

# The Buddy System

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Summary: Lois: "You could have pretended that we were sharing some fleeting moment of passion, but you didn't think of that, did you? No!" Clark: "No. But I'll remember it the next time we're in a closet."

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L: You could have pretended that we were sharing some fleeting moment of passion, but you didn't think of that, did you? No!

C: No. But I'll remember it the next time we're in a closet.

'I've Got A Crush On You'

This is a rewrite of 'Fly Hard'. Lex was never shot and, well, you'll catch on to the rest of the changes.

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"We are now operating on the buddy system." The tall, dark-haired man glares menacingly at each of us in turn. "If anyone goes missing, or tries something heroic, your buddy dies." He pulls the conference room door shut with a loud bang that makes me jump just a little in apprehension. Whatever these guys are after, they're deadly serious about finding it.

Next to me, Clark sighs and lifts his wrist, causing mine to rise too. It irritates me in a way I can't quite put a name to and I jerk my hand sideways in annoyance.

"Anybody got a paperclip?" Jack asks and rattles the cuff holding him to Perry. "I could get these off in nothing flat with a paperclip."

"No," Clark tells him. "It's not worth the risk."

"Really?" Lex has been chained to a filing cabinet and he shakes the cuff holding him there in disgust. "Do you honestly believe that they're just going to let us all walk away from this?"

"If they were going to kill us, they would have shot us when they got here," Clark says.

"Maybe they think they'll need hostages?" Perry suggests.

"We're already hostages," I correct him. "They're keeping us around to make sure Superman doesn't try anything."

"What about Jimmy?" Jack asks. "Maybe he can save us?"

Perry sighs. "Jimmy? Jimmy couldn't even save baseball cards."

The door swings open and the leader fixes us all with a disapproving glare. "Are you plotting something? I told you I didn't want any chatter in here. Them," he points at Clark and me. "Put them somewhere else."

The woman gestures with her gun for us to start walking. She stops in front of the broom closet near the copy room and I protest, "This one is too small, you should put us in there." I gesture at the comparatively more spacious supply closet next door.

She frowns in a way that indicates she hates having her judgment called into question. "No, you two are in here." She gives us a shove for good measure as we move inside. The door slams shut and I reach instinctively for the knob. Only it isn't

there — there's no way to open the door from this side.

The only light is a small sliver at the bottom of the door. Our prison smells like cleanser and chemicals, and it makes me sneeze. I turn my head sideways as I sneeze, burying my face in Clark's sleeve on instinct.

"Bless you," Clark says and I think I detect a trace of mockery in his tone.

Why, oh why, couldn't they have locked me up with Lex instead? At least he doesn't deliberately pick fights with me like Clark does. Where did he expect me to sneeze anyway? There's no room in this closet. Being caged with a former linebacker into a three by three foot area that's already crowded with dangerous chemicals and a mop that's digging into my back was a poor choice on the terrorists' part.

I shift unhappily and bump into Clark. OK, I admit it. If it wasn't so depressing, this might actually be a little enjoyable. Say what you will about Clark, the guy has taken care of himself. He must spend hours at the gym.

I let out a little sigh, remembering that time we were staying at the Lexor together and I came out of the bedroom to find him doing push-ups. He has nice arms, Clark does. Very nice arms. It seems such a waste — in general — that he's not dating anyone.

"Were you really here doing your taxes on a perfectly good Friday night?" I ask.

"Yes, really."

I roll my eyes, even though I know he can't see me. "And you say I have no social life?"

"I wouldn't call dating Luthor a social life."

"You're just jealous."

He doesn't answer and I wonder if he is jealous. I'm pretty sure that Clark likes me — really likes me. Sometimes I catch him looking at me with an almost-tender expression on his face. It's kind of sexy, although I'd never admit that to him.

"So are you?" I ask, wishing I didn't sound quite so hopeful.

"Am I what?" He sounds distracted, like I was interrupting his thoughts. Or maybe he hasn't figured out yet that it's futile to try and listen to what's going on outside when the door is so solid.

"Are you jealous that I'm dating Lex?" I try to sound conversational but I'm beyond curious to hear his reply.

It's dead silent and I hear him make a disgruntled-sounding sigh. "There's no good way to answer that question," he finally says.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I mean that it's a loaded question. Obviously, you *want* me to be jealous or you wouldn't be asking."

"Get over yourself! I do not *want* you to be jealous. I was just asking because of the way you mocked my dating Lex."

"Lois, you could do so much better than Luthor."

