthor was a rare flower; she was different, but it didn't mean she should be excluded. She should be cherished. Of course," Lena paused with a smile, "Kara Danvers also teased Lena Luthor whenever the opportunity presented itself."

The room broke into surreptitious laughter, Kara grinning from ear to ear.
"But," Lena continued, "it came from a place of fondness. Not malice. And when the two settled under a tree they deemed theirs soon afterward and sealed their friendship with a kiss, that small girl... I... knew that I would love Kara Danvers for the rest of my days. I'm here to reaffirm that love." She retook Kara's left hand, and reached to William for the ring she'd requested Jeremiah make soon after arriving back in Breighville. Kara hadn't wanted anything too fancy, and so a simple gold band had been the result. "With this ring," she stated, her sniffles getting the better of her, "I, Lena Kieran Luthor, take you, Kara Danvers, for my wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and health, until death do us part."

The priest looked to Kara. Kara held up a finger as to signal that she needed a minute. She released one of Lena's hands to wipe at her eyes and swipe her fogging glasses on her sleeve before putting them back on.

"Lena," she said, retaking the brunette's hand into hers, "without you, I was lost. When you left me that day twenty years ago, a hole formed and festered. I tried to ignore it, which worked at times, but never for long. As a child without you, the entire world felt like this big hole I was in the middle of and could never climb out of. As I aged, it seemed to be less about you and I thought maybe I was broken. I had to be...because I didn't feel like the other women who had settled down with husbands and bore children. Instead, I built a house I never planned to live in, a house of phantoms, of what could be. I purchased land that was more than enough for one person. And yet I was still spouse-less and childless. What was I waiting for, I wondered. But I knew. Deep down I knew." Kara took a step closer, pulling Lena's hands to her chest, to her heart. "I built that house for us, Lena. I kept your house intact in case you ever returned...for us. I bought that land for us. Because I was waiting for you. Ever since my vow to never marry, I had been waiting for you. To marry you. When you came back, I was stubborn. Boy, was I stubborn."

Lena choked back a laugh; Kara stroked the top of her hands with gentle thumbs.

"But you refused to let go. You didn't let me sink back into that abyss of loneliness and uncertainty. You gave me life." Kara picked up the wedding ring and slid it onto the fourth finger of the Lena's left hand. "That is why, with this ring... I, Kara Danvers, take you, Lena Kieran Luthor, for my wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and health, until death do us part."

There was silence as Kara and Lena stared at each other with such immense yearning that the priest cleared his throat. He looked from the couple to the audience, satisfied with the outcome. "By the power vested in me by the State... Er, by the power vested in me, I now pronounce you wife and wife. You may now kiss your bride."

Kara and Lena kissed as applause followed.

"I present to you the newly married couple," the priest stated.

The guests stood and continued to applaud. Kara and Lena turned to them, raising their joined hands with wide grins.

Minutes later, Lena had changed into her "going away" costume, which was only a slight alteration of her wedding attire by the removal of a few pieces. As she prepared to throw the bouquet, and women lined up behind her, Alex boxed everyone out. Everyone except for Sara, who stepped to the side when the arranged bunch of flowers came flying her way. Alex had won by default, Sam had exclaimed.

After sneaking to the back room while guests made merry, Kara and Lena allowed Brian and Del to throw a sheet over them and lead them out. There would be time to celebrate with others later.
"Hey, hand me the broom, will you?" Brian took to sweeping the church's kitchen as Del assisted him. He hated cleaning, but he couldn't stand dirt. He halted with interest when he saw green shoeprints tracking from a side exit he failed to notice before. How had they missed it? He stood, examining the door. Judging by the boxes pushed to the side and the cobwebs on the door frame, it wasn't a door used very often.

Del noticed the shoeprints and followed Brian's gaze to the door. "You don't think... Should we tell Kara and Lena?"

Brian frowned. "No. This is their wedding day. Let them enjoy it. Besides," he said, pulling out a revolver, his Colt M1878, "this is our job." He would be damned if he failed Lex Luthor.
Chapter 17

Brian and Del headed out the exit in search of more shoeprints. The green track blended with the dirt a few feet away from the door. Beyond that, a regular trail extended farther out. Brian and Del moved past and in between bushes and trees, looking for any suspicious activity as they brandished their guns at the ready. Brian was an excellent tracker, and this was simply par for the course for him.

"Do you think we should go farther?" Del asked.

"No," Brian replied, looking back toward their starting part. "The trail stops back there. The different shoeprints and horse hooves from today's activities make it clear that whoever it was didn't get a chance to follow Kara and Lena's wagon. That person is long gone."

"Hmm." Del rubbed at his chin. "The green shoeprints... Getting a sample of whatever substance it is might help." He bent down to assess the landscape from another viewpoint. Brian wasn't the only one with outdoor skills. "But although the footprints are unusual, it might be a coincidence."

"Might be," Brian conceded. "But if it's not, we'll take care of it."

The forest, with its odd and old upthrust of mountains, was blanketed in mystery and speculation. But Kara was aware that gold had been discovered here some years back. The area was one of the North Carolina spots that drew visitors from nearby Charlotte and elsewhere. People came here not only in search of rumored wealth, but also for opportunities of horseback riding and adventure.

There were a number of trails here for every kind of traveler. And they additionally attracted boaters, swimmers, and fishermen in search of a location to rest or relax after spending a few days camping or exploring. A dip in the lake was the ultimate reward if not seeking gold.

Kara and Lena walked side by side, each holding on to the reins of their respective horses. They'd ditched their wagon miles ago.

Kara looked to the pack on her animal's back, needing anything to distract herself from Lena's hungry eyes. They'd been on the trail for an hour, and Lena had repeatedly made her intentions — which were far from pure — known. "How long are you going to keep staring at me like that?" Kara chanced a question and a glance Lena's way.

Lena blanched, peeping between the reins. "Like what?"

"You know like what."

"Do I?"

Kara stopped, halting her horse, and Lena followed suit. "Lena, it was your idea not to be intimate again until after we were married. No doubt you remember all your talk about the anticipation being that much greater, and how it'd be like testing our willpower to resist each other since we aren't virgins with no clue as to what we're missing."
"And..." Lena took a step forward, holding Wrangler's reins behind her back. "We're married now. As married as we'll ever be."

"And," Kara began as she stared her down, unwilling to relent, "we're headed to a destination for our honeymoon. Aren't you excited?"

"To explore and relax in an area you've apparently never been to before and I selected? I am," Lena said, taking another step forward. She moved with purpose, leaving the horse reins behind. "But we don't have to do the honeymoon thing right now. We don't have to do one at all. And I could always whisk us away to some city if we change our minds." She clasped her hands behind her back. "Besides...a day out in the wilderness can hardly be considered a honeymoon."

"Do you not like the scenery?"

"I like it, Kara." Lena stepped into her personal space and looked up into her eyes. "But I like looking at you more."

Kara averted her eyes, trying to avoid the wanting gaze piercing through her. "I want thangs to be special too, Lena. And you ain't makin' it easy."

Lena slid her arms around Kara's waist, pulling their bodies close; Kara shivered. "We don't have to go to some special area for it to be special, Kara."

Kara finally looked at her. "Lena, please..."

Lena used a hand to play with one of Kara's biceps, twirling her fingers in the sleeve. "All right then. You clearly have greater willpower than I do." Her lips formed into a prominent pout. "It's just that my desire for you knows no boundaries. It's not something easily contained."

"Oh, come on," Kara scoffed. "I want you just as much. You know that." Lena's face was so close that Kara had no difficulty discerning its every detail. And the faint, unassuming smile it bore stirred burning, exhilarating memories. The shuddering warmth that ran through her destroyed her collectedness. She turned her face to the side in an effort to stave off the blush she sensed creeping up her neck. "However, my mind is made up. We need to stay on course, no diversions."

Lena let go of her with a sigh, moving back to Wrangler. "You sure you remember how far we've got to go?" she huffed, continuing along the trail.

"Well, I did initially think we were headed to the quarry, somewhere close by it. But you ruled that out." Kara moved her horse along to catch up with Lena's.

