

Flying Lessons

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Rated: PG

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Summary: What if the superpowers swap in "Ultra Woman" took place in the second season, before Lois knew Clark's secret?

Obviously, the central idea in this story belongs to Gene O'Neill and Norren Tobin, the original screenwriters of UltraWoman. I thought it would be fun to put a different spin on things so this is taking place near the end of the second season instead of in the third season.

Huge thanks to Vicki, for the friendly nudge and the encouragement. My thanks to alcyone and Lara who beta'd an early version of this story years ago. They might not remember how wonderful and helpful they were, but I do.

For Vicki

"So where am I taking you for dinner tonight?" Clark asks as he sits down in the chair next to my desk.

"I didn't realize you were taking me to dinner tonight." I don't try to hide the irritation in my voice. After all, he did abandon me halfway through dinner last night. Sure, he was paged by a source and had to leave. Clark almost always has a reasonable excuse for ending our dates early. If I were a little more paranoid, I'd think he didn't want to kiss me good night. Except that he *has* kissed me good night -- several times now -- and he definitely wasn't shy about it.

Clark leans forward, resting his forearms on my desk, and gives me a smile that makes it nearly impossible to resist him. "Well, you're a modern woman. If you wanted to take me to dinner instead, I wouldn't say 'no'."

I let out a derisive snort at his nerve. "As far as I'm concerned you still owe me for last night."

"Then let me make it up to you tonight. Please?" Clark touches my hand and our eyes meet. His are dark and serious and more than a little hopeful. I'm slightly mollified that he wants to make it up to me, at least enough that I'm willing to let him try.

I give him a skeptical look. "And you'll stick around for the entire date? You won't suddenly decide to adopt a puppy or buy gym socks or renew your driver's license?"

"Hey, CK," Jimmy calls from across the newsroom. "There's a kid down a well in Centennial Park. The Chief wants you on it."

Clark waves to acknowledge Jimmy and stands up. "Seven o'clock," he tells me as he moves toward the elevator. "Anywhere you want and I promise I'll stick around for the entire date."

Two seconds after the elevator doors shut, I realize that a child down a well practically guarantees me a glimpse of the only man more mysterious than Clark Kent. I can stay here and keep working on this trade union summit story or...

I grab my jacket and make a break for it.

I arrive in the park just as Superman flies out of the well with a blanketed bundle in his arms. I push through the crowd of onlookers to ask him, "Are they okay?"

Superman looks up from the bundle and, for the briefest moment, he seems almost amused to see me there. "They would

be -- if this was a real child." He tugs the blanket aside to reveal a doll with a still-wailing tape recorder strapped to it.

"That's so sick! Who would do such a thing?"

I barely have the words out before Superman drops the doll and grabs my shoulders. For a dizzying couple of seconds I think Superman has finally realized that he's desperately in love with me. He pulls me decisively against him and turns us swiftly. I want to say something, but there's a roaring sound in my ears and the world feels pink and fuzzy around the edges. Almost as quickly as he grabbed me, Superman releases me.

Only I can't seem to stand up straight and I'm horrified to realize that I'm about to faint. While he certainly has an effect on me, Superman's never actually made me faint before. I sway forward and he catches me, pulling me firmly back against him. I can faintly hear him asking me what's wrong above the static in my head. I try to tell him that I have no idea what's going on, but then everything goes black.

The next thing I know, Superman is holding me and saying my name in increasingly urgent tones.

"I'm okay," I mumble automatically. "What happened?"

"I don't know." He scans the crowd around us and then looks back at me. "I need to go now, will you be all right?"

"Sure. Fine." I'm actually still feeling a little discombobulated, but I'd rather appear competent and professional. I must be somewhat convincing, because he lets me go and turns away.

Then the strangest thing happens. Superman makes an odd skipping motion and then hesitates, as if he's feeling as out of it as I am. He bends down and picks up a camcorder that appears to be smoking. He glances around and then directly at me. His mouth opens like he's about to say something, and then he shrugs and walks away, still holding the camcorder.

"Wow, he's acting kinda weird," says the guy standing next to me.

It would seem disloyal to say it aloud, but I silently agree with the man. I look around for Clark, but he's nowhere to be seen. That figures. I'll ask him back at the newsroom if he saw anything unusual in Superman's behavior.

Clark isn't there when I return; which means I'll be writing the story about the doll down the well alone. I'm doing the final read through when I accidentally bump my coffee cup. In a split second, three things seem to happen simultaneously. One -- the cup starts to tip. Two -- I push away from my desk so that I don't end up with coffee in my lap. Three -- and this is the weirdest of all -- my desk skates across the floor. The coffee cup hits the floor where my desk should be. It lands on its side and the contents spill out, leaving a dark puddle on the linoleum.

After a confused moment or two, I glance around. There are only a few other people in the newsroom since pretty much everyone is still out to lunch. None of them are looking in my direction. Still, I know that Jimmy has to be around here somewhere -- and probably with a video camera.

I get up and casually walk over to my desk, now six or seven feet from where it belongs. Another furtive look around the newsroom reveals that no one is watching. I tilt my head to check the legs of my desk. There are no wheels that I can see. I push against it and it moves easily to its rightful place. For the sake of thoroughness, I wiggle my chair. It's not bolted to the floor at all.

I grab a few tissues and kneel down to mop up the mess now sitting *under* my desk. And then I hear my name.

It's Perry, talking in his office. I can hear the every word plainly even though his door is closed. "Lois came back almost an hour ago," he says into the phone. "Where are you?"

A little fainter, but still distinct, I hear Clark say, "I wasn't feeling well, so I went home. I think I'm just going to take the rest of the day off, if that's okay with you, Chief?"

Perry's reply is lost on me as I comprehend that I'm actually hearing a phone conversation from twenty yards away and through a closed door. I stand up and put one finger against my desk and push gently. It eases forward a few inches. You'd think I was nudging my keyboard and not a heavy wooden object.

Oh. My. God.

I am, inexplicably, as strong as Superman. With his superhearing thrown in as a bonus.

Something must have happened when he grabbed me at the park. Why in the world did Superman transfer some of his powers to me? And how? Did he do it on purpose? Why didn't he warn me or say something about it to me?

I really need to talk to Superman. There's only one person in the world who seems able to get in touch with him at a moment's notice. It's a good thing that I know exactly where to find him.

Clark looks exhausted when he opens the door. His tie and suit coat are gone and the top two buttons on his shirt are undone. Normally I would find his relaxed look kind of sexy, but right now it seems to mirror the dazed look in his eyes. I easily push past him into his apartment, apologizing as I go.

"I'm sorry you're sick, Clark, but I need to find Superman." I'm at the bottom of his stairs when I see the camcorder from the park sitting on his table. "Wait a minute -- Superman's been here, hasn't he?"

Clark slumps against the banister; apparently answering the door was too much excitement for him. "Uh, yeah, he wanted me to check that camera out."

I take a precautionary step away from him, not wanting whatever germs Clark's picked up. "Why? What does this camcorder have to do with anything?"

He scrubs at his eyes as he answers. "There were two women who ran off at the park this morning. One was a TV reporter and the other had this camera. It shot out a red beam that hit Superman."

"And me," I remind him. "Did you miss the part where Superman grabbed me and spun me around? Where in the heck were you this morning anyway? I never even saw you at the park. And I think that's where it happened."

If it's possible, Clark suddenly looks even paler. "Where what happened?"

I look around conspiratorially and then lean closer to him to whisper, "Superman gave me some of his powers."

"What?" Clark couldn't look any more shocked than if I'd told him that I was Superman.

"It's true." I shrug and take hold of his waist, silently praying that I'm right and the ability hasn't worn off. To my relief, I lift him easily. "See."

Clark wriggles and I worry that I'm going to drop him. As soon as I set him down, he stumbles backward and stares at me in disbelief. He's definitely paler now -- I hope I didn't give him vertigo when I picked him up.

"Do you mind if I take that camera to STAR Labs?" I ask and point at his table. Clark blinks, but doesn't answer, so I keep talking. "Obviously, you're in no condition to go anywhere. So I'll take it and see what we can find out. In the meantime, maybe you could contact Superman and ask him to meet me there?"

