

Baby, It's Cold Outside

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Rated: G

Submitted: November, 2010

Summary: A trip to the mountains leads to an epiphany (no, not that one) and a misunderstanding. Never fear, though--this is a ficathon story, and that means WAFFiness...and snogging.

I feel silly. What is wrong with me? It's just Monday morning. What's so scary about Monday morning? I've done Monday morning fifty times a year, give or take, for over twenty-six years now. I know a lot of people dread Mondays because it means going back to work after the weekend, but not me. I love my job. I'm more at home at the office than just about anywhere else. Yet here I am, trying to calm my racing heart as the elevator climbs inevitably toward the newsroom.

Geez, I haven't felt this nervous since Claude. What am I afraid of? It's just Clark, for heaven's sake. It's not like anything happened, anyway. Just a nice, quiet Christmas Eve--which he intentionally missed his flight home to spend with me--and a little hand-holding by the window, my head leaning on his shoulder after the carolers interrupted a potentially embarrassing almost-kiss. That's all.

The chime sounds, and the elevator doors swoosh open, just like every morning. I step out onto the bullpen landing and glance around the room. There he is, just like always. He's got his phone held to one ear, but he looks up and smiles a greeting nonetheless, just like every morning. God, that smile should come with a warning label. He says something into the phone--I'm not close enough to hear what it is--and hangs up. Deciding that the best defense is a good offense, I head straight for him.

"Please tell me that was one of your sources with a hot lead for us," I say, collapsing into his guest chair and dropping my shoulder bag on the floor with a loud thump. "We need something juicy to work on while the Mayor is skiing in Aspen and the entire City Council has fled to Aruba." There. I've established the ground rules, just in case he was in any doubt. Business. We can talk business. There's no need to discuss how good he looked in the candlelight Friday night.

"Sorry, Lois. No juicy scandals this week. At least not yet. But that was a potential new story."

I jump at the opportunity. "Great. I'm on it. What is it?" A beat too late, I notice the gleam in his eye.

"Oh, I don't know," he demurs. "You might not be interested. It's a real puff piece. And it involves children." My face falls. He's set me up, the rat. Well, so what? Anything Kent can do, I can do better. Kids don't scare me.

"Come on, farm boy. Anything is better than hanging around here all week hoping Perry doesn't hand us some warmed-over holiday filler like 'How to Compost Your Christmas Tree.' What have you got?"

"Ice skating," he says with a smirk.

I frown at him. "Come again?"

"You remember the Coates Orphanage?"

"Of course."

"That was the director. He was so pleased with the story we ran over the weekend that he's invited me to do a follow-up. Tomorrow they're taking the kids out to a farm near Echo

Canyon. It's really just a hobby farm, but it's got a large pond. The couple that owns it throws a big skating party for the kids every year around this time."

I immediately spot the flaw in this plan. "Clark, have you been outside today? The snow is now slush. It's not cold enough for skating. Not unless they have a refrigerated rink at this farm."

"It's colder up in the mountains, Lois. The pond is only two feet deep in most places, and the ice is already six inches thick. And they've got ten inches of snow on the ground. It'll be great."

He pauses to take a sip of coffee, and I realize I've made a tactical error. If I'd headed to my desk instead of his this morning, I'd already have a cup of hot coffee and a chocolate donut in front of me, courtesy of Mr. Kent. "But, like I said," he continues, "I know it's not really your thing. I can handle it myself. I'm sure Perry will come up with something for you to do."

"Oh, no, you don't. I've already come up empty with Bobby Bigmouth, Benny Bonebreak, and Sammy the Mouse. This entire city is sleeping off the holiday weekend. If you're ditching Metropolis for the countryside, you're taking me with you."

He leans back in his chair and clasps his hands behind his head in an annoyingly satisfied manner. "Whatever you say, Lois. Whatever you say."

It's a different world up here. The ground is covered in a blanket of pristine white. The sky is a brilliant blue. The air feels crisp and clean on my face. I breathe in great lungfuls as my legs pump smoothly, gathering speed on the cleared ice of the pond. I whiz past Clark and turn to skate backwards, grinning at him. It takes him a little while to get his ice legs, but before long, he's gliding gracefully around the turns, his right leg crossing in front of his left and back again, one hand tucked behind his back like a speed skater. He looks good.

Of course he looks good. When doesn't he? Still, there's something different about seeing him up here. I don't know whether it's the fresh air, the happy sounds of the children, the blue jeans and barn coat instead of a button-down shirt and tie--but whatever it is, he seems at home, in his element. It reminds me of the corn festival in Smallville. He's across the pond from me now, and suddenly I know what it is. It's the speed, the grace; Clark Kent in motion is a sight to behold.

I'm certain my admiration is showing on my face. Just as I'm looking around to make sure Clark hasn't caught me staring at him like an awe-struck teenager, a ball of snow comes flying across my line of sight and smacks into the back of the girl in front of me. She gives a startled yelp and whips her head around, her strawberry blonde ponytail lashing her face with the sudden movement. We both quickly spot the perpetrator. He's hard to miss--a husky boy of about ten surrounded by a knot of younger admirers. They're all congratulating the ring leader on his marksmanship.