"Heading for the quarry would take too long." She glanced at Kara devilishly. "I think we've established that I'm rather impatient about some things."

"Two hours is no short walk either," Kara quipped, readjusting her spectacles.

"It's the longest I can travel in this dress." Lena looked down at her blinding white clothing, the train tied up as to not get dirty.

"At least it's not hot, or cold. And I did suggest we change."

"And ruin our chances of stripping each other out of our wedding attire?" Lena arched an eyebrow. "Not a chance."

Kara grinned, nudging Lena with her shoulder. "Then you could give me the exact location. That
would help speed things along in a mighty fine fashion."

"Yes." Lena smiled. "But it wouldn't be as much fun, missing out on you locating the exact spot yourself."

Kara watched as Lena looked to her, green eyes narrowing in wonderment and then refocusing ahead. They were married, but it was still a foreign concept to Kara. What did being married mean? Could they expect to be happy from here on out with no more heartbreak? Did it entail the occasional sacrifice? Fights? Had they just had their first fight moments ago? Kara thought of Jeremiah and Eliza's marriage. It was truly the only marriage she could look to for an indication of what a healthy marriage with Lena could or should be like. Granted, she and Lena were both women and they'd evaded the town's intimacy rules. But how hard could it be? Jeremiah and Eliza made it look easy. Why couldn't she and Lena?

They passed by steep mountains and deep canyons that saw only a few hours of full sun each day. They came upon the largest of North Carolina’s forests, with dozens of waterfalls and a mountain peak where one could probably see four states. They found what Lena deduced to be 400-year old hemlocks, and yellow poplars towering 100 feet. The trees stood around 20 feet.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" Lena asked, picking up a flower and tucking it behind Kara's ear. "Let's stay here for a while," she said twirling and then turning back to Kara with a huge smile.

"Lena..."

"No, I have a better idea," Lena said, taking Kara by the hand and pulling her along as their horses followed. They took to a trail leading to one of the various waterfalls, mountaintop viewing areas and secret corners where they could feel like they were the only ones alive. Kara considered how well Lena must know these lands, to have taken a path leading to exactly where she wanted to go. Given the woman's years of searching for her, it wasn't surprising.

The waterfall they stopped at beyond the forest line was surrounded by bright green shrubbery and sped down a cluster of rocks, some huge and others small or tiny. Sunlight, shining between the skyline of trees, poured down as though from the Heavens, casting an ethereal feel over them.

Kara could only think to watch as Lena grabbed a blanket and tied the horse reins to a tree, then pulled her along. "Where are we going?"

Lena briefly glanced over her shoulder, a whimsical smile graceing her features. "To wash under the waterfall, of course." She worked her way up the rocks, kicking her shoes off and holding on to Kara all while doing so. Taking in a deep breath and looking up at the sky, Lena suddenly let her go and moved to rest her back against the rocks. She closed her eyes, apparently relishing in the water cascading over her body.

The waterfall wasn't steep. It was like going up a slight hill that eventually flattened and leaning against it as rain poured down. A little farther out was a lake.

"We're losing more time." Kara looked around exasperatedly.

Lena peeped out of one eye. "Are we?" She put her hands behind her head, positioning herself in a relaxed state and then staring at Kara full-on.

"And your dress... It's soaked."

Lena chuckled. "Yes, I'm aware."
Kara folded her arms across her chest, trying her best not to huff as she looked around.

"I just wanted to wash up a bit. Went overboard, I suppose." Lena shrugged.

Lena's eyes were still on her; she felt it.

"You know," Lena said, "you could help us move things along by assisting me out of this material."

Kara's head snapped toward the woman faster than she meant it to. "Do you not know how to disrobe yourself?"

"Does undressing me under this waterfall give cause for concern?"

"It's not the undressing you that worries me. It's what might happen after I do it." Kara swore under her breath. Lena was the epitome of stubborn and prideful. And she was teasing her again. Bested by the brunette's antics at the moment, all Kara could do was seek to temporarily stave off whatever it was the woman had in mind.

She moved to Lena and solicitously offered assistance as the brunette struggled to untangle a knot on her dress. The water was cool against Kara's hands.

"I thought you weren't going to help me," Lena whispered, looking up into her face and trying to make eye contact.

"I'm not."

"You are," Lena sighed softly against her ear.

Kara halted as she found the brunette scrutinizing her with a thoroughness that made her feel undressed. The woman's gaze moved unabashedly over her shoulders, breasts, and where her shirt fit snugly beneath her trousers, then meandered leisurely along the full length of her.

"Your eyes wander," Kara managed a response, feeling her breath stagger.

"They would wander more if appraising you in the sunlight."

Kara was no fool. She didn't have to ask to know that Lena was requesting to see her bare. She remembered the way the woman had gazed at her after their initial lovemaking as she stood in front of the window, the sunlight bestowing her with a glow. That same gaze confronted her now.

Lena's eyes never wavered from Kara's as the blonde stepped close and reached at the top of her gown. Kara's fingers were a brand of fire against her skin, slipping down within the crevice between her breasts to retrieve the necklace and drawing it into view. Kara stared at it endearingly.

"I could never have imagined that you would return to me after I gave you this."

Lena, moving a little off the rocks, met Kara's perplexed stare, feeling the overwhelming need to explain how a childhood necklace could weigh on a person — on her — so much. Where Kara's fingers had touched still burned, and she could barely draw a breath. But she would try. "It was as if..." She slowly began to remove the necklace, a slight gasp escaping her throat as she surprised herself by the removal. Except for when she bathed, it had been years since her neck was without the piece, and yet here she was stripping her skin of something so precious to her. "It was as if," she continued, "you gave me your heart and I had to protect it every waking moment." She lifted the necklace to Kara's bosom and secured it around the blonde's neck. "Growing up, I would tell myself that you were this beautiful soul who wouldn't be at peace until your heart was returned to you. I had
to see you again." She clasped her fingers and rested them securely at the nape of Kara's neck. "Imagine if I'd given you my heart, but you'd never see me again... That's how I felt."

Kara sensed a lump in her throat. "I don't have to imagine."

A joyous smile tempted Lena's lips as her eyes swept the comfortable-looking padding of grass to her left. She wanted Kara here and now. She would make Kara want her just as much. Circling and moving up behind the blonde, her hand dipped low to black trousers. Her quick fingers undid the buttons at the front, and after a deft snag, the trousers sagged loosely downward. With a startled gasp, Kara held the pants to her waist for modesty and whirled around to face her.

Lena smiled brightly. "Are you to still resist me?"

Kara held her trousers closer to her waist. Leisurely, Lena turned and began removing the intricate pieces of her gown. She was careful with the attached diamonds and pearls. The jacket was already off to the side, on top of the blanket as to not get any stains. Her gown was drenched, but it wasn’t ruined. She would cherish it for the rest of her life. "I think it might be best if we disrobe without looking," she called to Kara over her shoulder. "I don't see how you can have any modesty left in you after what we've done. So I'm guessing you're being standoffish because you want us in the spot I picked out." She yanked off another article of clothing. "Very well then. Let us enjoy the waterfall for a bit first. And then we can be on our way."

Kara raised a skeptical eyebrow at that, but she turned her back to Lena as suggested. Loosening the grip on her trousers, she peeled them down and seated herself on the edge of the rocks, where she placed her spectacles and removed the bottom pieces of her attire in their entirety except for her drawers. She let her feet dangle against the pebbles and cool water, staring at the the boots to her side for a lack of anything better to do. But her curiosity got the better of her, and she could not resist a glance over her shoulder. Lena had moved closer to the waterfall and was very clearly refusing to watch her in turn. Her eyes traced the fine curves of the brunette's stiff back, from the slender erect column of a pale neck, to the beckoning fullness of womanly hips. The overwhelming femininity elicited a strong rousing of desire, and she felt the familiar slickness beginning to overtake her undergarment.