"Better? Who would you consider better than a wealthy and accomplished philanthropist? The only man 'better' than Lex would be Superman."

"So you'd only give up Luthor for Superman?" His voice sounds odd, like he's holding back a sneeze of his own.

I suck in a sharp breath. That was low! "Do you really think I'm that shallow?"

He sounds casual as he answers — he must not have a clue how much his remark stung. "You were the one who brought it up — I'm just following your argument to its logical conclusion. You said the only man you knew who was better than Luthor is Superman. Ergo, you would give up one for the other."

My stomach tightens at the thought that Clark really does think I'm that shallow. "Do you honestly believe that men are fungible to me?"

"Fungible?" I can hear the laughter in his voice.

"It means interchangeable..."

"I know what it means," he cuts me off. "I just find it funny

that you would pick that word. So, if men aren't fungible to you, what are they?"

"What are... men?" He's completely flustered me and I hate him for it. "Men are not objects or collectibles, Clark! They're... you know, men. They're..."

"Companionship?" he suggests with a wry note in his voice. I can feel the heat of the back of his hand against mine and it's making me feel like we've already used up all the air in this closet.

"Men," I correct. "Men are so much more interesting than women. They say what they mean. They don't have to hold back or pretend to be insipid so that people don't feel threatened."

"You think people are intimidated by a smart woman?"

"You think they're not? Come on, Clark. An aggressive man is a leader. An aggressive woman is a bitch."

"I don't think you're a bitch."

"Me? I was speaking in generalities!" I smack his shoulder and he laughs, which just increases my ire. "You think I'm aggressive?"

"Some people might call it that. I would say you're—ambitious."

"Ambitious?" I can't help it — that assessment sounds just like 'bitch' when he says it with such obvious merriment.

"What's wrong with being ambitious?"

"Absolutely nothing. It's one of your better qualities."

Better qualities? Has Clark made some kind of checklist of my good and bad points? "Oh yeah? So what's one of my worst ones?"

Clark sighs softly. "I—I don't know."

"Yes, you do. Come on, spill."

Silence.

"I'll tell you one of yours," I offer.

"Gee," he says, his voice laden with sarcasm, "how can I resist?"

"Right there," I snap at him. "That's one of your worst traits. You're always teasing me, Clark. You think that if you make it sound like a joke, I won't realize that you're belittling me."

"Me? Belittle you?" He sounds truly flabbergasted. "You're the one who's constantly putting me down. There's your worst trait, Lois. You make snap judgments about people and you hate to admit when you're wrong."

"Snap judgments? What snap judgment did I make about you, Clark?"

"You called me a 'hack from Nowheresville'." The words are bitter and I'm horrified that he knows I said that. His wrist twitches, rattling the handcuffs, and then he adds, "Among other things."

"Well, Smallville isn't exactly the center of the cultural world," I say as my mind searches frantically for a better argument. "I can't believe you're going to go all the way back to when we first met. How long do you hold grudges, Clark? Maybe that's another nasty trait of yours."

There's a long silence and I feel a little dizzy — although maybe that's the dark affecting my equilibrium and not the fact that I'm standing close enough to Clark that I can smell the spicy clean scent of his soap and aftershave. It's irritating that he should smell so nice when he's such a putz.

The floor rumbles ominously beneath my feet.

"What was that?" Clark asks.

"An earthquake?" I suggest.

"I don't think so."

Another, longer, rumble shakes our dark prison.

I swallow hard. This is not how I pictured the last few minutes of my life — trapped in a closet with Clark Kent while the Daily Planet building collapses around us. I wonder how many days it will take to dig our bodies out of the rubble. If we don't survive this, I can only hope that Lex or Perry or Jack will

If only to solve the mystery of why I died handcuffed to Clark. It's horrifying to think what kind of assumptions people might make if no one is around to explain that we weren't bound together for kinky reasons.

"They must be using that machinery that we saw them with earlier," Clark says, interrupting my vision of our posthumous reputations.

"What do you think they're looking for?" I'm so relieved that we're not going to end up dead and bound together that I'm willing to make small talk. Anything, really, to pass the time until we can get out of here.

"I don't know." He sighs into the darkness and then says, "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that to you — about making snap judgments. It's just that, sometimes, I think you overlook the real person in favor of their exterior appearance."

"Like Lex?" I ask, hating the edge that's showing in my voice. "Or like Superman?"

"Maybe both."

The building shudders and Clark shifts restlessly, his arm brushing against mine in the dark. I have the sudden impression that he hates being in this small space even more than I do. Is he claustrophobic? I hope he doesn't start freaking out, because that would be more than I could handle.