I look at the girl to gauge her reaction. If she's sniveling into her sleeve, I'm going to wave down Clark or one of the chaperones. I don't do well with crying children. Luckily for everyone--except maybe the young aggressor--she's a tough cookie. Instead of crying, she catches my eye and nods toward the nearest snow bank. Before I know it, we each have an armful of snowballs and are raining down retribution with a vengeance.

The boy and his compatriots follow suit, and soon the air is ringing with shouts of triumph mixed with wet thumps and good-natured cries of protest. In the ensuing chaos, I catch a brief glimpse of Clark, his coat covered with snow and his arm reared back like a pitcher. He aims for one of the taller girls--I'm pretty sure it's boys against girls at this point--but he overshoots, and the snowball sails a foot over her head to land harmlessly in a snow bank.

Meanwhile, I'm dodging the younger children like a slalom skier and slowing down just enough to scoop up a fresh handful

of snow as I turn the corner again. I raise my head, ready to find my next target. I see Clark headed straight for me, his arm cocked, snowball in hand, and a wicked grin on his face. Before I can dodge to the left, a missile of white comes sailing over my right shoulder and hits Clark squarely in the face. I barely have time to register the fact that his glasses are plastered with snow before he careens into me, sending both of us tumbling into the nearest drift.

When I get my bearings, I'm lying on top of Clark. His arms are around me, one hand pressing my head to his chest, right under his chin. He loosens his embrace, and I lift my head, supporting my weight with a hand on each of his shoulders, my forearms on either side of his broad chest. We're both covered in snow from head to foot. I can't see his expression because his face is still hidden behind a thick coating of white.

I need to see his eyes. Partly because he took the brunt of our fall and I want to know that he's okay. But also because, despite my earlier misgivings, I find that I like the way we're lying, his arms around me and our legs tangled together. Ever since Christmas Eve, we've been on the cusp of something new--something exciting and full of promise as well as peril. Yesterday it scared me silly, but today it seems worth the risk. At least it does to me. That's the real reason I want to see Clark's face; I need to know whether he's as fascinated by this new possibility as I am.

Quickly, I reach up and remove his glasses. I don't know what I expect to see. Maybe pain if he's hurt. Maybe surprise. Maybe embarrassment at our intimate position. Maybe amusement. If I'm lucky, I'll see admiration. Instead, the look that greets me as I pull his glasses away is unmistakable panic.

Oh, God. He's appalled. Truly appalled to be holding me in his arms. This isn't what I would have predicted, but I quickly realize that it makes sense. After the way I rejected him last summer and then almost married the city's criminal boss, what else should I expect? Obviously, I was reading too much into his actions Friday night. He was just being a friend, like he said he wanted us to be. And now he finds me cuddling up to him like I want something more. Which, of course, I do, but obviously he doesn't. How embarrassing. No wonder he's disgusted.

I jump up and run for the barn--devoid of animals for years--where the refreshments are set up. Our hostess runs to meet me, a blanket in her hands. She hustles me into her house, clucking like a mother hen--something about wet clothes and hypothermia. In no time, I'm sitting on the edge of the bed in her guest room, dressed in nothing but a soft robe which is too long for me. She's going to run my clothes through her dryer. She tells me they'll be ready in fifteen minutes. I just nod. Finally, she leaves me alone, and I can cry in peace.

She knows. She knows. She knows. That one thought keeps echoing in my brain, shutting everything else out. Lois knows, and she's in shock. What else could explain her sudden flight and the docile way she allowed herself to be shepherded about by our hostess? Just when things were looking so promising between us, she's found me out. It's all ruined.

I don't know what I should do. Leave her alone or go to her? Will she want to yell at me, or will she never talk to me again? Finally, I decide that I have to know how she is. Waving off the concerned attentions of our host and the orphanage director, I head for the barn. Hot chocolate seems like as good a peace offering as any.

Steaming mug in hand, I head for the house where Lois disappeared. I make a quick stop in the bathroom to dry my clothes and my hair, bouncing my heat vision off the mirror. I don't want her to think I'm pretending with her, showing up soaking wet. Still, my glasses are back on my face as I climb the

steps to the guest room. I suppose they're not really necessary any more, but I think she'll be more comfortable with me if I have them on. Of course she knows I don't really need them, but there's no need to rub her nose in it.

The door to the guest room is closed, but I can hear Lois crying, even without my enhanced hearing. That strikes me as odd. I would have expected anger, not tears. I knock softly. "Lois? It's me. Are you warm enough? I brought you some cocoa." I feel like an idiot, but I'm not going to mention the reason for her tears where anyone else might hear.

She blows her nose before she answers. "Come in, Clark. I'm okay."

I open the door and enter the room. She gives me a wan smile. She looks almost apologetic. Again, not what I expected. She bows her head, and I resist the urge to kneel at her feet just so I can see her face. Hesitantly, I step toward her and hand her the mug of hot chocolate. "I thought you might be cold," I say. She lifts her head enough to see the mug. As she reaches for it, her fingers touch mine. A spark jumps between us, and she jerks her head upright, her eyes locking onto mine. I have no idea what she's thinking.

