

# Vanity

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Rated: PG

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Summary: Lois deals with the consequences of earlier decisions.

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I stared at the package in my hands. I had forgotten about this. Was it possible to return these things? I didn't want them anymore. I didn't even have a use for them.

"Vanity plates?" Jimmy asked over my shoulder in surprise. Sadly, Jimmy was my best friend. Not that there was anything wrong with Jimmy as a best friend. It was just that we weren't any better friends than we used to be. And really, Jimmy was only my best friend in that I had no better friends. It wasn't like we were suddenly all chummy or something. It was just that...well, maybe Jimmy had been my best friend before as well. In the before before, I mean. I just hadn't noticed. I hadn't thought I wanted or needed a best friend back then.

Until I had one, that is. A real one, I mean – not Jimmy. But that, like the vanity plates sitting in my hands, had been part of a different life. He wasn't my best friend anymore. Now he was just my partner.

Not that he didn't try. He still brought me coffee every morning just the way I liked it. And a donut – usually the best one in the box. And he invited me to dinner. But it wasn't the same. It could never be the same again.

Because he had been my best friend in the before. And in the after I couldn't let him. It was just too humiliating. Not when...when he had known...and I had not...he just couldn't be my friend anymore... I couldn't allow it. So I drank the coffee he brought me, and ate the donuts, but turned down dinner offers, had sent him home when he showed up in the days immediately after to offer comfort until he stopped showing up.

Now he knew the score. We were partners. Nothing more.

"Is there something wrong with vanity plates?" I asked Jimmy now, trying to sound superior but sounding needy instead. I hated this person. The person I was now in the after. But the person from the before was gone, and I suspected she'd never be back. She had fallen to her death with her estranged fiancé.

Jimmy shrugged. "No, you just don't seem the type."

I didn't reply. I didn't know what I was the type for anymore. "Aren't you going to ask me what the LL stands for?" I asked him, wanting to get this over with. I was sure he was dying with curiosity.

But Jimmy just looked at me in confusion for a moment. "It's not 'Lois Lane'?" he asked.

I flushed. Lois Lane. How had I not thought of that? Before-Lois would have. Or well, before-Lois should have. Because she hadn't. Maybe before-Lois wasn't so great. If she had been, I wouldn't be in this position, right?

"Right. Of course," I said now, turning around, and effectively ending the conversation.

I had ordered them with the car. Or truck? I wasn't sure what classification my Jeep fell under, but regardless, I had ordered the vanity plates when I ordered the silver Jeep. It had been a

statement of sorts. Some sort of symbolic gesture of the woman I had envisioned myself becoming.

I was going to be a married woman – married to the third richest man in the world and proud of that. Thus the vanity license plates. But I was still going to be me, and as such I wanted my own car, not one of Lex' hand-me-downs.

Of course, by the time the car came in, the farce of a marriage hadn't happened. My husband-to-be was dead, and I no longer wanted anyone to know about our almost marriage.

The car came with standard plates until the special ones I had ordered were ready. And until today, when the package arrived, I had managed to forget that I had ordered the plates at all.

Luckily, I had decided plates that said "Lois Luthor" were too much. They really would have deserved the name "vanity". So, I decided for more subtle personalization – using my new initials, LL. I couldn't be happier now that Jimmy had pointed out that those initials worked for Lois Lane as well.

If anyone else saw them, they would assume that's what they were for. And if they didn't, I was fully prepared to tell them.

Not that it mattered. I had no intention of using them.

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Except I didn't have a choice. Some bizarre law in Metropolis – once you received your vanity plates, you needed to surrender your original plates. I had tried to convince the DMV that I didn't even want the vanity plates, but they wouldn't take them back. So, I tried to remember my conversation with Jimmy while I put the new plates on. They stood for Lois Lane. That was my story. No one need ever know anything else.

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I felt my pulse speed up as he came down the walk. Given our lack of friendship, he hadn't been in the car yet at all, let alone seen it since I'd had to change the plates. Would he mention them? I'd wished for a moment that he had a car. I'd even considered renting one for the stakeout. But in the end, I hadn't been able to do it. He'd wonder why, and what would I tell him?

But what if he called me out on the license plates? I couldn't lie to him. I couldn't even keep secrets from him. I wanted to, but he knew me so well. Better than I wanted him to. Better even than I knew myself. Thus the fact that we weren't friends anymore. After-me couldn't stand to be around anyone who knew me. It was too humiliating.