She turned her head to give herself a reprieve. Just a minute or two, she told herself. But by the time she turned around again, Lena had undressed further. What had she expected? Of course, the woman would be further undressed two minutes later. Lena, her body turned to the side, now stood in nothing but garters, two narrow bands of fabric fastened about pale legs and keeping the attached stockings up as though for dear life. They were just below the knee, where the legs were most slender, and threaded with spiral springs for an audacious grip. And they were only outshined by the clean-shaven sex between them. Kara felt her heart sputter in her chest, especially when she noticed the next detail: One garter, the one on the leg jutting out a little farther than the other, was embroidered. It simply read: "Kara's."

Before she could get her bearings, she looked up. Lena was staring down at her, with just as much passion as the night they’d first made love. Those green eyes blazed into her with as much yearning as they could muster.

Kara rose and moved to stand behind the brunette, not touching, but close enough that Lena was trapped between a solid chest and the side of the waterfall. She leaned a hand against the rocks and gazed down upon the beguiling curve of Lena's breasts. She yearned to pull the woman close, to move against the softness before her and satiate the throbbing ache below her waist.

"You are a godsend," Kara murmured huskily.
Lena pressed into her until their closeness besotted her senses. Kara burned. Kara desired. Kara craved. And all for Lena.

"But...the honeymoon spot."

Lena turned to her, wrapping eager arms around her neck. They rested their heads together, breathing in each other's air and unable to stop staring at each other's lips. "We're here."

"Wha...?" Kara knew she looked befuddled.

"Can't you tell?" Lena smiled with quiet glee, and redirected Kara's face back toward hers after the blonde had begun to scrutinize the area. "Well, the exact spot is a small cave to the side of this fall, but I don't think the current view is so bad, is it?"

"It's not." Kara felt her voice stutter again as she looked down into Lena's eyes.

The intoxicating scent of Lena's perfume mingled with Lena's heady arousal, warming her from within.

Likewise, Kara's closeness threatened to unravel Lena on the spot. Kara's breath left her in a transfixed state. She was all too aware of the semi-naked chest and feel of Kara's lean body pressed to hers. They looked into each other's eyes for what may as well have been one hundred years.

Then, leisurely, Lena moved on the tip of her toes to bring her mouth to Kara's. The shock of Kara refusing her kiss was sudden, and the first touch of Kara's warm lips against her neck turned into a spark-fueled demand. Tentativeness had become raw hunger; discussion on where to consummate their marriage had turned to ash beneath the white hot reality of their mutual lust.

Kara recognized the supple form in her arms from a fantasy she'd had long ago, before she even knew what yearning could be. And the warmth and softness of Lena drove her to desperately want more.

Lena clung to her, aware of Kara's desire for her to yield. She waited for that voice within her to deny the blonde. But it never came. Not this time. There was no longer a need to compete with Kara, to try to make Kara want her. Not when Kara was already hers.

Kara felt Lena's hands reach for her shirt and peel it off, coming to her with an eagerness that was stupefying. Lena's body pressed wantonly, and she slid Kara's drawers half down her hips as fingernails sank into the blonde's backside. Hot lips latched onto Kara's neck with as much fervor as Kara had displayed moments ago. But as the brunette again tried to meet the woman's lips, she was again denied. Kara knew Lena loved kissing, but there was so much more to explore.

"Kara..."

Unintelligible words fell from Kara's lips as she pressed Lena back against the waterfall and placed fevered kisses along the ivory column of her throat and the swell of her breasts, one hand placed against the rising and falling sternum, and the other grasping the roundness of her ass before gripping a divine thigh. There was an urgency to Kara's movements, to having her mouth trace every part of the flesh before her.

Rapturous waves spread like quickfire throughout Lena's body as Kara fondled her silken curves. Kara kissed her cheek, so very close to her lips. Strong arms lifted her so that her legs wrapped around a tight waist. Lena felt herself laugh at the unexpectedness of it, her head leaning back against the rocks as the water washed over her. She felt so carefree, her hands slicking back her wet hair as she watched a bird fly across the brilliant blue sky.
But then she lowered her head, and Kara's eyes met hers with an intensity that took her breath away. Kara's head moved downward, and an almost shameful moan escaped her throat as the blonde's mouth caressed a pink, limber nipple. As Kara straightened, taking delicate hands into rough ones and pressing them against the rocks and above their heads, Kara's groin pressed into hers; she could feel the top of the intimate flesh, where Kara's underthings rested just below, meet her flesh, and she groaned at the sensation. Kara was just as wet as she was, and it aided their grinding.

"Lena..."

Lena needed steadiness. A way to get even closer to the welcoming body pressing into hers. And so she broke free of Kara's grip, her hands going to Karas' shoulders and then to the woman's well-formed back. At one point, she couldn't distinguish the wet sounds emanating from their lower extremities from the sounds of the liquid caught between their upper bodies.

Kara coaxed Lena's legs apart, urging them to unlock and for Lena to stand. The blonde bent on one knee and swept Lena's thigh over a sturdy shoulder, all the while staring up at her as though asking for permission. They both knew there was no need to ask. Kara's tongue tasted her swollen flesh, branding her lower lips and slit with a blazing touch, and her lithe form shook with the passion of it — a passion that threatened to make her tumble.

Kara's mouth brushed the top of the lower lips of her sex, as though reveling in their softness, and the woman's eyes focused on their plumpness and the slickness coating them. This is why Lena had shaved. She'd wanted Kara to see all of her with nothing obscuring her arousal, her desire. She'd wanted every part of her to be silken to Kara's touch, at least once.

Kara's tongue traced the tip of her sex, between lubricated folds, before moving to slide into her entrance. Again, Lena's head fell back, her hands slipping into Kara's hair, the water from above cascading down their bodies. Vaguely, she was aware of Kara's trembling body. She didn't know if it was the excitement or if Kara was nervous, but she knew she wanted to reassure.

Kara wouldn't let her. The woman just pressed into her harder, and Lena was lost to the whirlwind once more. They were in a world alone, apart from society's restraints and expectations. She went over the edge, into that splendid climax that only Kara could give her. And then Kara was pulling her down and moving her to the soft grass with barely a strain, quickly removing the long-forgotten underthings and placing herself between her legs. Unforgettable lips lined up at her sex. "Water...got in mouth," Kara panted between words. "Wanted to taste only you." And then the blonde's mouth was on her again.

Lena nearly melted, her moans as loud as Kara's. She was dying to kiss Kara, but this was beyond bliss. Never before had a lover been this eager to taste her. And it lit a fire under her all the more, the increase in arousal flowing out of her as steady as the stream of water to their side. She came even harder than the last time, Kara kissing her inner thighs as the tremors shook her body and she relaxed into the motions.

Kara watched her. She knew Lena wouldn't need to rest for long. But she was still surprised by the quickness with which the brunette recovered, gesturing with her fingers for Kara to climb over her before she in turn climbed on top of Kara.

Lena's hands stroked her body in a long caress, moving slowly to more intimate territory and halting right at her mound. Kara's thighs quivered and loosened beneath the long, tentative fingers. Her breathing was ragged and hurried, while her heart thudded a wild, frenzied rhythm. Lena was looking at her, staring down at her, in that predatory way that only Lena could.

"Lena..."
"Hm?" It was a non-committal response, one that made Kara feel like Lena hadn't really heard her.

"Why have you stopped?"

"I told you...I like looking at you," Lena whispered.

Kara felt her insides tighten. This woman. Did she not realize how those steely green eyes reduced her to a puddle?

"You can look and still... .... You know."

Lena smiled. "Even after all of this, there remains an innocence to you, Kara."

Kara's breath caught in her throat as she guided Lena's fingers to her wet, pulsating entrance, her entire body turning into liquid heat as Lena's gentle fingers explored her sex. Lena was apparently enjoying the lurid sounds as the digits worked in and out of her and along her folds. The woman's tongue dove between the fingers, assisting in ways that made Kara question all of the pleasures she'd considered to be her greatest before the pleasure of being with Lena like this. A person's mouth touching another's sex had seemed so unthinkable to her before. But she knew better now. Lena had opened a realm of possibilities for her, and she was never going back to the life where those possibilities had seemingly never existed.