"STAR Labs is a good idea." Clark shakes his head like he's still trying to wake up. "Do you remember Dr. Klein? Take the camcorder to him."

I pick up the camera as Clark watches me with dazed curiosity. "Cut it out," I tell him. "I'm still me. Don't treat me any differently just because I could squish your head the next time you irritate me."

Clark's stupefied expression morphs into a faint smile and he raises his hands in mock surrender. "I'll try to remember that."

I'm about to enter STAR Labs when I hear my name called. I turn around to see Superman jogging across the plaza toward me. We get through Security a lot faster than any of my previous visits to the Lab. There's a perk of being Superman that I don't think he shared with me.

As we walk to the elevator, I can scarcely wait to be alone with him. There are so many questions to ask him, not to mention that it's amazing to know that we're equals now. As soon as the doors slide shut I turn to him and ask, "Why did you do it?"

"Do what?" he asks.

"Share your powers with me. Was there a reason that you picked me?"

"I, uh..." He bows his head for a moment and then looks me in the eye. "I'm not entirely sure how that happened, Lois."

I have to swallow my disappointment as the elevator doors open. Superman politely waits for me to exit first. There are other people in the hallway now and I don't bring up the subject again.

A balding man leans his head out of a doorway at the end of the hall. "Superman," he says and gestures for us to join him. Even though I've met Dr. Klein before, he stares at me without a flicker of recognition and asks, "And is this Lois? The one who now has your powers? Is that the video camera you told me about?"

"Here." I hand the camera to Dr. Klein. He looks so pleased with the camera that I'm half-expecting for him to start cracking his knuckles in anticipation after he sets it down. Superman continues walking to the end of the long countertop.

"I think there's something in that camera," he tells us. "I'd prefer to keep it at a distance. I get around that thing and I start feeling disconnected."

"Hmm, curious." Dr. Klein taps one finger to his chin and then gives me an assessing look. I feel like a bug under a magnifying glass as Dr. Klein gawks at me. "Tell me, Lois, which powers have you accrued? Strength? Hearing? Vision? Flying?"

"Strength. I, uh, I pushed a heavy desk across the floor like it was nothing. And the hearing. I can hear people talking all around us right now."

"It's probably best if you don't listen in," Dr. Klein says with a frown. "I'm not sure what your security clearance is."

"Oh, I'm not! It's just background noise, really. I didn't even realize I was hearing other people until someone said my name when I shouldn't have been able to hear them. It caught my attention."

Superman gives me an understanding nod. "That happens."

"What's through that wall?" Dr. Klein points at the back of the laboratory.

I look at the wall but all I see is a plain old wall. There's a poster that reads 'Did you run your QA log?' and a door. I squint a little and concentrate and the wall seems to dissolve in front of me.

"Oh my gosh! I can see through it! Uh, it looks like a break room? There's a TV, a couch, a table and chairs."

"Very good," Dr. Klein says approvingly.

I grin at Superman, absolutely delighted with this gift. "Do you have any idea how useful this is going to be? I can see through walls and hear conversations now. People will start calling me 'super-journalist'."

Superman looks like he's fighting a smile as he answers. "Yes, it's very useful."

"What about flight?" Dr. Klein asks.

"I haven't really tried that. Uh--" I try to think of floating, but nothing happens. "Maybe I'm doing it wrong?"

Superman shakes his head. "Don't worry about it."

"So what do I do now?"

Dr. Klein taps his chin again before speaking. "I'd avoid interaction with others as much as possible. If word gets out that Superman's powers are transferable, we could have a mess on our

hands."

"Avoid others? Are you kidding me? Am I supposed to barricade myself in my apartment for the rest of my life?"

Dr. Klein looks offended that I'm taking this so harshly.
"Only for a day or two. Until we can set things right."

"Right? Set what right? Did you miss the part where I said that I *enjoy* having these powers?"

Dr. Klein stares at me in open-mouthed horror for a few seconds. Then he turns accusingly to Superman and asks, "You didn't tell her?"

"Tell me what?" I glare at both of them and wish the power to read minds had been included in this package. "What aren't you telling me?"

"When Dr. Klein said that my powers had transferred to you," Superman says haltingly. "He meant it literally."

Hours later I'm sitting in the break room with my head down on the table. It's been a long and exhausting day and my new powers are no longer exhilarating. Now they're frightening. I've pulled the knobs off of two doors and broken a countertop in half -- all without even trying.

I've gone over and over the events in the park for Dr. Klein, trying to find the point in the sequence when the actual power transfer occurred. Superman's experience was similar to mine -- the pink haze, the mental cloudiness and, for him, the sudden loss of all his super abilities.

After taking the camera apart, Dr. Klein found a small chunk of red rock wedged behind the shattered lens. A sample of it under the microscope revealed that it has all the same properties as Kryptonite -- it's just the wrong color. Superman stoically allowed Klein to place the rock right next to him. Nothing happened. He didn't feel any pain, he said. His posture and attitude, however, grew decidedly more apathetic the longer he was exposed to it. It had zero effect on me.

I hear footsteps approaching the door and, because I can, I lift my head and squint at the door. It's Superman -- and he's paused in the hall outside with his head tilted like he's trying to listen. I wonder how quiet his world must be now -- without the constant hum of people talking in the background.

Further down the hall, someone calls out to Superman and he turns and walks in their direction. I'm sorry to see him go -- I feel absolutely alone. It's the oddest sensation, being surrounded by the noise and din of humanity and yet feeling completely isolated.

Not for the first time today, I wish that Clark were here. And then it dawns on me -- I'm supposed to meet him in less than an hour for dinner. Assuming, of course, that he's not still sick. I look at the phone on wall and decide I'd better call him.

His phone rings four times and then his answering machine picks up.

"Hi, Clark, it's me. Are you there? I hope you're feeling better." Behind me, I hear the door squeak open. I half-turn, catching sight of Superman in the corner of my eye. He gives me a nod in greeting as I continue speaking. "I'm sorry, but I think I'm going to have to cancel our date tonight. I, uh, I guess I'll call you later, okay?"

After I hang up the phone, Superman asks, "How are you?"

"Honestly?" I let out a sigh. "I'm feeling a little discouraged.

I'm a walking disaster. How do you do it?"

"It will get easier." Superman comes closer and gives my shoulder a squeeze. "Pretty soon being careful just becomes second nature."

"Is that how you do it, then? It's just second nature? Because this is giving me a new appreciation for you. Even if it's second nature, it's got to be tedious having to always be careful."

"The only time I ever feel completely free is when I'm flying." His voice is low and wistful.

"Unfortunately, flying is the one thing I can't seem to be able to do."

"Maybe you're thinking too hard about it?" he suggests.

"Thinking too hard? Is that how you fly? You think happy thoughts and it just happens?"

"No." He breaks into a laugh. "I'm not Peter Pan and there's no fairy dust involved."

"I'll make you a deal," I tell him. "You teach me how to fly and I'll gladly give your powers back when Dr. Klein figures out how to reverse us."

He holds his hand out to me. "Deal."

I shake his hand carefully and quickly release it. I already made him wince earlier today when I grabbed his arm without thinking. "So what do I do?"

"Well, first..." He pauses and thinks for a moment. "We should get you comfortable with the idea of being off the ground. Close your eyes."

I do. Without anything else to distract me, I can hear his heart beating and it feels incredibly intimate. I hear him take a breath and release it slowly. "Do you know how I learned that I could fly?"

I open my eyes a little to peek at him -- I had no idea he was actually going to share something personal with me. "How?"

"There was a quarry, not far from where I grew up. That was one of the greatest boasts that you could make at my high school -- that you had jumped into the quarry."

"You went to high school?" My eyes are wide open now. "Here? On Earth, I mean?"

For a second his expression looks horrified and I wonder if he's regretting his decision to tell me this story. Just as quickly, his features shift back to the pleasant smile he usually wears.

"Yes, I grew up here. Well, not Metropolis, but here on Earth."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt. Tell me the rest. Did you jump and change your mind halfway down?"