I actually broke out into a sweat when I saw his face. He noticed. Of course he did. As much as I hated to admit it, Clark was as good an investigative journalist as I was, or as good as I had thought I was, I guess. And you didn't get to be that good without paying attention to details.

But he said nothing as he got into the car. Not a word. Clearly, he knew what it meant. What it really meant, I mean, not the cover story.

If he hadn't known the truth, he would have mentioned them. I could even imagine him doing so. Even now, in our current relationship, he'd find it too hard not to laugh, ask if I really needed that much help finding my own car or something like that.

But he didn't laugh, he didn't tease me about them, he didn't mention them at all. Because he knew.

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I was surprised when I saw him on my doorstep the next night. He had given up a month ago, I'd thought. We hadn't exchanged more than a dozen words last night at the stakeout. What was he doing here?

"Can I come in?" he asked softly.

I nodded. I wanted to say no, but something in his stance made me feel like that wasn't an acceptable response.

"Coffee?" I asked. "Tea?" I had to bite my lip to keep from crying. I hated how formal we were with each other. I missed the camaraderie of our old friendship. But I couldn't...I just couldn't.

He shook his head. “Can we talk?” he asked instead, and my pulse sped up again as I looked at his face. He was going to call me on the plates now? Why tonight and not last night?

I nodded my head in agreement, taking a seat across from him. Noticing how he sat down on my couch, but made no comment on how uncomfortable it was. I guess the after-Clark had learned his boundaries well.

He looked up at the ceiling for a moment, and I was surprised by the sheen of tears in his eyes when he looked back at me. “I have to tell you something,” he said softly. “Well, I don’t have to, but I’m worried...” he trailed off, staring out the window.

I didn’t know what to say. This already was way off course. This was not the polite, somewhat formal conversation we had lately. This was...this was before-Clark.

/This is the man who sat on a park bench and told me he loved me./

I felt the tears flood my eyes, and I blinked them back. He had taken that claim back when it was all over, but...well, even after-Lois wasn’t sure about that. He had seemed so sincere. And when he took it back, he had not. He had seemed nervous and edgy.

He turned back to face me. “I don’t want you to feel like this is something else you missed, like — well, like the other thing you missed.” He tripped over his words, but that made it perfectly clear. It was the big thing I missed. Nothing little that I may have forgotten. “No one knows. No one,” he repeated, looking directly at me.

“And I have to admit, I’m worried. Our relationship isn’t what I want it to be for this admission,” he said now, looking like he was wondering right at this moment if this was a mistake. “But I want it to get back to that place. And I’m hoping that if I tell you this, it will. Or, of course, you could hate me and we could never speak again.”

I said nothing. What was there to say to any of this?

“Lois, I’m Superman,” he said, his voice so sincere that I didn’t react. I didn’t even know what the appropriate reaction was. What would before-Lois have done? She would have laughed at him, I’m guessing. It was a ludicrous claim. And if she hadn’t done that, she would have started yelling.

But after-Lois didn’t have any reaction at all. She was slow, a watered down version of before-Lois. It took her a long time to process new information.

“And I don’t want you to feel like I kept this from you for a year,” he rushed on. “I mean, I did, but I didn’t want to...” He looked at me, waiting for a reaction, but when none came, he kept talking. “It’s just I didn’t want him to know, and...”

“Him?” I asked, almost without thought.

“Luthor,” he mumbled, and I felt the blood rush to my face.

“Lois, say something,” he pleaded with me.

“You’re really Superman?” I asked, still too numb to really respond.

He unbuttoned his white shirt, and there underneath was the Superman crest. And in case I thought Clark wore a Superman costume under his clothes for fun, he floated off my couch for a second before falling back down.

I nodded. I should have been surprised, but nothing surprised me anymore. If I had let the biggest criminal in Metropolis convince me to marry him, I clearly was the stupidest woman alive. So not noticing that my partner and ex-best friend was also Metropolis’ resident superhero was not that much of a surprise.

And so he didn’t tell me. What was there to be upset about? We weren’t friends anymore. And before, well, could I have expected anything different? Superman wouldn’t tell his secret to a stupid woman who might tell her crime boss fiancé about it.

“You shouldn’t have told me now,” I told him.

He shook his head. “I needed to. I can’t...Lois, I can’t do this

anymore. I want to be there for you. To be your friend. I can’t...if you need me to stay away I can, but...”