As waves of pure physical pleasure washed over Kara, she could only think of how what she had with Lena was special. Theirs. She let herself be engulfed by Lena's presence, moaning into her, shuddering, reaching for and rivaling her possession, and mending their bodies in complete consummation.

A film of sweat shimmered on their bodies as they lay entwined in the afterglow, Lena playing with the necklace that now adorned her neck. Lena's face turned into the leave-riddled blond hair that spilled across her shoulders and inhaled. How smitten the woman was with her, Kara thought. But she understood; she was smitten too.

They visited the cave hours later. It was medium-sized, with just enough room for two people, and there existed an opening at the top in addition to the entrance. Vibrant colors otherwise hidden unless observed under the sunlight or other ultraviolet light sparkled against the walls. The brilliant coatings were largely deposits of hyalite opal, a true form of opal found in this area, Lena had told her, and that, under shortwave ultraviolet light, these coatings would fluoresce or glow a vivid lime green rather than the faded green they now showcased.

Other fluorescent minerals shined as well. Feldspar glowed pink to red, manganapatite glowed cream to orange, and a odd phosphorescent blue mineral set it all off.

Although the display was stunning, the eeriness of the cave was just as imposing to Kara.

When they finally reached Kara's home in the woods, they giggled as she carried Lena over the threshold. Kara covered Lena's eyes with her hands once they were settled, directing her toward a table next to the window. "Open your eyes," she said.

When Lena did, she was surprised to see a rolled up scroll-like piece of paper with a ribbon securing it.

"It was Lex's idea. So we'd feel more...official." Kara smiled, leaning on the table beside Lena.
Lena untied the scroll with obvious interest. She smiled with glee, one finger in her mouth, as she read the document. It looked just like the fancy marriage certificates between men and women she'd seen in different cities, except it was Kara and Lena's names where the husband and wife's names would be. Lena felt the tears stream from her eyes before she could think further. She was more than content with how their union had been acknowledged by family, friends and acquaintances, but this little piece of paper did make it feel more official.

"You see the priest who officiated has already signed. Our signatures are printed, but we can sign too. The only other thing that's missing is the signature of at least one witness," Kara added, looking ahead. "Anyhow, I figured the paper went well with the new components of the place."

Lena turned around quickly in her chair, seeing that the home was now adequately furnished and decorated with some of the antiques and paintings taken from her home. Newer antiques were also present.

Kara watched her face light up and just as quickly sink as she turned back around in her chair and stared at the document. "Lena, what is it?" She moved off the table, her brow crinkling with concern.

"I... I love this, Kara, I do," she said, her eyes lifting from the document to focus on the window. "It's just... The last time we were here...you..." She felt her voice leave her, and Kara immediately knelt down beside her, rubbing her back.

"It's okay, Lena. We don't have to stay here." She used a finger to wipe at the tears falling from wide, questioning eyes, and lifted Lena's face to hers. "We can make that our home."

And so they did.

They perfected their marriage certificate. And as the days passed, they furnished Kara's cabin with a blend of their tastes — Lena's typical artistic flair, and Kara's creations from work. Kara settled back into her blacksmith job with ease, although the new shop name and children visiting her to hear her survival story would take some getting used to. Lena busied herself with learning another language, Japanese, discussing investigative observations with Brian and Del, and cooking when Kara worked long days and nights. With Alex and Maggie handling the overseer duties, she didn't know what occupation she would take on in the future, but she could be content biding her time for now. Although, like Lex, she didn't have to work, it almost seemed like it was in her blood to urge herself to excel beyond mediocre circumstances. To most other women, a woman not having a profession was standard. But for Lena, it would only be settling.

She and Kara set out to make the most of their married life. They discussed improvements for the house, working conditions, and what they saw for themselves in the future.

And they made love. They made love almost any chance they got their hands on each other. It was provocative, exciting, and completely new to want someone like this every minute of the day and to discover different facets of what aroused the other. But although it was bliss, it was also lacking; Kara would kiss every part of her body except for her lips. At first, she considered it mere teasing, but the absence of Kara's mouth on hers had taken on a life of its own, with Lena not daring to ask Kara what the woman could be thinking by denying her, but also seeking out the blonde's lips time and time again.

Lena had already known that when Kara Danvers set her mind to something, she was not easily deterred from that route. She could be resolute, never faltering far from her purpose. Thus, when Lena realized that Kara was following some stern ritual when it came to their marriage, it was clear that they faced a struggle of flaring tempers ahead. So far, Kara had not indicated that the kissing
drought would cease, and Lena's patience was wearing thin.

Kara boldly became meticulous in the way they spent their time together, always carrying some type of journal with her and apparently jotting down a completed act. After Kara would chop wood for the stove and fireplace, or exercise, and it was clear sexual intimacy was next, with Lena's inability to resist a sweaty Kara who had just been hard at work, Kara would insist on giving Lena one kiss on the cheek before washing up. This consistently had the effect of leaving Lena wanting, desperate for more, and unwilling to wait for Kara's bath to be over. She’d march into the bathing area and pull Kara up against her right there. Kara would always eagerly comply, a soft laugh at times escaping her lips. It was the same when Kara came home from her blacksmith shop or covered in dirt from helping Mr. Ray, who always seemed to take up more of Kara's time than needed. Even a change in routine, such as Kara assisting her father, Cora, Clarence, Lex's men, or waiting for Lena to arrive home after a visit with Hazel, Sam or Ms. Merriam, didn't do a thing to break Kara from the ritual.

From the first night in their marriage onward, Kara insisted on them having separate rooms, which always resulted in Lena seeking her out at night if Kara didn't seek her out first. After lovemaking, Kara would always note something in her journal and place it beside her bed. Lena was more than tempted to read it, but she respected Kara's privacy. Always had.

There were also the nightmares or night terrors. Kara had them every night, waking up hot sometimes and shivering other times, and screaming about hanging on to see another sunrise. Lena would always hold her until she fell back asleep.

Lena questioned her on the fifth day. "Kara...what are we doing?" she asked exasperatedly, after one of their lovemaking sessions, which were increasing in length and in the number of teases Kara made to her body.

"Loving each other," Kara replied with a bright smile as she pulled on her suspenders.

It was a day later when a mist settled on a nearby river, mottling the surface of the water into a dull brownish gray and muting the autumn colors of the forest. Lena stood there, waiting for the sun to rise. She wasn't sure how much longer she could go along with whatever outline Kara had for their interactions. Their time together in New York now felt like years ago, almost as though it had been a dream, so free they had been there even with their unresolved issues. Now it seemed like they were somehow restrained. Lena assumed the routines had something to do with Kara's two-year absence from her life. Kara had kept a journal then, too, she knew. Was it the same journal now? She didn't know. But she knew Kara perhaps needing some type of routine was the only reason she hadn't yet objected to it.

She just hoped she could last the day during a visit with Kara's family.

Alex lay still for a bit. Sunlight was just starting to pour in through the windows, and from the comfort of the mattress beneath her and its sunflower smell, she remembered that she was naked between clean sheets. The slender arm draped around her midsection was further indication. She turned toward a stirring Maggie. Except for the birth of William, she'd never seen a more beautiful sight. Maggie's dark hair splayed out on the pillow. Olive skin and rosy cheeks thrived under the sun.

As she yawned, bright almond eyes opened to stare back at her.

"Mmm, were you watching me sleep again?"
"I can't help it," Alex said, turning on her side to snuggle. "You're so beautiful."

Maggie moved to rub Alex's bare arm. "I seem to remember you sayin' somethin' different when we first met."

"Are you goin' ta reminiscence about that again?" Alex chuckled. "Me threatenin' to black out your senses is that fond of a memory for you, is it?"

"It is." Maggie laughed. "I was goin' to leave town that day. Wasn't even plannin' on attending that job inquiry. But when you placed me on my butt the way you did, and talked to me like that, it made me think about what I was doing with my life. Suddenly, I remembered the overseer thang, and --"

"-- The rest is history?" Alex sat up on one elbow, tucking a strand of Maggie's hair behind her ear.

"You just want me to shut up."

"I do not."