"No." He shakes his head and grins and suddenly his smile seems familiar, even though I'm quite certain I've never seen Superman look happily nostalgic before. "I jumped and it was just as terrifying and amazing as people had claimed. Only I forgot one thing."

"What?"

"A rope." He lets out a rueful chuckle. "The rope people used to haul themselves out had been removed a few months earlier to deter jumpers. So one of my friends left to find a rope while the rest of us waited and, well, teenaged boys tend to egg each other on a lot. So I jumped in, just to prove that I wasn't chicken. The water was cold and I kept thinking that if hypothermia didn't kill me, my parents certainly would when I came home soaking wet. I didn't know then that I had heat vision -- or that I was invulnerable to the cold."

There are so many questions I want to ask -- the fact that he has parents and boyhood friends for starters -- but I don't want him to stop the story.

"So then what happened?" I ask.

"I decided to climb out. I made it about halfway up the cliff wall before I slipped and went right back in the water. So I tried it again, only that time, when I slipped, I remember thinking that I just wasn't going to fall. And I didn't. The higher I climbed, the more I realized that I was doing it without much effort. I got to the rim about the same time my friend came back with a rope." His eyes gleam at the remembrance. "I was a legend for that. The only person ever to jump the quarry and then climb back out."

"So you can only fly when it's necessary?"

"No, I can fly -- could fly -- whenever I wanted after that. But first I had to figure out that it was simply a matter of trusting in my ability to do so. Later that night, I snuck out of the house and went back to the quarry. I knew it was potentially stupid, jumping in with no one around to help if I got in trouble, but I had to see if

I was right. So I jumped -- only that time I stopped myself before I hit the water. I did a few times, actually. Jumped, stopped before the water, and then flew back to the edge. It was exhilarating. I don't know that anything has ever matched that feeling of being absolutely free."

He clears his throat and his expression turns serious again. "So close your eyes, and believe that there's nothing weighing you down. Imagine that gravity no longer applies to you."

I close my eyes and try to picture Superman as a teenager; free and happy as he subverts both the law of gravity and his parents' rules. For some odd reason I'm imagining that his parents look like Clark's. I can easily imagine Clark coming home dripping wet and pleased with himself, even though he knows he's about to catch hell for being reckless.

Except I'm not supposed to be thinking about Clark. I'm supposed to be thinking happy airborne thoughts and scoffing at the laws of physics. I mentally chant to myself that gravity means nothing to me. I don't really believe it, though -- gravity has never exactly been my friend.

I open my eyes and nothing has happened. "Maybe I should click my heels," I suggest sarcastically.

"I still think you're trying too hard. It's not something you concentrate on to make happen, it's something that happens when you-- let go."

"Let go?"

He nods encouragingly. "Exactly. Just let go and it will happen."

I close my eyes again and take a deep breath, then release it slowly, imagining that the air escaping me is lifting me higher. Superman lets out a soft laugh.

I open my eyes and realize that I'm now a few inches taller than he is. I glance down and feel myself start to dip. No! I hurriedly push out another breath and it works -- I rise higher into the room. The higher I go, the more giddy I am.

"See, you're a natural." He sounds delighted.

My head bumps against my ceiling and I laugh at the sheer absurdity of the situation. "I can't believe I'm not falling."

"You'll never fall, once you've figured out the trick," he assures me. "Now you know that you can do it, it's easy, isn't it?"

I drift back towards the floor, then swoop back into the air just as my toes start to touch down. He's right, now that I believe I can do it, it's as simple to fly as it is to breathe. Superman is still smiling, but I wonder if this is hard for him -- watching me do what he was born to do.

"I'm sorry," I tell him as I come back to earth. "This must be so frustrating for you."

His eyebrows furrow and he shrugs. "If I had to lose my powers, Lois, I'm glad they went to you."

There's a pause between us while I argue with myself over whether to ask him if he'd trust me to take him flying. Before I can work up the nerve to ask, he gestures at the door and says, "Dr. Klein sent me to tell you that it's getting late and you can go home now. He said he should have some news for us in the next day or two."

After I get home, it takes me almost half an hour to work up the courage to climb outside my window. My knees shake as I crawl out onto the ledge. I take a deep breath and let my feet dangle. I can't do it. I know I can fly -- really I do, but I just can't jump. I close my eyes, let out another breath and push away from the ledge.

Nothing happens.

I open my eyes and there's the street, five stories below me. I don't fall -- I simply hover there in delighted wonder. It's one thing to drift with the floor just below you. It's another to float this high above the ground.

For almost a minute I stay there, watching the cars and people pass below me. Then I lift higher, above the roof of my

building, my confidence increasing with every passing second. I fly -- FLY! -- in the direction of the one person with whom I simply have to share this.

Clark is sitting on the end of his bed with his head bowed when I land on his back porch. His phone is sitting next to him. He looks dejected and I wonder who he just talked to and what they said. He definitely looks like he could use a friend.

I tap on the glass to get his attention. He looks up and his eyes widen in surprise, but he walks over to open the door for me.

As I come inside, I ask him, "Aren't you wondering how I got onto your back porch?"

Clark raises one eyebrow, as if I've just insulted his intelligence. "Well, considering how you tossed me around earlier today, I'm going to assume that you flew here."

"I didn't *toss* you around." I glare at him, a little insulted by his version of events.

"No," he concedes with a smile. "You didn't."

I grin back in relief -- he was only kidding. A rush of affection for him spills through me. Only Clark dares to tease me like this. He's done it since practically the day we met. It took some time, but I eventually realized that he wasn't mocking me; he was acknowledging me. It's the verbal equivalent of a wink. There's something reassuring about having one person in the world who isn't fooled by my blunt personality.

I hold my hand out to him. "Wanna fly with me?"

Clark doesn't say a word and I can't tell if he's speechless because he thinks I'm kidding or if he's trying to find a polite way to decline.

"Come on, Clark, I promise I won't drop you. This is the coolest thing that's ever happened to me, and I want someone to share it with. Fly with me. Please?"

A very long two or three seconds tick by before he reaches out and takes my hand and softly says, "All right."

It isn't until we're outside and standing on his balcony that I wonder how I'm supposed to do this. Superman has cradled me in his arms the few times when he's flown with me, but it would feel weird to hold Clark like that. I let go of his hand and giggle involuntarily.

"So, um--" I gesture at him and shrug. "I'm not, uh, not sure what the protocol is for this. I mean, should I carry you or hold on to you or --?"

"Having you hold me sounds nice." His eyebrow quirks lecherously upward and it's only the fact that I would hurt him that stops me from giving him a playful shove. Besides, he's right. It does sound nice. Really, really nice.

I put my hands on his waist, just like I did earlier today when I picked him up. I take a deep breath and then, just as my feet are starting to lose contact with the floor, my confidence wavers and I immediately return to earth.

I look up at Clark and wonder if he realizes that I'm quietly freaking out. I don't want him to lose faith in me, but I feel like I need to justify why we're still standing here. "If you, uh, get scared, or we go too high, or anything like that, just let me know."

He nods. "All right."

This suddenly seems like a very bad idea. Just because I can fly and I can lift him doesn't mean that I should do both at the same time. What if I drop him? I try to give him a way out. "I won't take it personally, if you don't want to do this."

"Lois." His hands move to my waist, loosely holding us together. "Just relax. It's okay. I trust you."

I search his eyes for a moment and see that he really does mean it. Clark trusts me. He absolutely trusts me. I'm not sure I'd trust him this much if he showed up at my apartment claiming to have Superman's powers and asked me to go flying with him.

"Please," Clark adds softly. "I'd really love it if you'd take me flying." He gives me an encouraging smile and I can't help smiling back.

I take a deep breath and release it slowly. Just like my first attempt under Superman's guidance, I mentally picture us both rising higher as I exhale. We lift off of the patio by a few inches and I glance down to check that Clark is with me. He is. There's a flutter in my stomach as I comprehend that *I'm* the one making this happen. We drift higher -- almost as high as the roof of his building -- and I look at him to judge his reaction.

Clark grins at me. "Keep going."

"Are you sure?" I flex my fingers to test my hold on him. It's strange how little effort it takes to lift him.