The noise ceases and Clark lets out a forced-sounding chuckle. "Well, here we are, in another closet together."

"Another closet?"

"You don't remember?" Now that he can tease me about something, he sounds like himself again.

"No, I guess I don't."

"The Metro Club," he prompts. "We were in the kitchen closet."

I smack his arm with my free hand as the memory floods back. "You blew my cover!"

"For your own good — and the good of the story," he says defensively. "If Toni had found out about you any other way, you might be sleeping with the fish right now."

"Fishes," I correct him.

"What?"

"The phrase is 'sleeping with the fishes', not fish."

"I don't think that's really a word, Lois."

"Sure, it is. I fish. You fish. He fishes. It's a word." I can't believe he's actually going to argue this point with me.

"In that context, sure. But the plural of fish is fish."

"Says you. When we get out of here, I'll show you in a dictionary. For someone who makes his living with words, you're certainly a lunkhead."

"I don't think 'lunkhead' is a word either." I can hear the laughter in his voice as he says that and I just want to smack him again.

Instead, I take a deep breath and count to ten as I release it. Patience, I tell myself. Patience. If you kill him, you'll have to explain to Henderson how he drove you to justifiable homicide. I reach ten and say, in as sweet a tone as I can manage, "Shakespeare made up words, did you know that?"

"Someone has a pretty high estimation of her writing abilities."

"Three Kerths, Clark. How many do you have?"

"None," he admits and then adds, "Yet."

"Well, if you ever win one, you can make up a word."

I hear his amused chuff of air. "Is that how it works? You get one word for each award?"

"Sure." I grin into the darkness and give in to the inanity of his suggestion. "One for each award."

"And the three words you picked to coin were fishes, lunkhead and chumpy?"

"Chumpy!" Talk about not letting something go! Is he still upset over losing that game to me? "Chumpy is a real word!

They're all real words!"

"OK, fishes is. I'll give you that one. So what's your third word?"

My mind goes blank. I don't have a word.

"You know what it was? You named someone. Superman. You're the one who gave him that name."

Superman! My breath catches in my throat as I remember just how bad our current situation is. "Do you think he knows what's happening here yet?"

"I... yeah." There's a pause and then Clark sighs. "If he knows about the bomb; then he can't do anything but wait and hope for a break."

"He'll save us," I whisper past the sudden dryness in my mouth. "I know he will."

Clark's fingers lace through mine and he squeezes my hand in reassurance. "He will."

Time stretches out in the blackness as we stand there. His hand holding mine is comforting and there's a reassuring certainty to his slow and even breaths.

"Lois?" he asks quietly.

"What?"

"What if someone else asked you out? Would he have to be a wealthy philanthropist for you to agree?"

Is he asking for himself? Or is he just making small talk? My hand feels heavy in his and I wonder if my palm is sweating.

"I don't know," I say slowly as I try to guess where he's headed with this. "It's not Lex's wealth that attracts me. It's... I don't know. Force of personality, maybe. He's very intense."

"So you're looking for intensity?"

"Or someone who can fly," I say flippantly, trying to keep the conversation from turning even more awkward. "I'd definitely date any man who can fly."

"So, if I could fly, I'd have a shot?" he asks. His tone is light, but I get the feeling that he's unhappy with my answer.

"I'll accept a pilot's license," I tell him, still trying to sound carefree. "Do you have a pilot's license?"

"No." His hand lets go of mine and I feel a little dizzy.

"Clark, I'm just kidding." I want to grab his hand again but I don't dare. "I'm looking for someone who makes me feel special. Like I'm his whole world. I don't care whether he has money or can fly, I just want—" I frown and stop myself. How is it that I always end up confessing the most intimate and embarrassing things to Clark?

"What do you want?" he asks softly.

I don't say anything because the answer is that I want someone like him, just without his annoying tendencies to correct me or tease me. I want someone I enjoy just hanging out with, someone I can tell the trivial and sometimes mundane details of my inner life. I want someone I can trust to stand by me through hell or high water. I want the opposite of my father.

"I want someone I can trust with everything," I confess.

"We all do." His hand finds mine again and he gives it a squeeze. "But it's scary to have to trust when you don't know what their reaction will be, isn't it?"

"Yeah."

Silence envelopes us for several seconds before he nervously clears his throat and asks, "Do you trust Luthor?"

I shake my head slowly, then I realize that he can't see me. "Not like that, not yet."

He lets out a small sigh and shifts a little closer to me. "Be careful with him, OK? I don't want to see you get hurt."