"Are you mad?" I ask. I wish I had the nerve to sit next to her and put my arm around her shoulders. I don't dare.

A frown creases her brow. "Why would I be mad, Clark? It's not your fault. You gave me my chance, and I threw it back in your face." Her voice sounds uneven. I can tell she's trying not to cry again. And I have no idea what she's talking about.

"Lois?" It's lame, I know, but it's all I've got right now.

"Oh, Clark!" She bows her head over the mug, her hair falling across her face like a curtain. She's crying again. "I'm such an idiot!"

This time, I give in to the urge to kneel, my knees almost touching the hem of the robe which falls in fuzzy pink waves around her ankles. "No!" I say it tenderly. I take the mug from her hand and lay it on the nightstand. I take her hands in both of mine. Amazingly, she lets me. "Lois, you're the most brilliant woman I know. It's my fault for not telling you sooner."

She shakes her head vehemently. "No. You did tell me, Clark." She frees one hand and uses it to push her hair behind her ear. I can see her eyes now, and they look anguished. "Last summer in the park, you poured your heart out, and I stomped all over it. I had my chance. I was just too blind to take it. And now it's gone. I've made you hate me."

Mentally, I stop short. It occurs to me that this conversation is not about what I thought it was about. I'm still not certain what's going on, but I'm pretty sure it has nothing to do with my Secret. Switching gears, I focus on the last thing she said. Whatever else might be going on in her head, she must never be allowed to believe that I hate her.

I reach for her. "No," I croon. I rise to sit at her side and hold her against me like I've always wanted to. I stroke her hair as I rock us back and forth. "No, Lois. I could never hate you. I've loved you from the moment I saw you."

She stops the rocking, and her head snaps up again. At first, I'm terrified, but there's no trace of anger or even embarrassment in her eyes. Just an intense scrutiny that makes me want to squirm, and something else I can't put my finger on.

"You lied," she says. The words are an accusation, but her expression is one of joyful hope. I have no idea how to respond. She's right, of course. I'm not about to defend myself against that particular charge. But I have no way of telling which particular lie she's referring to, nor why it seems to make her happy rather than livid. Luckily, she clues me in. "That day in front of the Planet, when you said you'd never been in love with me..." Ah, now I get it.

"Yes," I freely confess, "I lied." My arms are still around her, and I hold her eyes with mine. If she hears nothing else today, she

has to hear this. "I have always been, and will always be, in love with you."

She doesn't answer. She just takes my face in both of her hands and presses her lips to mine. I lift her onto my lap and kiss her back, joy spilling from every cell of my body. I still have no idea what brought all of this on, but at this point I don't care.

He loves me. Now that he's said it--and now that he's showing it with every touch of his lips on mine, with his hands on my back, my arms, my face, my neck--I feel like I've always known. It seems so obvious, like I should have seen it all along. Maybe I did. Maybe that's why I've treated him the way I have--because I was afraid of his love. I must have had a good reason, but for the life of me I can't remember what it was.

He pulls back from me, just a little bit. He looks at me with a mixture of joy and questioning, as if seeking reassurance that I'm really okay with this. In answer, I reach up to brush that adorable curl back from his forehead. That feels so good that I bring my other hand up and bury them both in his thick, silky waves. "We've both been such fools," I say with a smile.

"No, baby, not fools--just blind," he says. He reaches to lay his hand on my cheek, but I grab his wrist. He looks a little worried.

"Lois?" He pulls back a little. "This is okay, isn't it? The way you kissed me, I thought..."

"It's fine, Clark. More than fine. It's beautiful."

"Then...?" He trails off with a significant glance at my hand on his wrist.

I release my grip and take his hand, holding it tenderly between both of mine to show that I'm not really mad. I do need to say this, though. It might seem silly, but I just can't let it slide. "There's just one little thing."

"What is it? I'll do anything for you, honey."

He's so earnest that it's hard not to smile, but I want to get my point across.

"Don't ever call me 'baby' again." I try to scowl, but I don't think it's coming out right. I give up and break into a grin as his laughter washes over me like a wave.

"I don't know what I was thinking," he says, shaking his head. Then a thought strikes him, and he cocks his head to one side. "'Honey' is allowed, though?"

I pretend to consider the matter. "I can live with 'honey,'" I graciously concede. I lean in to kiss him again. "But only if I can call you 'snookums.'"

He laughs again, his voice warm and deep and full of joy. "Lois, you can call me anything you like."

I don't. My lips have better things to do, and so do his.

Bottom dweller's note: This was a 2009 holiday ficathon story. Here is Saskia's request:

Three things I want in my fic:

1. ice skating
2. snogging
3. hot chocolate

Preferred season(s)/holiday [if applicable]: 2 (set around Christmas if possible)

Three things I do not want in my fic:

1. Mistletoe
2. Revelation of Superman
3. Smallville

Special thanks to Bob for the beta reading and for letting me steal Sammy the Mouse. Thanks to Deja Vu for her careful editing. For the uninitiated American FoLCs, snogging means kissing.

THE END