"Absolutely." He lets out an exhale that's half-laugh, half-sigh. "Take us higher, please."

We gain altitude, soaring above his rooftop and then higher still. The expression on Clark's face must be what pure joy looks like. Soon we're so high that even the tallest buildings in Metropolis are beneath our feet and I stop rising, just letting us float. Float is really the best word for it -- the sensation is that same curious weightlessness as being in deep water. Only we're not getting wet and the city is spread out beneath us like a wonderland of fairy lights.

My eyes trace the dark sweep of the rivers below, following their path to the black expanse of ocean. It's hard to differentiate between the horizon and the ocean, which adds to the illusion that we're suspended in dark water.

"Wow," I whisper. "I've never seen the city like this before. Do you think he does this?"

"Superman?" Clark asks.

"Of course. Do you think he hangs out up here sometimes?"

"Sure." Clark sounds almost wistful as he tips his head back to study the stars above us. "It's so quiet."

"You're right! You know, there's been this dull roar in my ears -- all the traffic, people, machinery. It was giving me a headache."

He tilts his head to look at me instead of the stars. "What do you hear now?"

I listen for a few seconds. The city below seems so distant and muted now. And yet I can clearly hear a steady rhythm and I wonder if it's true that cities have a pulse. Then it dawns on me that what I'm hearing is Clark's heartbeat and not Metropolis. It feels far too intimate, like I'm spying on him somehow, so I leave it out of my answer.

"Just, uh, just kind of a far-away humming noise."

"That's good." Clark's arms tighten around me, bringing us closer together.

"You'll tell me if you're getting cold, won't you?" I ask him. "Or if you start feeling nervous or--."

"I'm not cold," he says softly. "Please, let's just stay here a little longer."

I want to stay with him like this forever and the realization sets off a small spark of panic inside me. Too late, I realize that I can't simply walk out on him if I start getting cold feet. There's no door to slam. There's nothing but me and Clark and the sound of his heartbeat. It's so cozy and intimate and yet I can't stop myself from ruining it by blurting out, "Are you sure? I mean I did threaten to squish your head earlier today. What's to stop me from dropping you now?"

Clark doesn't tense and his heartbeat remains slow and steady. "Did you bring me up here just to drop me?"

"Of course not," I reassure him, feeling terrible that I suggested it. "I would never let you fall."

Our eyes meet and his pulse quickens. Mine races to match it. The breeze around us picks up a little and it blows my hair across my face. Clark tucks a wayward strand behind my ear. His hand stays there, keeping my hair tamed. It's a faintly possessive

gesture that makes me wish Clark would cradle my face between both his hands and kiss me.

At this moment, I've never wanted to kiss anyone more in my life. In spite of the breathtaking view below us, Clark is looking at me like I'm his entire universe. Maybe it's the moonlight or maybe it's his trust in me or maybe it's the way I can hear his heart racing with anticipation, but he's suddenly my whole world.

His face tilts closer to mine and my eyes slide shut, anticipating his kiss. His thumb traces over my cheekbone as his lips brush lightly over mine. He does it again, a little slower. Then again, this time catching my lower lip gently between his. His hand goes to the back of my head and he deepens the kiss.

I'm almost afraid to really kiss him back -- what if I hurt him? What if we lose altitude because I'm distracted? What if I drop him? And then I hear it -- it's not much more than a whisper -- but its effect is like cold water and my head jerks back.

"Help! Superman!"

"Is someone in trouble?" Clark asks.

Thank goodness he hasn't interpreted my distraction as ambivalence about kissing him! "Yes, I think so. And Superman can't--. Oh god, Clark, what do I do?"

"Let's check it out," he suggests.

"Together?"

"Would you rather I just wait here?" he teases.

"Hold on," I tell him, tightening my arms around him. And then I realize that, while I may be able to fly and float, I have no clue how to get there fast. "How do you think he does this? I--"

"Just drop," Clark suggests. "We'll pick up speed as we go."

"Drop?" My whole body goes cold at the realization that I'm messing with powers that don't belong to me. I'm going to end up hurting Clark -- and be too late to save the frantic woman whose cries I can't ignore. "Clark, I can't--."

"Yes, you can. Just drop and let gravity do the rest. Trust that you can stop us. No matter how fast we fall, you're in control. All you have to do is concentrate on moving toward where the emergency is without hitting any buildings on the way. It's all about reflexes and steering. Just drop."

How can he be so certain? There isn't really time to argue with him about it, so I decide to give it a try. I let go of the floating sensation keeping us aloft and my stomach seems to be left behind as we start to fall. I stop us immediately and tighten my arms around him.

"See -- you can stop us at any time. Don't worry about me," Clark urges. "Just go."

And then we're in a free fall, descending so fast that I gulp for air against the winds buffeting us. Clark doesn't seem frightened by the fact that we're plummeting so swiftly and his trust does wonders for my confidence. I'm relieved to find that it takes only a subtle shift to maneuver us as we hurtle headlong towards the ground. It's really not that hard to zip out of the way of buildings. If it weren't for the anxious calls for help, I'd probably enjoy this.

As we get closer and closer to the sound of the cries, my other senses kick in. I can smell the acrid tang of smoke and hear the shrill blare of the fire trucks' sirens as they approach. There's an old apartment building, seven stories high, with flames and black smoke pouring from most of the windows on the top floor. In one of the few windows not consumed by fire, a frantic woman is shrieking for Superman's help. Scores of people are standing on the sidewalk below, calling reassurances to her or just gawking in horrified awe.

"Land in the alley behind the building," Clark suggests.

"Then go in through the back as fast as you can to get to her. If the flames aren't that close, take her out through a back window. Try to bring her somewhere where there aren't a lot of people."

Clark's right. I can't be seen. It would complicate everything if someone were to see me.

As we touch down in the darkened alley, Clark gives my shoulders a squeeze. "Be careful."

I nod and dash away, crashing through a door on the back of the building and marveling at how easy and unpainful that was to do. But how invulnerable am I? If I run into the flames, will it hurt? There's no fire here, so it's too soon to tell. I find the stairwell and run up, making it to the top in an unbelievable two seconds.

On the other side of the door is an inferno. I give myself a little pep talk: I can do this. Look how fast I got upstairs. Racing down the hallway to where the fire hasn't reached yet will be easy. I can feel the heat now and I realize that, under normal circumstances, I probably would be spontaneously combusting. I take a deep breath and run forward. The woman's shrieks have now become sobs and I feel a stab of guilt that it took me much longer than Superman to get here.

The far end of the hallway is free of flames and the smoke isn't overwhelming just yet. I push down the door of her apartment and yell, "Hello?"

A middle-aged woman in a blue nightgown with green curlers in her hair turns from the window and stares at me in surprise. She's clutching a small white and gray dog. The poor thing has its head buried beneath his mistress' arm and is whimpering softly.

"Where is he?" the woman asks me sadly. "I thought Superman would have been here by now." She gives the dog a reassuring pat and croons, "Right, baby? Yes, he will. Superman will save us."

"You need to come with me," I tell her.

"There's no way out -- the stairs are on fire!" She gapes at me like I'm insane and turns back to the window. "Oh, thank god," she says in obvious relief. "At least the fire department is here."

"Come on," I say and take a step closer to her. "Let's get out of here."

She ignores me to wave one arm out the window to catch the attention of the firefighters. Her dog watches me warily from beneath her other arm.

What to do? On the face of it, I can understand her skepticism. She's expecting Superman, not me. Still, it's a little depressing to be rejected out of hand.

"If I have to," I warn her, "I'll pick you up and carry you out of here."

This earns a derisive snort from her that increases my irritation with her. Does she really think I won't do it? She probably has a good forty pounds on me, but she has no idea who she's up against.

I try again. "Last chance. I'm getting you out of here one way or the other."

She shakes her head and I march forward, grabbing her shoulders to pull her back from the window. The dog snarls and she instinctively puts both arms around the hapless creature so she won't drop him. I drag her backward, as she kicks and screams in terror. The dog whines and struggles to escape. This is a mess. I have a sudden vision of having to chase them both down while the building collapses around us.