Under any other circumstances, I would be irritated by his supposition that Lex is going to hurt me. Right now, though, I can't see his face, but I can feel the warmth of his hand and hear the caring in his voice and it tempers my reaction. In fact, the tone of his voice holds something a little deeper than friendship and that thought makes my mouth dry with anticipation.

Is he going to kiss me?

I've kissed Clark before. Well, sort of kissed him. And there was a little niggle at the back of my mind afterwards that wanted the experience to be real. Standing here in the dark, I've never been so aware of him as a man as I am at this moment. Clark isn't just the nice guy who brings me coffee in the morning. He's also the guy with a body that's an invitation to start daydreaming.

I *want* him to kiss me.

"Thanks," I whisper. "I don't want to see me get hurt either."

Clark genuinely cares about me. A bittersweet ache goes through me at the thought that I care about him just as much. Really care about him. As more than simply a colleague or a friend. I'm actually *glad* that he was here tonight and is stuck with me now. All those long days, late nights, and little moments with Clark have all led inexorably to this realization: the reason I tell him every stupid thought that enters my head is because he's never once betrayed those confidences.

What if I'm dating the wrong man? Lex is charming, rich, attentive — everything a woman is supposed to want. But Clark is my best friend. How did that happen?

"I trust you, Clark." The words are so quiet and unexpected that I'm not even sure I really said them until his hand tightens in mine.

"You do?"

"With everything," I add, feeling my throat start to close off. "I don't know how that happened, but you're my best friend, Clark. I'm sorry that I called you a hack from Nowheresville."

He moves, turning towards me, and his free hand finds my cheek. Please, Clark, kiss me. I don't care if it's in this cramped and dark closet. In fact, that would kind of be a funny thing to tell our kids, wouldn't it?

My breath seems to leave me as I realize that I'm actually contemplating a future that includes bearing Clark Kent's children. But none of that is going to happen if he doesn't kiss me. It's an agony waiting for him to do it.

He sounds almost nervous as he says, "I want to trust you, Lois. With everything."

"Then trust me." My breathing has gone shallow as I wait for the inevitable. Only it doesn't come. Why is he hesitating? For heaven's sake, I've sent out every possible signal that I'm OK with this. I'm about to do something potentially foolish when the door flies open.

My eyes blink and water, unaccustomed to the brightness of the lights. The leader is standing there, his face livid and his gun pointed directly at us. Clark moves in front of me and I realize he's trying to protect me. Something warm and fuzzy builds inside me at the knowledge that he cares that much.

"Can either of you get me online with the computer?" the leader demands impatiently.

Clark answers first. "I can help you. What file do you need?"

"That's not your concern," the leader says curtly, scowling at both of us. "Just get me onto the MetroComp database."

"MetroComp?" I push my way in front of Clark. "That's the old system. We updated it three years ago. He won't know how to use it. You'll have to take me."

The leader quickly unlocks my side of the handcuffs and I rub my wrist as a reflex.

"Be careful," Clark cautions and then the leader pushes him backwards and slams the door in his face.

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It's taking forever for the e-mail server to recognize that I'm trying to send a message. The leader is walking back over towards me and I try to casually block the screen. He tugs my hands away and his face turns almost purple with anger when he sees the SOS I'm trying to send. He clicks on the cancel button and turns to the female in his group.

"Go get her buddy," he snarls.

She marches over and opens the door, tugging Clark's arm to bring him across the newsroom. Why do you want Clark?

<“If anyone... tries something heroic, your buddy dies.”>

“No!” I stand up and grab the leader's arm as I realize his intentions. “Please, don't hurt him. It's not his fault.”

“I warned you,” the leader says coldly.

I hear Clark calling out to me but I don't catch the words as I continue to plead with the leader. “You can't hold him responsible for my actions. He had nothing to do with it!”

The man's cold eyes flicker with something almost like amusement and then he raises his gun and points it at me. “Would you prefer that I shot you instead?” The world seems to slow down and I can see his finger start to squeeze the trigger. I'm dead — I know it with a certainty, and I close my eyes and hope it won't hurt for long.

There's an angry “No!” from Clark and then something heavy knocks into me and I'm sent sprawling towards the floor as the world around me explodes in a rapid burst of gunfire. Only I don't hit the floor very hard and somehow I've ended up beneath a desk. There's someone breathing behind me and I recognize that it's Clark. His arms are tight around me, his body the only shield between me and a last loud chatter of gunshot.

“Don't move,” Clark whispers urgently in my ear. “Play dead.”