“But what?” I asked, confused by the look in his eyes.

“I can’t stay in Metropolis. I can’t...I can’t see you everyday and barely speak to you. I just can’t,” he said now.

“So you thought you’d tell me your biggest secret before you took off?” I asked.

“I don’t want to take off,” he said. “Please don’t make me,” he pleaded. “I hoped that telling you would be a way of showing how much I trust you. How important you are to me. How...” His voice trailed off as he stared out my window. “How much I want you in my life,” he added in a whisper.

I didn’t say anything. Not because like before I had no reaction, but because I didn’t understand my reaction. There was a feeling in the pit of my stomach that I couldn’t identify.

“I could hear your heartbeat yesterday,” Clark said softly, and I was confused for a moment before I realized that hearing a heartbeat wouldn’t be challenging at all for Superman. “It was so fast. I couldn’t figure out what was wrong,” he started.

“Maybe my heartbeat is always fast these days,” I interrupted quietly. It seemed reasonable to me. I felt like my pulse was always speeding up.

“It’s not,” Clark shook his head. “It’s... different now than it was before, but not faster so much as...I don’t know. Just different. Like there’s a different cadence to it or something.”

I nodded my head. Not that I completely understood what he was saying, but it made some sort of sense. Besides, I was still distracted by the weird feeling in the pit of my stomach.

“And then I realized. The new license plates. They came with the car you ordered when you were supposed to be getting married.” He was staring out the window again, and I was glad for that. It meant he couldn’t see my face as I digested that he was going to bring that up. “And I realized. LL – your initials wouldn’t have changed if you had married...” His voice trailed off, but I still found I had no words to speak with.

“Lois,” he said earnestly, looking me directly in the eyes, “I miss you. I miss having you to talk to and having you talk to me. You should have told me when they came in, how you felt about it, what you were thinking, why you chose to use them anyway.”

“I had no choice,” I interrupted, focused on the only thing in there I could answer without thought. “I tried to return them, but some stupid Metropolis law means I can’t.”

He smiled at me, and I couldn’t figure out why. “You called it a ‘stupid Metropolis law,’” he pointed out. “You almost sounded like your old self there.”

I giggled. It was a half crazy sound, but a laugh at least. I didn’t laugh much these days. And he was right. That was a bit more like before-Lois than after.

“I miss you,” he said again.

I nodded, focused once more on the feeling in the pit of my stomach when he said that. It was...different than normal.

I watched him warily as he came over to stand beside the love seat I was sitting on. He stood there awkwardly for a minute before sitting next to me. I watched him curiously. It was as if I wasn’t participating in this moment, just watching it from above. I watched him nervously extend his arm towards me and draw me to him. It was only then that I realized I was crying. Not that that was unusual for me these days.

He sucked me in until my head was buried in his chest. “I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I didn’t want to hurt you.”

“You didn’t,” I told him honestly. My words were mumbled against his chest, and I wasn’t sure he could even hear me. But then I remembered – he was Superman. Of course he could hear me.

We sat in silence for several moments while I cried. When I finally pulled away, I felt better. Really better. Not healed – not by a long shot, but more me than I had in a long time.

“I missed you, too,” I told him honestly, finally identifying that as the feeling I’d been having all evening. “So much,” I added, flushing slightly as I realized how true that was.

“I’m sorry about keeping this huge -” he started, but I cut him off.

“Can we just forget about that?” I asked him instead. “I mean not that you’re Superman, just that you kept it from me and that I almost married...well, him,” I said. “I just...” I trailed off as I tried to find words for what I wanted to say. “I don’t want to think about the last few months of my life. Not for a while anyway. Can we start right here? We’re best friends and partners and you happen to have another job saving the world?”

He smiled, the smile reaching his eyes, and replied, “That sounds wonderful to me, too.”

“Good,” I nodded my head.

Clark smiled at me as we sat in companionable silence, before I spoiled the moment by yawning. “I should go,” he said softly. “It’s late.”

I started to argue, but then saw the clock and realized that it *was* late. So I nodded my head.

I walked him to the door, feeling lighter than I had in weeks and also a little nervous – like this change was perilous and things could go back to the new norm in seconds.

Clark was out the door and at the head of the stairs when he turned back and smiled at me. “Look at it this way, Lois,” he said, his eyes dancing. “With the new license plates, you’ll never have trouble finding your car.”

I laughed, a full out laugh, and saw Clark join in. Lois Lane was back.

THE END