The dog gets free, but I grab the scruff of his neck with one hand before he can bolt away. He wriggles and snaps at me while the woman begins to swear a blue streak. I change my hold on her so that my arm is across her chest and she's braced against my hip. Then I move, flying across the apartment and out the window in a blur.

The women screams like she's being murdered as we take to the air outside. Below us, I hear the crowd gasp as a single organism and then we're gone, over the building to land in the dark alley where I left Clark. The moment I set them down, the woman collapses, sobbing incoherently, and the dog runs to hide behind a nearby dumpster.

"You're safe now," I tell her, offended by her ingratitude.

"Go away!" She waves one arm weakly to drive me back. Her teeth are chattering, but I don't think it's because she's cold. "Leave me alone!"

A hand touches my elbow and Clark softly says, "You should get out of here."

"I didn't hurt her!" I tell him defensively. "I swear. I didn't hurt her at all."

"She's just in shock. She'll be fine in a few minutes. Go home."

"What about you?"

"I'll walk. It's only a few blocks to my place. It's better if no one gets a picture of you flying, let alone taking someone along with you."

I'm still feeling dejected when I get home. I saved that woman's life and all she could do was act like I'd tried to kill her. I take a shower to get rid of the smoky smell and then flop onto my bed. The suspense is too much for me and I turn on the television to see if there's any mention of my pitiful attempt at being a hero.

There's nothing. I should be relieved, but I'm a little disappointed. I don't want anyone to know it was *me*, but it would have been nice to get a mention. Has the world become so inured to a flying man that a woman with the same ability doesn't even raise an eyebrow?

I turn off the television and stare at my ceiling. Above me I can hear that my neighbor's watching something with a lot of moaning and heavy breathing while a saxophone trills. I turn on my radio alarm clock, but the sounds are still there, on the periphery of my mind.

How does Superman manage to stay sane, with this much background noise? I didn't notice it so much until I spent those blissful few minutes above Metropolis with Clark. I throw one arm across my eyes and mutter, "Oh, Superman. It sucks to be you."

And then another sound distracts me -- a siren working its way across the city in a hurry. I'd rather face rejection again than listen to my neighbor's dirty movie. I dress quickly, all in black, so that I'll blend into the shadows.

I follow the sound of the sirens to find that a warehouse has collapsed, trapping a man inside. I sneak in through the dock area, hoping that I can do something to help the man pinned beneath a beam. Several cops and EMTs are crowded around him discussing how to proceed as he groans and pleads with them for help. I can't march into the middle of that group and lift the beam without revealing myself. Should I leave it to the machinery that they're waiting for? The trapped man's entreaties are becoming weaker. I rise to the far end of the jutting beam. It's lying across the top of a smashed forklift too. What if I used the forklift as a fulcrum? Then I could lift the beam without anyone seeing me.

I push down on the beam. It lifts a tiny bit, but not enough to get the man out. I try again, putting some oomph and pressure into it, and the beam sinks a few more inches. On the other side of the warehouse I hear the rescue workers start exclaiming. They waste no time in sliding the man clear and call out to me, "Thanks, Superman! We've got him!"

I release the beam slowly, just in case anyone's toes are in the way, and then I dash outside and take flight. From high above the warehouse, I squint down at it and see them loading the injured worker into an ambulance.

Another cry reaches me and I rush in the direction of it. Adrenaline courses through me as I wonder what's happened -- and how I can help.

It's a good thing that flying is effortless, because I couldn't have walked home by the end of the night. I'm lying on my bed, too exhausted to sleep, when I hear a knock on the door. I squint

in that direction and catch a glimpse of Clark standing there.

For a second or two I think about ignoring him and pulling a pillow over my head to block out the light so I can sleep. But then he knocks again. I sit up wearily and then stumble for the door. As soon as I have it open, Clark holds up the early edition of the Metropolis Star with a 32 point headline: "Superman's Sister? Mystery Flier Saves Woman, Dog".

I take the paper and quickly scan through the article. The woman I rescued described me as a scrawny and aggressive brunette. My exhaustion burns away in a rush of indignation.

"Scrawny?" I look up at Clark in disbelief. "Do you think I'm scrawny? Scrawny and aggressive?"

"She was expecting Superman," Clark tries to placate me.

I glare at the paper and it bursts into flames.

"Whoa!" Clark grabs the paper and throws it to the floor, stomping on it with his foot to put the fire out. "Let's consider the source. It's the Star, Lois. You know they always take the low road."

"What about the Planet and the other dailies? Anything?"

"Nothing yet, but Perry wants us all over the story."

I sigh and head for my couch. My exhaustion seems even worse now. "Clark, what am I going to do? No one can find out that it was me. I'll never have a moment's peace if it's splashed all over the news that I have Superman's powers."

Clark joins me on the couch. "So don't tell anyone."

"But what am I going to do the next time I hear someone calling for help? I can't do this, Clark. I can't be him."

"No one is asking you to do that." Clark's hand pats the middle of my back.

"I know." I rub my eyes, trying to ease their scratchiness. "But I couldn't just lie there in bed last night and listen to everyone calling for help and do nothing."

Clark's hand leaves my back and he sounds a little worried as he asks, "You went out again last night?"

Igulp in a breath of air and nod as the memory floods back. "It was bad." My voice becomes a squeaky whisper when I try to explain. "There was this man in a car accident and I didn't get there in time."

"You can't save everyone." Clark takes my hand in his and squeezes it gently. "No matter how fast you are, sometimes you still won't be able to help them."

I let out a choked laugh. "Would you believe I've told Superman that before? It just feels so different on this side of the cape."

Clark's fingers stroke over mine to soothe me. And it works. I relax against him and my head comes to rest against his shoulder. For the first time since last night, I can feel the tension leaving me. My eyelids slide shut and I exhale deeply. I've fallen asleep on Clark's shoulder before and I wonder if he'd let me do it again now.

"What should I do, Clark?" I whisper.

"Take a long, hot shower; that might help. And then go back to bed for a while. You don't have to go to the newsroom this morning, I told Perry that we'd be out beating the sidewalks to try and track down the mystery woman."

"You lied for me?" The words feel thick and far away, like they're coming from someone else. I can't believe that Clark would risk his job for me.

He shrugs and the motion jiggles my head where it rests against him. "What are partners for?"

"Mmmm, thanks." If I wasn't dead-tired right now, I might try kissing him again. That was a nice kiss last night. I sigh, drawn into a dreamy memory of that kiss and the feeling of floating in Clark's arms. Only this time, instead of a call for help, our kiss ends with Clark promising to check on me later.

I wake up to the ringing of a phone. I reach out and pull the

receiver close to my ear.

"Lo?" I mutter thickly.

"Lois? I'm at STAR Labs—"

"Clark?" I sit up and stare in disbelief at my alarm clock. It's almost two in the afternoon; I've been asleep for hours. I'm in my bedroom, even though the last thing I remember is sitting on the couch, snuggled against Clark's shoulder.

"Yes," he answers. "Dr. Klein thinks he has that camera fixed and he asked me to call you."

"Is Superman there too?" I ask.

"Yes, he's here."

"Okay, tell them I'll be there in a few minutes."

"Hey, Lois?" I can practically hear his smile through the phone. "You might want to drive here instead of flying in broad daylight."

"Oh, yeah." I glance around the room and see that Clark pulled my blinds closed before he left. And there's a blanket over my legs. I wish I had been awake enough to remember Clark tucking me in. "Okay, uh, tell them I'll be there in half an hour."

When I arrive at STAR Labs, my name is on the list and I'm immediately allowed access. I'm given a visitor's badge and an intern to escort me. As we ride down in the elevator, I reflect on how much I've learned about Superman since I stood here with him yesterday. For one, if he has a real life, I hope it's with people who know his secret and can support him the way Clark helped me this morning. After only one day in Superman's boots, I'm exhausted both emotionally and physically.

Superman is waiting in the hallway when the elevator doors open; obviously someone called to say I was here now. The intern gives Superman a wave and stays in the elevator. I ask Superman about Clark as we walk down the hall together.

He hesitates for a moment before saying, "He had to leave."

A little ripple of disappointment goes through me and I just barely manage to choke out a glum "oh" in reply.