I squeeze my eyes shut and wonder just how badly he's been hurt. I want to tell him that I'm so sorry, that I never should have tried something so stupid, that I had no idea this would happen, but the loud and creative swearing behind us forestalls my apology. Their leader is enraged and a couple more gunshots are directed at the desk we're under. Clark tenses and I feel his body shift ever-so-slightly as if he means to protect me one last time. I can feel the tears forming as I realize that telling him that I trust him might be the last thing I ever say to him.

“I thought we weren't supposed to kill anyone,” the woman says. “Now what are we gonna do?”

“Leave them,” the leader snarls. “Let's get that damn equipment up here. The sooner we find it, the sooner we can blow this joint.”

I hear their boots march across the floor, away from us. Time stretches out in near silence and yet I don't dare to move. I can feel Clark's shallow breathing on my neck and it gives me hope that at least he's still alive. All my muscles start to shake at the thought that he's dying and a choked little sob escapes me.

“Shh.” His voice is barely audible as his arms tighten around me.

Please, Clark, please don't die. It's all I can think — a litany that's repeating over and over in my frightened mind.

“They've gone downstairs now,” Clark says softly. “I'm going to get you out of here.”

“Me? We need to get you out of here. How bad are you hurt?” I whisper and turn my head slightly so that I can look over my shoulder to see him. Don't die, Clark. Don't die.

“I'm not hurt.” He lets out a sigh.

“Not hurt?” I can't really see him, so I wiggle until I'm lying on my back and looking up at him. He's not kidding — he doesn't look hurt at all. There's no blood. He doesn't look pained, just anxious. “Why aren't you hurt?”

No sooner are the words out of my mouth than I know why. Oh. My. God. There's only one person in the world who could take direct gunfire like that and not be hurt. And he's the same man who, minutes ago, said he wanted to trust me with everything. It dawns on me that there was a damn good reason he was hesitating earlier.

“You,” I say hoarsely. “You're—” I can't make myself say the name. The name that was never really his. I made up that name — not him. “You're you,” I finish, feeling the utter lameness of that statement.

Clark moves from under the desk and holds his hand out to help me. I take his hand reflexively, unsure that I could get my numb limbs to cooperate enough to haul myself out from under the desk on my own. We both kneel and peek over the top of the desk. There's no one around.

“You told me you couldn't fly.” I hope that didn't sound accusatory. I was trying for lighthearted but I'm not sure I got there.

“I said I didn't have a pilot's license,” he corrects as the beginnings of a smile tug at the corners of his mouth.

“I know this isn't really a good time, but we're so going to talk about this later,” I caution.

“Definitely.” He nods and this time he really does smile.

“So now what? How do we stop them?”

“We?” He shakes his head. “*You* are going to leave now. And take Perry and the others with you. I'll go find the bomb.”

“The bomb?”

“If they don't have a bomb, or hostages, they don't have any leverage.”

“So this is more like a division of duties than you telling me that I have to just sit on the sidelines and watch you play the hero?”

He blinks and looks astonished. “I've never thought that, Lois.”

He actually means it. The thought sends a warm flutter through me. I put one hand on his arm to forestall him leaving. “You owe me, Clark.”

“Owe you?”

On impulse I lean forward and kiss him. It's the softest kiss, and it's over far too soon, but I'm not sure how much I dare with him just yet. I bite my lip and watch for his reaction.

His eyes find mine and he smiles. “I hope I owe you more than just that.”

“I thought you were going to kiss me, back there in the closet,” I tell him, trying desperately to explain.

“I was.”

“But you didn't.”

The handcuff still attached to his wrist clanks as he lifts his hand to cup my face. “Wouldn't you rather wait?” he murmurs, his breath caressing my lips as he speaks.

“Wait?” I squeak.

“For a less hectic moment? Or do you need the prospect of a nuclear detonation to heighten the excitement?”

“I don't,” I hasten to assure him. I stop myself from blurting out that he's exciting enough on his own. “We can wait. After all, we have to talk first, don't we?”

His thumb caresses my cheekbone and then his hand leaves me. “Please be careful, Lois.”

“You too, Clark.” I find that I really mean it, even though I know now that he can't really be hurt. It doesn't matter — I'm still going to worry about him.

“Remember how I said that it was scary to trust someone with everything?” he asks.

I nod, not sure I trust my voice.

“It's not that scary,” he says. He gives me a smile and then moves away, disappearing into the stairwell in less than a second.

“Yes, it is,” I tell the door as it swings shut. “But it's the good kind of scary.”

Finis