"You do." Maggie quirked a brow. "But...that just means you want somethin' else from me instead." She sat up, bringing their faces together with a kiss. "I like to think we still have a lot of history to make together."

"Me too." Alex kissed her chin, then neck. "Do you think they'll make it -- Kara and Lena?"

"Let's hope so. Otherwise, what chance do we have?" She batted her eyelashes. "What shall we ever do with ourselves?" she took on a mock accent, a mixture of whatever accent it was Lena spoke with.

"Oh, hush." Alex laughed. "And help me get ready for this dinner ma and pa are hosting."

Siobhan thought about where she could go from here. She no longer had Lena. And Lena was the only reason she'd stayed in Breighville. She could have been making some kind of decent living in New York by now, she supposed. But sentimentalities had kept her with the only person she'd ever truly loved. Seeing Lena in shambles after Kara's presumed death had been more than enough incentive to work on improving herself not only mentally but through action. No longer could she bring herself to seek Lena's company for her own selfish motives. Lena had repeatedly been there for her, and she had been determined to be there for Lena.

The decision had come at the price of hurting a friend, however.

Winn.

Winn who had doted on her and helped her heal when all she could do was sit in bed and draw images she'd hoped would help ease Lena's mind. It was Winn's caring nature, improving her crutches, helping her practice walking again, and bringing her food when the maid was too busy tending to Lena, that had put her in a prime position to get her strength back and help Lena as much as possible. While Winn had teased her about how much effort she was putting into recovering so that he could one day court her properly, her only thought had been of Lena.

She had used him, she knew that. And the reality of it was never more potent than it was with the man, his back turned to her, now standing a few feet away working on some kind of rake in his front yard.
When he turned around, a dull thud slowly made its way to her head. Although the sun was just rising, the light seemed too bright for her eyes somehow, like it was focused on highlighting Winn in a way that signaled his goodness. To some degree, he was an angel, and she was a demon who'd ripped through his heart.

"What are you doing here, Siobhan?" he asked, clearly annoyed.

"I came to apologize." She took a step forward.

Winn shook his head, putting his rake to the ground and pulling it along the grass. "Save your apology. You didn't feel about me the way I felt about you. I get it." He gestured to the multi-colored tree above his head. "Leaves will be falling soon. So if you don't mind, I'd like to keep working on what is the most optimal design for my rake here."

"Regardless of what I felt for Lena, I shouldn't have treated you the way I did," Siobhan pressed.

Winn stopped the rake mid-sweep, the tips of the instrument digging into the dirt with force. "No, you shouldn't have!" his voice rose, seemingly beyond his control. "You knew how I felt about you, but you just kept letting me think there was a chance. Why? I didn't mind helpin' you, Siobhan, so if that's why you --"

"-- God, no," Siobhan took another step forward, her hands up in front of her to plead her case. "I did use you, but not for physical care. I benefited from your help. But it was your company, the way you saw me, that I craved. You would talk my ear off, but they were the best damn 'talk your ear off' conversations I ever had." She laughed nervously. "It felt so damn good to be wanted, Winn." She threaded her hands through her hair, eyes looking off to the field and back to him. "To feel like -- to know that --someone cared about me so much. With Lena, she cared. But not the way you did. Not like you."

The two stared at each other for a long stretch, just assessing the truth in the other's eyes. Winn released a labored sigh before leaning on his rake, his head atop his hands. "I guess we've both felt like we weren't enough for the person we wanted, huh?"

Siobhan smiled softly at that. "Yes."

Winn walked to her, planting the rake in the ground and scratching his nose. "Why are you still here?" He looked at her, again searching her eyes. "I mean, in town."

"Because I couldn't leave without seeing you."

Winn nodded, placing his hands in his pockets. "So is it just wishful thinking on my part, or does it seem that you care about me after all? Just a little?"

Siobhan's features softened. "I care."

"Then... I don't see why we can't start over... As friends, I mean. Everyone makes mistakes. And you seem sincere. And I'd hate to see us part on a sour note...again. So..." He shrugged. "I don't see why we can't start over."

Siobhan's smile widened. "Me neither."

"I don't like that either," Mon-El laughed as Cora attempted to feed him some banana porridge. They
sat at a table beside the Danvers house, feasting on what Eliza had cooked up. The woman had insisted they eat inside even though the kitchen table wasn't big enough for all of the expected guests, but the two had declined, stating that having been invited was enough, that immediate family should be a priority and that they'd be fine. When she'd suggested everyone eat outside then and that they pull up two tables so that the two felt more included, they'd declined that idea as well.

To be honest, they hadn't declined for any selfless reason. They simply wanted to be alone. Mon-El couldn't remember a time when he ever felt this at peace in someone's company. He knew that a person's sobriety wasn't dependent upon anyone but that person alone, but he couldn't help feeling like Cora had breathed new life into him and cleansed him from the inside out. He would continue to work on himself and not buy into the notion of a good woman having changed a bad man, but he would continue to appreciate Cora for the light she'd brought into his life, and for being the overall amazing person he'd come to know her to be.

"You don't like porridge?" she asked, giggling while tasting the food for herself.

"No, I like porridge. I just don't like bananas."

"What? Nooo. That is very peculiar, Mon-El."

"Not any more peculiar than you liking greens with syrup."

Cora's laughter deepened. "It's good."

"So says you."

As their laughter quieted, the air between them seemed to become thick. "Cora... Will you be staying in Breighville? Or do you plan on leaving someday?"

Her big gray eyes softened. "For now, I stay." She scooted closer beside him. "But if I ever leave, I would hope for you to come with me."

Mon-El smiled brightly.

"I need to become more independent," she said. "Learn not to lean so much on Kara. You understand?"

Mon-El nodded, his eyes catching sight of Kara and Lena walking up toward the residence. "Speaking of..."

When Kara and Lena entered the Danvers home, the last person Lena had been expecting to see was Mr. Ray with a grin on his face. But there he was, sitting in a chair a little ways away from the kitchen table, holding up a cup in their direction to acknowledge their arrival.

"Kara, Lena...so glad you two could make it," Eliza stated with a smile, hugging them both. "I take it...life is treating you well?"

It became clear that Eliza was choosing her words carefully in the presence of Mr. Ray. "Yes," Lena replied, seeing that Kara had caught on as well.
"Here, let's get you two seated and some plates." Eliza ushered them toward the table, where Jeremiah, Maggie and Alex were already seated.

"Good to see you," Jeremiah said with his usual stoic smile, looking up from the table.

"Good to see you, too, Jeremiah," Lena replied.

She moved to sit across from Kara, immediately taking note of the sitting arrangements. Maggie sat beside her, Alex beside Kara, and Jeremiah and Eliza were seated at either end of the table. It felt odd that Kara hadn't made an effort to sit next to her, but she decided to focus on the meal instead, marveling at Eliza's culinary skills. The food looked like it had been cooked to perfection, with just the right amount of seasoning. It was both mouth-watering and pretty. The meat selection was chicken, turkey, and ham, all on wooden platters that were decorated with leafy greens. And the sides included biscuits, cornbread, and baked potatoes with gravy. Additional options were soup and porridge. And beverages included tea and lemonade. Eliza must have been up all morning cooking everything, but it at least seemed that Alex and Maggie had helped. And maybe Mr. Ray as well. Lena knew that a few men in town cooked. But would Jeremiah have sat back and let another man assist his wife without lending a helping hand? Perhaps if Jeremiah had been busy with his blacksmith duties earlier in the day.

"I'm sure you saw Mon-El and Cora outside," Eliza said, scooping up a bowl of soup and handing it to Lena.

"Yes. We said hi and talked with them for a bit."

"I tried talkin' them into coming inside or at least having us all eat outside with them," Eliza relayed, "but they're both so stubborn."

"Sounds like they wanted to be alone," Kara commented, smacking on a piece of turkey before pushing the spectacles back up on her nose.