Superman stops in front of a door and holds it open for me. I step inside and realize that this is the same break-room I saw through the wall yesterday.

"We're going to do the transfer here?" I ask, more than a little bewildered.

"No, they're still fine-tuning the camera. Dr. Klein thought you'd be more comfortable waiting in here."

The television mounted on the wall is on one of the cable news channels. They're airing a story about the warehouse collapse from last night. I sit down on the couch just as the newscaster announces that Gerald Brookstone, age fifty-three, died on the way to the hospital.

"He died?" I whisper in disbelief. "I didn't help at all! Maybe I even made things worse. Maybe I should have taken him to the hospital myself or—"

"Lois." Superman sits down next to me and takes my hand in his. It's so reminiscent of Clark this morning that it just makes me miss him even more. "You did the best you could. You can't save everyone -- no one can. He was in an ambulance when he died, with qualified medical personnel and even they couldn't save him. It's not your fault."

I shake my head. He wasn't there, so he can't really know--. Except he does. If anyone would know, it would have to be Superman.

"Does this happen a lot?" I ask him, my voice hoarse with unshed tears. "Do you find out later that you only delayed the inevitable?"

Superman's dark eyes search mine, as if he's trying to determine how much of the awful truth he should reveal. "You can't play God with people's lives, Lois. All you can do is try to help, but in the end, it's not up to you. No matter how fast you can fly, or how strong you are, you can't save everyone." He

gives me a gentle smile. "You told me that once, remember?"

"I don't want to be you anymore," I confess, wishing the words were enough to make it happen. "I want my life back. How do you do it? How do you get up each morning -- assuming you even slept the night before -- and go out there and be *you*? Don't you get tired?"

"Sometimes," Superman admits softly.

I look at him again and I can see that he does look tired. And sad -- there's definitely sorrow in his eyes. It triggers a rush of compassion for him inside me. Who does Superman go home to? Does he even have a home? What would I have done without Clark last night and, most especially, this morning?

"Please tell me that you have someone who understands all this." I squeeze his hand gently. "Please tell me that sometimes you get to have a real life."

"Sometimes." Superman ducks his head and I suddenly feel like I'm prying -- I can understand now why he'd want to keep that side of him private. "It's not an easy balance, Lois."

"Last night I went flying above Metropolis. Do you ever do that?"

"I've never done that with a beautiful woman in my arms." Does he have any idea how flustered I get when he smiles at me like this? Is he teasing me? Flirting with me?

"You've never asked me," I whisper.

"My mistake." His smile fades and I hear his heart rate increase. "Lois, I need to tell you--."

The door opens and Dr. Klein waves for us to follow him. "I think we're ready now."

I glance at Superman in time to see his eyes close in frustration. "What did you want to say?"

Superman shakes his head and stands up. "It'll have to wait."

Dr. Klein leads us to a long and narrow room with a glass wall at one end. The camera that Superman found at the park is mounted on a tripod in front of the glass wall. Behind the glass stands a man in a lab coat who is muttering to himself as he double-checks something on the clipboard he's holding. Dr. Klein leads us to the far end, away from the glass and has us rehearse for him again how we were standing when the beam hit us. Then he positions us so that my back is to the camera and Superman is standing in front of me.

Dr. Klein steps back for a few seconds. He takes hold of my shoulders and moves me an inch to the right. Then he clears his throat and tells us he's going to the booth.

I'm nervous -- terrified actually. What if it hurts? What if the powers leave me, but don't return to him? What if it doesn't work? What if I'm stuck being "super" for the rest of my life? Is this how he feels? I put Superman on a pedestal and now I'm realizing just how unfair my expectations were. I've misjudged him. The familiar red and yellow of his 'S' blur in front of me as I comprehend that his suit is really just a costume -- a disguise. It's a way to help people without having to worry that the press -- people like *me* -- would be pounding down his door. To say nothing of the weirdoes like Jason Trask and Arianna Carlin and the Vale brothers.

"Lois, you don't have to do this," Superman says quietly, apparently mistaking my reticence for regret at losing his powers.

I give him a watery smile, wishing I could explain my feelings. "The flying was fun, but I don't want to be you anymore."

I don't realize how much I'm shaking until Superman gently takes hold of my shoulders. "You didn't have to help people last night."

"Neither do you. Have to help people, I mean. But you do. I've always respected you for that, but now I really know why. It's not just the powers; it's what you do with them that's so amazing."

"You are just as amazing," he tells me earnestly.

"No, I'm not. I used your powers to tease Clark. I told him I was going to drop him."

Superman grins at me, his eyes dancing with amusement. "We both know that you would never drop him."

"No, of course not. But you wouldn't tease someone like that."

"Maybe I've never had anyone I knew well enough to tease that way." His hands slide down my arms as he lets go of my shoulders.

I shake my head, feeling even more miserable that he's trying to make me feel better.

There's a crackle of static from the two-way speaker overhead. "Counting down, in ten, nine--."

My knees suddenly buckle and Superman catches my arms, holding me up.

"Thanks," I choke out.

"I'd never let you fall." He gives me a tender smile as the words echo in my mind.

//Never let you fall. Never let you fall.//

I said those same words to Clark last night. Hearing them from Superman now feels like I've somehow come full circle and yet--

//Never let you fall.//

I stare at his mouth and the man I kissed last night coalesces into the same one standing in front of me now. No, I tell myself firmly. That's insane. There's no way--

//Never let you fall.//

All those lame excuses. All those times Clark disappeared for the flimsiest reason--

//Never let you fall.//

"Clark?" I whisper, scarcely believing it.

His eyes widen.

Dr. Klein continues his countdown, "--four, three--"

There's a loud screeching of tires and then a tremendous banging noise. I look up, trying to locate the source of the commotion. It's somewhere outside, above this basement level room. There are panicked screams and cries ringing in my ears and then something hot slams into my back.

I sway forward, reaching out for balance. My fingers slip over the slickness of his suit as my entire body shakes and my knees give out beneath me. True to his word, he doesn't let me fall. That same pink haze fills my vision as the screams fade. My mind spins, trying to comprehend everything that just happened.

Clark's head jerks up as he now hears the commotion above us. Then he looks at me, his expression torn between relief and anxiety. I understand just how invasive and disruptive super-hearing can be, so I push away from him, righting myself on wobbly legs.

"Lois--," he starts to say.

I wave my hand to express how urgent I know those cries are. "Go!"

He's gone in an instant.

As I leave STAR Labs, I can see that a garbage truck has collided with a bus on the far side of the plaza. Wailing sirens signal loudly that emergency vehicles are on their way. A growing crowd of people are watching Superman as he works to free the passengers trapped inside the bus. For the first time ever I can see past the flashy disguise of the superhero to the man I thought I knew.

It all makes sense now -- all those suddenly-remembered appointments and urgent errands. Clark wasn't leery of commitment or restless. He was selflessly giving up little pieces of his life to help others. No matter how inconvenient the interruption, Clark is simply too nice to ignore those cries for help. Superman helps people because he's Clark, not the other

way around.

I try to summon up some anger that Clark never told me, but after a day in his boots I know exactly why he wouldn't want to share his secret. I would never tell anyone something that profound and personal -- especially a take-no-prisoners reporter obsessed with the flashier parts of my appearance. Until yesterday, I sort of assumed that Superman simply faded into the background and waited for the next disaster. Knowing the truth is somehow worse. He does have a life -- but he has no one to go home to at night. I suppose he can visit his parents on a whim, but what does he do the rest of the time?

I already know the answer. He has a job -- one that he's damn good at doing. He sits through long and pointless meetings, edits my copy, and listens to me swoon over his alter ego. He takes me to lunch, brings me coffee, and saves my life. He's my best friend. Clark is the kind of friend who, even though he must have been shattered over losing his abilities, still took the time to teach me how to fly.

I told Clark last night that I wanted to take him flying because it was the coolest thing that had ever happened to me and I wanted someone to share it with. It's only now that I can recognize that he taught me how to fly for the very same reason. For the first time ever there was someone he could share the experience with; someone who could relate to his unique perspective and the delicate balancing act that is his life.

