

# Perceptions

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Rated PG

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Summary: On the night Clark wins his first Kerth, Lois comes to a realization.

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Thank you to Erin Klingler for GEing this for me.

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One more look in the mirror. I look okay. The black dress fits perfectly; the pearls are the right touch. I look every bit like the type of girl that would go on a date with Clark. Only this isn't a date. Not really.

I had thought of it as a date. Before. I had imagined us arriving. My wearing this very dress. Clark in a dark suit. He'd look so handsome beside me. And after I won, people would marvel at me. "How does Lois do it?" they'd ask themselves. "She wins a Kerth year after year, and yet she still has time for a personal life. Look at that guy she brought with her. He's gorgeous and he seems sweet. And look how smitten he is with her."

Now, what would they say? Would it be the same, only marveling over Clark? "How does Clark do it? Win a Kerth in his first full year with the Planet and still have time for a personal life?" I do not want to be Clark's arm candy.

Deep breaths. It's going to be hard tonight. I promised myself I wouldn't say anything again. While deep inside I may wonder how Clark got nominated and I didn't, I have to stop saying anything. It's not exactly helping our partnership or our friendship. And I'm happy for Clark. Really. It's just ... well, it should be *me* on that nominee list.

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Okay, so far, the evening hasn't been exactly smooth. Clark can read me too well – he was able to tell immediately that I still am a bit uncomfortable with the being his escort thing rather than his being mine.

And he abandoned me as soon as we arrived. How could he do that? Even if he could tell how I was feeling? Now I need to avoid ... well, everyone really. I don't want anyone asking what I'm doing here. It would be too mortifying.

I'll just keep myself busy reading the nominated articles. I've always liked the big posters displaying them when you walk in. Okay, I really just liked seeing my byline magnified. But still, I liked it before. Can't say I'm crazy about them this year, but at least they give me something to do.

I snort as I read a nomination from Carl Weinberg at the New York Times. They let him print this drivel?

Ah, and here it is. Clark's article. There's no point in reading it; I've read it before. He had me proofread it before LANing it to Perry. At the time, I hadn't thought anything of it. We often proof read each other's articles. If I had known, though ... Well, I don't know exactly what I would have done, but it just would have been nice to know, I guess.

Okay, definitely not going to read it ... "Edna Gillahoy was fifty-four when she made her retirement plans." The first line catches my eye as I'm trying to walk past. "She wanted to make sure her children didn't have to deal with it later. Little did she

know when she selected Chilton's Adult Living as her retirement community that she'd never live there." Why am I still standing here? "Instead, her carefully made plans would go up in smoke, and at eighty-one she'd be moving in with her daughter, Molly. Without Molly, Edna would be homeless."

I don't really remember all that much about the retirement home scandal Clark had written about. Even when Perry announced he'd been nominated for it, it never occurred to me to read it. What for? It's a fluff piece. Nothing like the real journalism I had been nominated for in years past.

But the more of his article I read, the more I realize how self-centered I'm being. This *is* real journalism. Maybe it isn't about some big political scandal, but on the other hand, maybe it's bigger. Aside from the talking heads, who really cares that Mayor Dillens has been taking kick-backs to leave certain businesses in Suicide Slum alone?

Real people shake their heads at that and then forget about it. It doesn't affect their day; they think all politicians are crooks anyway. I still think it's worthwhile to report on those things – maybe one day reporters like Clark and me will report enough on those scandals that the system will be cleaned up. Maybe one day people won't think all politicians are crooks.

Until then, though, I'm guessing more people are touched by this article of Clark's than anything I've written. This is the real life stuff people think about everyday. This poor woman, and all the others Edward Chilton had taken advantage of, went bankrupt trying to plan ahead and make sure their children didn't need to deal with making arrangements when they could no longer live alone. It was so unfair.

In the end, though, there were countless others who didn't share her fate. Who had been saved from making her mistakes. But only because while I was busy writing "real journalism" Clark had cared enough to investigate this. More than that, as the side bar someone had attached to Clark's article said, even those people who had fallen for Chilton's scam were better off now. A charity had been set up by Edna's daughter, and after Clark's article was published, money had poured in. None of the people had enough to move to a retirement home now, but at least they were no longer destitute.

"You know, you've read this before," Clark's soft voice comes from behind me. I turn to him and see the hurt still in his eyes despite the teasing tone to his voice.

"Not for real," I say. "This is fantastic, Clark. Really."

His face breaks out into a grin that is so genuine, so happy, I can't help but grin back. "Thank you, Lois," he says quietly. "Thank you."

"Let's go take our seats," I reply as I notice the entry hall emptying out. I put my hand through his arm as we walk in. I no longer care what other people say.

Actually, that isn't true. I do care. I want them to know we're together. That Mad Dog Lane, whom everyone thinks doesn't have a heart, is with Clark Kent, who is the most talented journalist in this room and has the biggest heart of anyone I've ever known to boot.

THE END