Lena arched an eyebrow. She wasn't surprised by the fact that Kara had already dug into her food. Nor was she surprised by the fact that the blonde was chewing with her mouth open. But it was the way Kara was staring at her, like it wasn't the food the woman hungered for, but rather Lena herself. She saw Alex and Maggie relating to Kara's words with nods. She supposed any couple could relate. Even if Mon-El and Cora weren't yet romantically involved, it was obvious that they were headed in that direction. But this wasn't something Mr. Ray could find out about. She watched him take a sip of whatever it was he was drinking as he peered over the rim with interest.

"What Kara means," Eliza said, no doubt trying to throw Mr. Ray off, "is that Mon-El and Cora have become good friends. They often discuss work, gardening and the like with much seriousness. It can be drainin' trying to keep up with their talk." She smiled wide. "But at least Mr. Ray has joined us. Insisted, in fact."

"Jonathan and Mr. Ray have known each other since Jonathan was a child," Jeremiah said. "He practically raised him. And seeing as Alex and Jonathan's marriage didn't quite work out as planned, Mr. Ray here felt somewhat responsible. Suggested breaking bread with us to show his good will, and that he raised Jonathan better than that."

"Our differences had nothin' to do with how Jonathan was raised," Alex chimed in, placing a potato onto Maggie's plate. "Some people just ain't meant to be."

"But we do have our rules," Mr. Ray said, lowering the cup in his hands while staring at the back of Alex's head and rubbing his plump belly. His eyes briefly settled on Lena. "And Jonathan should
have followed those rules to the best of his ability."

"Still," Alex stated, turning around to look Mr. Ray head-on, "it's not yer fault. Neither is Jonathan's penchant for hogging William all to himself, like today. The overwhelming majority of pairings in town get it right. We didn't." She turned back around to tend to her food. "I know that what we did isn't typical, Mr. Ray, but it won't set some divorce standard in the town. You have nothin' ta worry about."

"But you did set a precedent," Kara offered, briefly glancing Alex's way. "And precedents...can be tricky." She turned back to Lena, swallowing the remainder of the food in her mouth and slowly flicking her tongue against her teeth; it was done in a way that made Lena's thighs twitch. Was Kara being sexually provocative? And in her own parents' home? And in front of her sister and a neighbor to boot?

Lena's jaw set firm. Kara knew how much she loved kissing, and yet the blonde continued to deny her. Lena never imagined the day she would be jealous of her own sex. What a mess, she thought, as her mind flashed back to her first day back in Breighville, and how it reminded her of — and contrasted with — this day. That day, she was the one trying to lure Kara in. Pure and innocent Kara, who'd seemingly wanted nothing to do with her. But this Kara before her now was no innocent.

No.

As far as Lena was concerned, this teasing, lustful Kara was a devil incarnate.

"It'll be fine," Alex replied.

"Agreed," Maggie echoed. She'd been looking back and forth between everyone, seemingly more aware of their guest and the need to watch their behavior and choose their words carefully than anyone else in the room.

Mr. Ray sipped his drink like he wasn't convinced.

"The food is lovely, dear," Jeremiah stated, an obvious attempt to change the subject.

"Thank you, Jeremiah. I put some extra butter on those potatoes. You tasted it yet?" Eliza played along.

"I tasted it," Maggie assured, taking another bite. "Real nice."

"Sure is," Jeremiah agreed, digging in with a spoon.

Kara abruptly chuckled. While the awkwardness of dinner was understandable, Lena couldn't remember a time Kara so blatantly looked past the town's rules. Sure, there was their intimate moments together, but that was different. She still expected Kara to hold some of the beliefs she held before.

"Will either of you be attending church this Sunday?" Eliza asked as if on cue, looking from Kara and Lena to Alex and Maggie. It was a given that Mr. Ray always attended church; so there was no need to ask him. "Alex said that Father Mable should be returning soon."

Kara got up from her seat, licking her fingers as she again made eye contact with Lena. "Sure, ma. I've been feeling a bit sinful lately, so..." She pushed her spectacles back up on her face and headed toward her room. "I'll be right back."
"So you'll be attending as well?" Eliza turned to Lena.

"Certainly," Lena said, getting out of her chair. "Excuse me." She followed Kara back to the room as swiftly as she could, once again recalling her first day back in Breighville. Once she entered, Kara was leaning against the wall beside the door. Lena quickly closed it and lightly wrapped a hand around Kara's neck as she pushed into her. She was seething. "What game are you playing out there?"

Kara laughed, holding her hands up in surrender. "No game."

"You're not behaving like the Kara I know."

"The Kara you knew is long gone." Kara pushed her forehead against Lena's, challenging, infuriating.

"I don't believe that."

"Believe it."

"Kara, you don't have to be anyone but yourself around me. I promise you."

"I am being me, Lena. Is this version of me so bad?"

She asked it so softly that Lena's grip on her neck loosened, and her eyes focused on Kara's ever-so-alluring mouth. Her busy hand slid to the middle of Kara's chest, and her free hand pulled Kara closer. "Kiss me," she whispered.

Kara stared with apparent interest before moving her head back.

"You won't kiss me," Lena said with a sneer, "and yet you claim you aren't playing games?"

She used both hands to pull Kara even closer.

"Are you to take me in my parents' home?" Kara arched an eyebrow.

"Do you want me to?"

A knock came at the door, and Lena and Kara jumped apart.

Alex eased her way into the room, folding her arms across her chest. "You two are aware that Mr. Ray is out there, aren't ya?"

At their worried expressions, Alex gestured with reassurance. "Don't worry. You're safe. You two were talkin' so low that we couldn't make out what was being stated. But, whatever you got going on, it's time to take it down a peg. Okay? Funny business can wait until you get home. And Lena? Ma wants to talk to ya."

Lena gave Kara an angry glare before heading out the door. Alex turned to Kara, who shrugged.

"You know...I truly had a difficult time finding out about Kara's...feelings. Took me about a year," Eliza said, hanging up some clothes on the clothes line in the backyard. Lena assisted her. "I just couldn't understand how," her voice lowered, "a woman could desire another women like that."
She turned to Lena and leaned against the pole. "But when I thought of it in terms of what any typical couple had...like my union with Jeremiah...I started to understand it all. He helped me to understand it too. For example, how Kara never responded to Mon-El in a romantic way. How her face always lit up when around you. How she got excited doing even the tiniest things for ya." Eliza smiled. "Come to think of it... I don't think the emotions you two share are all that typical. In this town, we see so many pairings together just because their union was decided before they could walk. Most aren't in love. Maybe only a few are."

Lena looked to the sheet in her hands. She hadn't been expecting this conversation, but it was likely one they should have had earlier. She looked back up at Eliza, seeing the pride and clarity in her eyes. This woman, who was one of the holier people she'd known, was proud of Kara's willingness, bravery even, to follow her own heart despite whatever religious conviction. And Lena surmised that no more could be asked of a parent whose child was in an unorthodox relationship. Not only had Eliza accepted Kara, she'd supported her.

"What I'm trying to state," Eliza continued after saying something about some souls just fitting together and God sometimes putting forth plans one wouldn't expect, "is that I thank the Heavens every day that you and Kara found each other. I know that you two are having some kind of issue now... That's why I sent Alex in to cool thangs down, and I told Mr. Ray I needed to tend to washing some clothes before it got any later while he and Jeremiah talked about whatever it is men talk about... But it'll work itself out. This is just one of the many bumps in the road that will test your marriage."

Lena only hoped that was true. "Thank you, Eliza," she said with as much sincerity as she could muster. "Truly thank you."

"What?!” Alex whispered, swirling around on Kara, who sat on the bed. "You haven't kissed her in a week?" Alex stopped in place, folding her arms across her chest. "Goodness, Kara. No wonder she's livid with you. Can you imagine if I did that to Maggie? Do you want to blow up your marriage?"

"I know what I'm doing," Kara argued, sitting back against the wall.

"Oh, because some old hag assured you of that?"

"If anything, this will just bring Lena and I closer together. And the woman wasn't that old."

Alex moved to her, pointing a finger. "This is the most fool-headed thing you've ever done."

"No, it's not!" Kara sat up, frowning. Her pout reminded Alex of a petulant child. "It is too." Alex moved to the door, opening it swiftly and halting before turning back to Kara. "Make it right, or you may lose her."