An ambulance has arrived on the scene and I watch in appreciative awe as Clark gently moves an injured woman onto a stretcher. There are so many things he could do with those powers and yet he only uses them to help. Clark's strength of character is even more amazing than the fact that he could bench press that bus without breaking a sweat.

With the woman safely loaded into the ambulance, Clark looks in my direction and I'm pretty sure he sees me watching him. Is it my imagination or does he hesitate for a moment before turning to talk to the EMT? A cold shiver of dread runs through me. What if Clark is regretting my newfound knowledge? It stands to reason that, had he wanted to share, he would have told me already. How weird are things going to be between us now?

Saddened by the thought that I may have lost more than I gained in finding out his secret, I turn and walk away.

As soon as I step out of the elevator, Perry catches sight of me and yells that he needs to see me in his office immediately. I sigh wearily and work my way across the newsroom. I know what Perry wants to talk about; I'm just not sure I'm up for the task. I don't even have the door closed before he starts in. "Do you have anything on that mystery woman yet?"

"No," I answer, hating the lie. I sweeten my deceit by adding, "There was an accident in front of STAR Labs and Superman showed up. I was able to speak with him. He doesn't know anything about the mystery woman either."

Perry frowns in annoyance. "So she's no relation?"

I shake my head. "No."

"Then we'll lead with that." Perry frowns again and goes behind his desk to sit down. He looks up at me with deliberately exaggerated curiosity. "Anything else?"

"Nope." I walk backwards, eager to leave. "I'll have something for you in an hour."

"Make it thirty minutes." Perry shuffles through some papers on his desk, shifting his irritation from me to other matters.

For at least the last ten minutes I've been staring at the half-truths on my computer's monitor. It feels as if the blinking cursor is mocking me with the story I can't share. My mind keeps returning to the moment when I called Superman 'Clark' and he didn't correct me. I look over at Clark's desk and wonder when he's going to return. What is he thinking, right now? Is he

avoiding me? Is he disappointed with me? After all, I only spent one day with his powers before I was eager to call it quits.

In spite of my current level of anxiety and the fact that I spent the morning napping, I'm still exhausted from last night. After a couple of slow blinks, I give in to the weariness and close my eyelids. The noise of the newsroom seems to lessen a little as I slip into the blissful remembrance of hovering high above Metropolis with Clark.

I remember the sound of his heartbeat and the way it sped up as our lips met. If only I hadn't had to leave to go rescue that ungrateful woman and her dog. Shame mixes with my regret. How many times has Clark gone to help someone and I've harangued him upon his return? Part of me wishes I could see Clark right now and apologize profusely for how deeply I've misunderstood him. The rest of me fears that since he never trusted me with his secret before, he might very well wish to avoid me now.

"Lois?"

I jerk back to reality to find Perry standing by my desk. I quickly jiggle the mouse to kill off the screen saver and blur out, "I was just reading through this once more before--."

"Send it," Perry interrupts. Gone is the brusque manner from earlier; now he's shifted to sounding paternal. "You look exhausted."

I stare at my keyboard, too drained to even try denying it.

"Go home." Perry raps his knuckles twice on my desk as if to say his decision is final and I can't appeal. "I'll see you tomorrow, bright and early."

By the time I get home I'm far more nervous than tired. At some point I'm going to have to talk to Clark. Neither one of us can avoid the other for the rest of our lives. Well, I guess he could. He could fly away to Outer Mongolia or the Arctic or some tiny island that only he knows about. I look at my couch and remember how nice it was to fall asleep against Clark's shoulder there this morning. My breath catches in my throat as I realize just how completely Clark understood my situation -- and just how much I've never understood his.

I go to the window and open it all the way. If he chances by surely he'll read that as an invitation? There's so much I want to reassure him about. I have a lot of questions, too, but I'm willing to wait until he's ready to give me the answers. Well, okay, there are a few questions I really would like him to answer as soon as possible. Starting with what he was going to tell me before Dr. Klein interrupted us.

Was he going to confess?

The more I think about it, the more consumed I am by curiosity. What was Clark about to say? What if he had been planning to tell me the truth before Dr. Klein interrupted us? Somehow that would be better, wouldn't it? It would show that he actually wanted me to know the truth. Usually, when I discover something big that someone has been hiding, my fingers itch to start typing. In this instance, with a first-hand knowledge of the life-changing stakes involved, all I can feel is intrusive. Please, Clark, give me a chance and I swear I'll prove that you can trust me.

I'm going to go crazy if I keep pacing around my apartment so I crawl out onto the fire escape and tip my head back to watch for him. After a few minutes, I sit down but continue scanning the gathering dusk above me for a glimpse of red cape. The lights of the city begin to come on and the temperature is rapidly dropping, but I don't want to go inside. If he flies by and sees me sitting out here, he'll know that I really, really want to talk to him.

Time slows to a crawl and the minutes feel like days as I sit there, growing colder but too fearful I'll miss him to go inside and grab a jacket. My attention drifts to a loose thread on the cuff

of my sleeve. I pick idly at it even though I know it might ruin the shirt. And then, suddenly and without a sound, Superman lands with cat-like grace in front of me.

My breath whooshes out of me and I have to struggle against the jelly my knees have become to stand up. My voice practically squeaks as I say, "Hi... Clark." Can he hear my heartbeat? Does he know how nervous I am, right now? Is it okay to use his real name when we're alone?

"Hi." The evening shadows hide his expression and I'm frustrated that I can't tell what he's thinking.

He must notice that I'm shivering because he gestures at the window. "Would you like to go inside?"

Disappointment, so deep and bitter that I can actually feel my soul shrinking, fills me. He's not going to ask me to fly with him. I'm embarrassed to realize that I had this all planned in my head. Clark would tell me he's always wanted to fly above Metropolis with me in his arms. And then he would pick me up and take me high above the city and we'd finish our kiss from last night. Reality is bittersweet: he's still my friend and he cares just enough to get me inside before I freeze to death.

"Sure," I agree in a choked whisper.

Inside, in full light, his super-suit seems like the garish distraction it was no doubt designed to be. I want desperately to get to the man underneath; the one who wears jeans and a t-shirt after work and couldn't pick out a coordinating tie if his life depended on it. Instead, I'm filled with disappointment for the romantic daydream that just died and tongue-tied because I don't know what to say to him anymore.

Clark looks around my apartment like it's the first time he's ever been there. Then he softly asks, "May I?" and indicates one of my sofas.

"Yeah, of course." I sit down on the opposite sofa.

"I read your story in the evening edition," he says. His right knee bounces nervously and I wonder if he's upset that I directly quoted Superman without actually speaking to him or if he's wishing he was anywhere but here.

"I'm sorry. I know I didn't actually interview you, but...."

He shakes his head. "No, no. Don't worry about it. It's basically what I would have said."

Our eyes meet for half a second and knowing who he really is feels too intense. I quickly look away. "So, uh, did they all come back? Your powers?" I glance at him in time to see him nod as he answers.

"Yes." His fingers play with the edge of his cape, smoothing out an imaginary wrinkle.

"That's good," I reply automatically, just to have something to say.

"Yeah."

At this moment I wish more than anything that I could still fly so I could leave in a hurry. This is even more awkward than the end of our first date, only now I can't slam the door shut and put a mercifully quick end to it. What if he actually had wanted to take me flying? If this is cringe-inducing, imagine how much worse it could be at 2,000 feet.

"May I ask you a question?" His voice is low and, when I look over at him, his expression is deadly serious.

Foreboding ripples through me. Does he think I've told someone his secret? Does he think that I have the whole story typed up and ready to go? Whatever he's about to ask, I'm certain it's going to change our relationship forever. At this moment I would give anything to have him simply be Clark to me again. I give him a nod and brace for the worst.

Clark takes a deep breath and then asks, "How angry are you?"

I blink, trying to comprehend the question. Angry? He thinks I'm angry?

"I don't blame you," he rushes to speak before I can. "You

have every right to be upset. I know you might not believe this, but I've wanted to tell you for a while now. Especially since we started dating. There just never seemed to be a good time."

I stare at him, shocked into silence that Clark actually wanted to trust me with the mother of all secrets. "You were going to tell me?"

He stands up and comes over to sit next to me. His expressive dark eyes look pleadingly into mine. "I was so ashamed yesterday, when the first thing you did was confide in me. I've owed you that same trust, Lois. I'm so sorry. Will you forgive me?"

"Clark--." Words fail me and I can feel my cheeks flushing. This close I can't help but be affected by him. In the past it was a schoolgirl's crush on Superman that made me weak-kneed in his presence. Now my mind is spinning because I know the real flesh-and-blood man beneath the suit. I've kissed those lips and been held in those arms and now he's sitting so close to me that his knee is pressed against mine.

"I owe you everything," he says earnestly and his hand takes hold of mine. His touch sings through me as I realize that everything Clark does has to be deliberately gentle. All those casual little taps and brushes from him have never once been accidental. Restrained affection has never seemed sexier than it does right now.

"You don't owe me anything," I whisper.

"You covered for me." He shakes his head in apparent wonder. "When I read your story tonight and realized that you...." His voice trails off and he clears his throat softly. "Thank you, Lois."

"You covered for me this morning," I point out. "Isn't that what partners are for?"

I swear that time stops for a moment or two. All I can do is frantically hope that he'll say 'yes'.

"Partners," he confirms with that smile of his that never fails to melt my defenses, especially at this particular moment. "And... friends?"

I can't help grinning back at him in sheer relief. "Best friends," I tell him and squeeze his hand. Our eyes meet and I'm almost hypnotized by the blatant adoration in his.

"Lois, last night...." He takes a deep breath. "You have no idea how much last night meant to me. I've wanted to take you flying, god, I can't even tell you how many times I've dreamed about that. But I wanted it to be, well, like last night. Flying, just us. No Superman, no deception. Just us."

"Just us," I whisper. My mind swims with the promise inherent in those two words. Just us. Me and Clark. "I like the sound of that."

"Would you fly with me?" That sly and familiar smile of his tugs at the corners of his mouth and I know he's about to tease me. "I promise I won't drop you."

It's the same promise I gave Clark last night to entice him to fly with me. I remember what he said, as Superman, about never having known someone well enough to tease them. I can't help but let out a little giggle as I realize that he's using an inside joke to acknowledge the secret we now share.

I pretend to consider it. "I don't know. Would you have to hold me?"

He gives me a solemn nod that's totally at odds with the twinkle in his eyes. "Yes."

My heart soars at the thought of him holding me, but being able to kid with Superman because he's my best friend is so much fun that I can't help arching one eyebrow and asking, "How close?"

Clark stands up and pulls gently on my hand so that I stand up to join him. "Close," he tells me in a low voice that sends a heated shiver through me.

My throat suddenly feels too dry to make a snappy comeback

so I simply nod instead. Clark releases my hand and walks to the window. He holds the curtain back and gestures for me to go ahead of him. I climb out onto the fire escape and he follows. My entire body is thrumming with anticipation as he steps closer to me. Then the weight of his hands settles on my hips. His touch is infinitely gentle and yet faintly possessive as he whispers, "This close."

I have a moment of panic as I realize that, in less than a minute, it's just going to be the two of us, somewhere high above the city. I close my eyes and try to take a deep calming breath but I can't seem to get any air. I think of last night, of how wonderful it was to be alone with him. The sad truth is that, while I was in control last night, tonight I most definitely am not. I think about how much trust he showed me last night; how he never seemed to have even a flicker of doubt in either my ability to keep him safe or my intentions -- not even when I threatened to drop him. I've flown with him before, but never under this new set of circumstances, and it's paralyzing me.

Clark must sense my hesitation because he makes me almost the same offer I gave him last night. "If you get nervous or you want to come back, just tell me, okay?"

I look up and the expression on his face takes away what little breath I've managed to take in. It's the same expression he had last night when he looked at me like I was his entire world. It's the same look of open affection that I found so hypnotic only a few minutes ago. Clark adores me. He would never hurt me. He might tease me on the ground, but I doubt he'd ever be so cavalier in mid-air. I wish I hadn't ruined the flirty mood we had going before I balked.

"Is it the way I'm holding you?" he asks. "I know I've always kind of carried you before, but I really liked it last night, being face to face like that."

"I did, too. It was more... equal." I put my arms around his waist to show him I'm willing to go now. "Take me flying, Clark."

His fingers tighten ever so slightly on my hips and he dips his head to whisper near my ear, "I've waited so long to hear you ask me that."

I close my eyes for a few seconds, letting my senses swim in how nice he smells and how giddy just being this close to him makes me feel. All at once, I'm beyond eager to have him all to myself and I look up so I can tell him to get moving. That's when I see the roof of the building across the street slipping away behind him. I'm shocked to realize that we're already flying and it's so smooth that I never even felt my feet leave the ground. I feel a momentary twinge of envy that floating was never this effortless for me.

"You're really good at this," I tell him.

He grins and his chin dips slightly in acknowledgement. "So were you," he generously tells me.

I laugh and shake my head. "Not this good."

"Practice," he says with a slight shrug that somehow brings me closer against him.

I want so badly to kiss him, but it doesn't seem like a good idea when we're still low enough that people can see us. I ask him a question instead. "Did your parents ever find out? When you jumped in the quarry? Did you get in trouble for that?"

"Yes. It took a couple of weeks for the gossip to get back to my mom, but like I said, I was a legend for it. It was inevitable that she'd find out."

"Were you grounded?"

Clark shakes his head. "Worse. I had to live with the guilt that I had devastated my parents by being so careless. They weren't upset because I could have been hurt; they'd long since figured out that I was nearly indestructible. They were worried that someone might ask too many questions. My dad was always warning me about showing off; that someday someone would try

to dissect me like a frog."

I think about the wackos who have tried to do exactly that and I feel another rush of gratitude for the trust he's showing me in sharing his secret.

"I would never let anyone do that to you," I promise him.

"We'll protect each other," he says with a smile.

I grin and then look away, awed all over again when I see the twinkling sea of lights as Metropolis lies spread out beneath us. The western horizon is tinted orange and red with the sunset and above us the stars are beginning to fill the sky. I'm breathless from the beauty of the surroundings and the new understanding I have of Clark. I lay my cheek against his chest and hear the now-familiar rhythm of his heartbeat.

"Are you cold?" he asks. I can feel the rumble of his voice against my cheek.

"Maybe a little," I admit, willing to admit to anything if it means he'll keep me close against him.

I realize that I really was getting cold as he wraps his cape around me, enveloping me in warmth. One of his arms encircles me, low on my waist. His other hand rests on the middle of my back, wide and warm. One of his knees slides between mine, sending a different kind of heat through me. I feel him place a soft kiss near my ear and the warmth of his cheek warm against mine. "I still owe you dinner," he whispers. "You choose where. Anywhere you want."

Now that we're here I don't want this to end. All my fears about commitment seem utterly groundless in the face of this simple intimacy with Clark. "I don't want to leave, not just yet."

I can feel his smile against my cheek. "Me neither."

Clark's hand smoothes slowly along my spine, setting off a heated chain reaction inside me. I can feel my heart pounding and I know he must hear it. I tilt my head back to find his mouth is kissably close.

"We were interrupted last night," I tell him.

He nods. "Yes."

There's a long breathless moment while I wait for him to kiss me. He doesn't and I wonder if he's being deliberately obtuse or if there's another reason why he's not taking the hint. I decide to make it a lot more obvious. "Maybe we should finish what we started?"

His eyes darken and his voice sounds huskier as he asks, "What are we starting, Lois?"

It's comforting somehow to know that he's just as unsure as I am about what lies ahead. I touch his cheek, running my thumb lightly over his lower lip. I see him swallow reflexively and it only increases my confidence.

"Us," I tell him. "No Superman, no more deceptions. Just us."

"Us," he repeats with a smile. He keeps one arm securely around me and lifts his other hand to the back of my head as he bends to kiss me.

The first touch of his lips is soft, almost hesitant. His second kiss has no hesitation at all to it and I respond eagerly. If it were possible to float on happiness alone, I would be the one keeping us there, suspended between the stars and the city.

Just us.

THE END