The door closed with a pointed slam.

When Kara and Lena returned to their cabin some time after noon, Kara hadn't felt the weight of her sister's earlier words as much as she felt them in this moment. Lena hadn't talked to her the whole way back, and now she simply took off her coat and the earrings she'd worn to the dinner and lightly
placed them on a desk.

Kara watched her. She was staring intently at the desk as if contemplating a better spot to place her earrings. Her stance, with her shoulders hanging the way they were, made her look defeated. But even so, her profile, the angle of her nose, her strong jaw, and her full lips, were mesmerizing. Kara knew those lips in wondrously intimate ways, and ached to know them again.

"So...what did you and ma talk about?" she asked.

"Does it matter?" Lena countered, dragging her fingers along the desk. "When we can't even talk freely with each other?"

Kara frowned. "We're talking freely now."

Lena finally looked to her. "Are we?" She turned to Kara fully. "Kara, you've been doing these odd things. These unbelievably odd things, and you won't even tell me why."

"Odd?" Kara shrugged. "Like what?"

"Like not kissing me for starters."

Kara rolled her eyes, moving to take off her own coat and place it on the couch.

"Why are you doing this? I just want to know why."

"Not kissing you?" Kara straightened the coat out on the soft surface. "Is that all?" She turned to Lena with a bewildered expression.

Lena made the most incredulous face Kara had ever witnessed. "Is that all?" the brunette challenged. "You're being serious? You think not kissing your lover -- your partner -- isn't something to be concerned about?" Lena walked to her.

Kara readjusted her spectacles. "Not if it's for the better of their marriage."

"How can not touching me be for the better of our marriage?!" Lena's voice rose, and she loosened her hair from the bun she'd carefully crafted.

It was clear to Kara that her nonchalant reactions struck a cord of irritation in Lena, but that wasn't her intention. "I touch you plenty."

"And it's not just about kissing me, Kara." Lena paced briefly while frustratedly raking her hands through her hair. "It's the way you seem to have put our relationship in some sort of bubble. 'Don't do this without doing that'... 'Tease just enough one day but not the next.' It's like you're following some manual instead of just letting things flow naturally. I mean, are you doing all of this to create some artificial drama so that we aren't too happy and it lessens the blow when we're upset with each other or in anticipation of our relationship failing? Because I know couples who've done that. Are you bored?"

"No!" Kara's voice finally rose, somewhat startling Lena with the sudden emotion.

"Then again... I ask you why," Lena stressed.

Kara shook her head with a sigh, heading into her bedroom. When she returned, she returned with the journal Lena was all too used to seeing. "The woman I told you about in Bermuda." Kara held up the journal. "She taught me so much about life. Not just about sex and relationships, but that too.
And she was darn clear about how passion can fade if things aren't kept exciting. How sex can get boring. Even you suggested we wait to increase tension for our wedding day. It wasn't until you suggested it that I took her words about fading passion to heart and figured you wanted more of the excitement, tension, when possible."

Lena, her hands still in her hair, let out a disbelieving chuckle. "So...you're telling me all of this has been due to a fear of sex getting old? Of me not desiring you anymore?"

Kara stared at her coolly.

"Kara," Lena said, lowering her hands and moving to grasp Kara's fingers as she looked the blonde in the eyes. "Sexual intimacy gets old for everyone. But we're far from that point, if you couldn't already tell by the way I nearly tackle you whenever you come home from work. I could never not desire you. And I hope it's the case that you could never not desire me." She pulled Kara closer. "And there's so much more to romantic relationships than sexual intimacy. Didn't the older woman tell you that? We've been so wrapped up in each other's physical space and busy with other things that we haven't had a good chance to explore all of those other joys. But we had those joys before you went missing, remember? And even before that, we had it."

Lena's hold on Kara tightened, and Kara looked down at their interlocked digits. "I've messed up again, haven't I?" She broke Lena's grip and moved to grab her coat. "I need to go for a ride."

"Kara?"

Kara headed for the door.

"No, wait, Kara!"

Kara didn't wait.

"Hold on," Mon-El called out to Cora who stood outside the bakery shop in the middle of town. He'd gone inside to buy her treats she hadn't yet tried. But he hadn't been in the store for more than two minutes when he heard a commotion outside. "Where is he?" a familiar voice sounded to his left. It was his mother.

"I heard my son's in there," Rhea's voice sounded off again.

"I'll be back in a moment," Mon-El told the clerk before heading out. When he stepped outside, he immediately took note of his mother's nightgown attire as opposed to the fancy dresses she usually wore, her smeared makeup, messy hair, and the way she wobbled. She was drunk. And she was waving a finger in Cora's face like she was a second away from issuing a slap. Cora, for her part, seemed unfazed.

"Ma," Mon-El said.

Rhea clapped, now pointing at Mon-El. "There he is! There's my boy," she spoke loudly, attracting the attention of passerby after passerby. "You haven't been to visit...me or your father in weeks," she slurred her speech. "And now I come to find out that part of the reason is because you've been galavanting around with this whore!"

Cora gasped.
Mon-El moved in front of Rhea, a frown marking his brow. "Watch your mouth."

Rhea's jaw dropped in what Mon-El could only describe as mock shock, and she placed a hand to her chest as though wounded. "Or what? You'll hurt your dear mother?" She turned to the people who had gathered about to watch the spectacle. "This is how he repays me after I helped get him through those two y...years when he was as lifeless as a dead fish."

"Help me?! By encouraging me to drink myself into stupor after stupor?"

"It helped you forget, didn't it?"

Mon-El balled his fist so hard that his hand started to shake. "You haven't been a mother to me in years. And you never used to want to see me before. Why now?"

Rhea turned back to him, almost falling over. "Because you are making a fool of us! Me and your fa-father." Her tone was laced with venom. "This..." She again pointed to Cora. "Is not the woman we chose for you. Where's your betrothed, Mon-El?"

Mon-El grabbed Cora by the hand. "I don't have time for this. Let's go, Cora."

Rhea rushed in front of them, turning and spinning to the crowd with laughter. "Oh...let me guess. She's with Lena. And they're doing all sorts of ungodly things to each other."

"Quiet," Mon-El growled, trying to reach for Rhea, but she hopped back.

"See how my son has been corrupted?" she addressed the onlookers. "He touches this woman despite the no-touching rule. And he just tried to touch me."

Murmurs erupted, spreading like wildfire.

"And I'll tell you why that is," Rhea continued. "Gather around, people. Gather around," she yelled, gesturing for everyone to come nearer.

"Ma, stop!" Mon-El again moved to reach for her, only to be halted by a man twice his size, telling him to let the woman speak.

"It's because of Lena Luthor!"

"Ma!" Mon-El couldn't believe this was happening. He felt his throat clench, and his heart worked into overtime. His eyes moved from his mother to Cora, before catching the sight of Alex, Maggie, James, Winn and Sam running out of the overseer building.

"She's a deviant!" Rhea screamed. "And so is Kara Danvers!"

Lena sat on the couch, assuring herself that everything would work out. What Kara had told her wasn't the worst thing in the world. They were still in love, and still very much wanted to be together. Kara had only tried to ensure the latter lasted. Lena tried to coach herself into not considering this a significant issue. But how could she not? She and Kara had only been together like this for a little over a week, and already Kara was looking for ways to sustain the ardor in their relationship. Already the blonde had been consumed with doubt. Lena didn't know if she should consider it a lack of a belief in their union, or just a logical attempt to want to prolong their heated interest as far as possible. To Kara's credit, it wasn't unheard of for a couple to want to intensify
things after the novelty had worn off. Lena and Siobhan had done the same. And besides admitting to Kara that it happens to all couples, she'd also attempted to heighten their tension just like Kara had said.

Still, in the present, Lena couldn't imagine not longing for Kara's touch. Her body buzzed at the mere thought of Kara's ministrations. She didn't even have to close her eyes to envision Kara above her, the blonde's face tense with craving.

She sighed at the unexpected sound of loud knocking making her turn her attention to the front door. She answered it swiftly, finding Mr. Ray at the other end. He moved past her, looking around in a bewildered state.

The man, with his plump belly looking even plumper as if maybe he'd just had a meal, was dressed in his usual farming attire and held his hat in his hands, exposing his receding gray hairline. His eyes were wide, unfocused almost, and his face was stained with dirt. Subconsciously, she moved backward.

"Mr. Ray, is there something I can help you with? Are you looking for Kara?"

"Just you," he said, his gaze finally focusing on her. It roamed over her, causing her to remember that she'd changed into a robe fifteen minutes after Kara had left. She pulled the robe tighter around herself.

"You corrupt women, ma'am."

The air in Lena's lungs left her. "What?" Was he referring to what she thought he was referring to? How?

"Kara was the sweetest girl. I watched her grow up, you know. She was as spirited as any male youngin, but she still had a delicateness to her. She'd tumble with the boys one day and marvel at a flower the next. And soon enough, she blossomed just as surely as any flower. Bright, charming smile. The personality to go with it. Blue, caring and sincere eyes. Long blond hair that looked like it'd been kissed by the sun. She was precious and untainted. And she was mine. Mon-El was never gonna be enough fer her. So I said hi to her every mornin', tippin' my hat like a right gentleman. Brought her fresh vegetables when I knew she was low on them, assisted her with spare smithin tools when I could. I let my presence be known, but I didn't push. I trusted that she'd eventually see me for what I was to her and request to be let out of her marriage to Mon-El. I saw their union fallin' apart. It was over!" he growled. "But then you came along." He pointed the rim of his hat in her direction. "You took her away!"

The panic and utter terror Lena felt at what the man was saying — the complete realization of the danger she'd put Kara and her family in — nearly took her feet out from under her. She was without words. Had this been the man who'd pushed Kara, if Kara had indeed been pushed? If so, why? Out of revenge? Had he somehow seen an exchange between them? How long had he known? Suddenly, the memory of Alex walking in on them in her office, a discovery that never would have happened without the assistance of Mr. Ray, came to her.

"Kara was never yours," she finally said, deciding to keep her response simple.

"Oh, girl..." He sneered. "I have a feelin' that you are a test from our Lord and Savior. Just somethin' to overcome. Nothin' more."

Lena was experiencing an overwhelming case of déjà vu. This whole exchange reminded her of her encounter with Jonathan, and that terrified her more. She moved behind the couch, looking for
anything she could get her hands on to defend herself if need be. Mr. Ray had never come across as anything but a gentle soul, but it had been a mask. A carefully constructed one at that.

His eyes narrowed. "You call yourself married to Kara, I hear."

"Where have you heard that?" she demanded.

He didn't answer. "Surely, you must know that yer marriage," he emphasized the last word with scare quotes, "can never be recognized in the eyes of God."

A brazen smirk spread across Lena's lips. "I'm not a religious person, so...."

"You blasphemous cunt!" He moved toward her. Before she could react, he grabbed her by the hands, his hat flying to the floor. "You're a disgrace to this town, to your family. But then again, so was your father."

"You bastard." She tried to pull away, but his hold on her was remarkably strong for his age. He had to be at least mid-50s. She offered him the most defiant look she could conjure. "You can curse me and my name as much as you want to. But don't you dare talk about Kara as though she's some thing to be discarded because your pristine image of her has been shattered, or presume to think that you were ever anything more than the helpful but annoying neighbor in her eyes."

"And don't you presume to think that you'll get to keep livin' your distasteful truth." His sneer took on an almost maniacal form.

Lena jerked her hands free from his grip, which had loosened at some point during his attempt at intimidation. "You should take your leave now, sir."

He unexpectedly took a step back, his demeanor abruptly changing from angry to calm. "I will not."

She felt herself trembling. His relaxed state was arguably more worrying than his noticeably irritated one. "Kara and I are in love. And that is all that matters. If we have to leave this town and take her family with us to be free, so be it."

He was in front of her again in an instant, surprising her with his quickness and reaching for her. She stood still, unwavering, as he grasped her throat. He didn't squeeze, only rubbed there instead. Her skin scrawled, but, still, she held her ground.

"You're a brave shrew, aren't you?" he mocked.

She took in a deep breath, fighting the fear trying to overtake her. "You wouldn't hurt a woman."

His grip around her throat finally tightened. Instinctively, she took hold of his hand and jerked hard. His fingers released her. "Keep your hands off of me," she ordered, her act of defiance empowering her.

"And who is there to stop me?" He looked her over, his gaze settling on the vee of her robe. "Not that I would ever settle for a vile creature such as yourself."

The calm tone of his voice didn't alter. A tremor rippled along her arms to the tip of her toes. "You are in a woman's house, insulting and threatening her, and refusing to leave. Our view on vile creatures are starkly different."

"And who is this woman?" He moved toward her ear. "Certainly not you. Your farce of a marriage doesn't make the roof above our heads your roof as well. You taint this home."
"Not any more than you tainted the Danvers home earlier today, you sickening piece of shit. You didn't show up there for Jonathan or for Alex. You attended that dinner because you knew Kara and I would be there. I don't know how you found out about the wedding, but you were assessing the situation for yourself, weren't you? Tell me...did you push Kara off that cliff? Were you so blinded by jealousy that you saw fit that no one would have her if you couldn't? Tell me, you bastard!"

Lena launched toward him, raising a hand to strike. As he intercepted her attack with a hard deflection to her arm, his expression was no longer that of a cool and collected pest. There was malice in his eyes. Her heart thundered against her rib cage and she moved backward toward the fireplace. He was going to kill her. She knew it.

Before she could grab the fireplace poker, he gripped her wrist, lifting the weapon with his free hand. "May this town finally be rid of you and your sickness." He raised his arm high. She squirmed, attempting to kick him below the waist, but he jumped back. The poker hit the floor, but his grip on her wrist remained. He was quicker in raising his arm for a second time, intending a slap or maybe a punch. Lena closed her eyes, bracing herself for the hit.

She heard a ruckus and a groan instead. Somehow, Mr. Ray was yanked away from her. He went flying into a nearby table, breaking it in half with his weight, before rolling into the wall to her right. "Don't you ever lay a hand on my wife again!" Kara growled. She stood over Mr. Ray, who still lay crumpled on the floor. He held his stomach, groaning.

"Kara?" Lena questioned.

The blonde turned to her. A blaze burned in that ocean gaze. It wasn't the blaze she'd seen countless times. It was one of overwhelming rage. The tears sprang from Lena's eyes.

Kara ran to her, hugging her tightly. "It's okay. I'm here now," she said, placing kisses atop her head. They heard Mr. Ray rising with a cough and looked his way. He could barely stand, still holding his abdomen. "You should be ashamed of yourselves," he spat, before rushing out the wide open back door Kara had entered through.

Lena immediately hugged Kara tighter, instantly feeling the relief of the man's absence. Kara continued to place kisses atop her head. "Shhh." Kara soothed. "He's gone. Everything's fine now."

Lena breathed in the scent of her, not wanting to be without this warmth, this security, ever again. She resisted somewhat as Kara pulled back to look her over. "Are you hurt?" Kara surveyed Lena's face and limbs as the brunette's eyes went to her bruised wrists. "Oh, Lena." Kara raised the delicate wrists to her lips, lightly kissing them. She pulled Lena back into her arms. "I don't understand. Why would he attack you like that? He was like a man possessed."

Lena looked up at Kara's face, seeing the intensity in her gaze and the firm set of her mouth. Her muscular body quavered with a desperation to go after the man, to get answers, but also to hold Lena and never let her go. "I think...he meant to kill me."

Kara stared down at her, apparent confusion plaguing her features, but the question died on her lips as Alex, Mon-El and Cora came rushing in through the front door, clearly out of breath. They stared
at the two as though it was the end of days.

"Alex?" Kara questioned.

Mon-El looked pained. "I'm so sorry, Kara. I never meant for this to happen."

"What is it?" Kara looked from Mon-El, to Cora, and then to Alex.

Alex shook her head, looking to the floor and then back up at Kara again. "All hell has broken loose."

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