

# Lighter Than Air, Better Than Gravity

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Rated: G

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Summary: As the events of "Ultra Woman" draw to a close, Lois and Clark come to terms with the new understanding between them.

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Awareness of the sparse crowd beneath them faded away, as did the sounds of the spontaneous applause and curious exclamations that so often followed an appearance by Superman. The people watching the tabloid-worthy exhibition rapidly shrink away into the white-clouded distance didn't seem to matter anymore, not when Clark was holding her so close in his arms, her feet dangling in open air as the ground receded at what should have been a terrifying pace.

Lois had always loved flying with Clark. There was something about the freedom inherent in casting off the fetters of gravity, the thrill of thumbing her nose at gravity and the other laws binding everyone else, and the joy of being singled out from all the masses of society by the one man who could fly. When Superman's powers had been transferred to her so few days before, Lois had thought that flying would be the easiest thing to become accustomed to. Lasers shooting out of her eyes and a strength so great that control -- never one of her more dominant traits -- had to be exercised at every moment, those could be frightening, but flying? That, surely, would be a piece of cake. After all, she was never afraid when Clark flew with her, and self-confidence was one thing she didn't lack, so flying alone should have been almost relaxing.

So why hadn't it been?

Questions, however, especially self-reflective questions, faded as quickly and surely as did the crowd already lost to anyone's sight but Superman's. And it was Superman's arms that cradled Lois close, refusing to let her fall prey once more to gravity's imperious demands, holding her within the invulnerable aura that extended from his skin.

Suddenly conscious of her own lack of strength -- a

sensation so familiar and yet now so newly startling -- Lois's arms tightened around Clark's neck. She wanted to lose herself to the kiss, but a kiss wasn't only made with lips and mouth; it was a gesture of complete trust and surrender, a gesture made with the whole body. And after the last few days of having to watch her every move and restrain herself from exerting even the slightest undue pressure, Lois could not help but be aware of her arms embracing Clark, her hands on the back of his neck, her body held against his. Almost tentatively, she slid her hands down to rest on his arms and tightened her fingers.

A shiver ran down Lois's spine when Clark felt the pressure and tightened his own arms around her, pulling her closer to himself, as if he meant to draw her permanently into his aura. He was Superman -- invulnerable, impervious to harm, indestructible -- and yet he felt the slightest contact from her slender fingers. Strong enough to lift a rocket into orbit, kick a nuclear warhead into the safety of vacuum, or simply push an asteroid out of the way, and yet he responded to her touch with the gentlest of embraces, careful not to hurt her.

She had hurt him, though, Lois knew. She had seen it, no matter how he had sought to hide it. Unused to the powers that had so briefly infused her body, she had seen him hide a wince from the clasp of her hand in his or the tap of her palm against his chest or the caress of her fingers against his cheek; she had seen him bleed when her temper had gotten the best of her and his powers.

As if sensing her sudden withdrawal, Clark lifted his head to peer down into her eyes. After discovering that he was Superman, she had to admit that she had idly wondered if it was his special vision...gizmos...that had allowed him in previous years to so easily see past all the walls and masks and barriers she had thrown up between them. And yet even when she had been the one flying them through the air, even when she had been the one stopping the terrorists and blowing out the fires and cleaning up after traffic accidents, Clark had looked at her with the same silvery-brown eyes and seen straight into her soul.

"Lois?" His voice was carefully modulated, undiluted by the heights to which they had flown. "Are you okay? Did Lucille hurt you? I thought you were all -- "

"Relax, Clark," Lois said with a wry grin, shaking off the thoughts that had been plaguing her since she had gone to open a gate and instead found herself tearing it from its hinges and lightly tossing it across the street. "I'm fine, thanks to you. Great entrance, by the way." She searched him carefully as she said the words, looking for any sign of embarrassment or humiliation.

Clark shrugged as a light, amused smile played along his lips. "You can't always arrive in style."

Impulsively, Lois leaned forward to kiss him again, trusting implicitly to his hold on her. He did not let her down -- he never did.

"Well," he said after a moment, slowly drawing back to look at her. "I suppose we should head back. Perry will want the story."

Uncharacteristically, Lois felt the stirrings of reluctance. It had only been since Clark entered her life that she had ever found herself looking forward to anything besides work. In fact, it was only since Clark that she had even \*realized\* there was anything to life besides work. That had frightened her once; she distractedly wondered when had been the exact moment it had stopped.

As they began to gradually descend back to the patchwork earth beneath them, Lois leaned her head against Clark's chest, closing her eyes when she heard his heartbeat. It was not the same as it had been when she had been able to hear shuttles gliding through space and ants tiptoeing belowground, but it was comforting nonetheless.

"Clark," she suddenly asked without lifting her head, "do you listen to my heartbeat?"

"I...uh, well...it just..."

Intrigued by Clark's obvious discomfiture, Lois looked up and smirked at the deer-in-the-headlights look on his face. "Well?" She lifted an eyebrow inquisitively.

Clark took a deep breath, something shifting in his expression. She had seen the same shift before a hundred times, a thousand times, countless times since Perry had first partnered them, and it never failed to make her catch her breath. It was as if he relaxed his staggering control and allowed his heart to shine forth from his expression, a heart that saw her and could not help but soften and beam. Once more, Lois's fingers tightened on Clark, this time on his shoulders.

"Lois, at first, I didn't even realize I was listening to it. I've been able to hear individual heartbeats since I was eleven, but it was always background noise, drowned out by other things." He looked away, down toward the ground, but Lois now intimately knew that he did not have to see where he was going to take them there. "I never really paid attention to the heartbeats unless I was at an accident scene. But...Lois, when Trask threw you out of that plane, I thought...I was afraid I wouldn't be able to get to you in time. So I listened to your heartbeat. And other times, when you were in danger, or when I was trying to find you, I would concentrate on it."

"And?" she prompted when he fell silent, transfixed as she gazed up at him.

"And maybe that's why I can pick your heartbeat out of a crowd of others -- or out of the whole city of Metropolis. I didn't even realize I was listening to it until..." He took a deep breath and once more -- infinitesimally compared to what he was capable of -- tightened his arms around her. "Until you told me Luthor had proposed to you. Lois, I was so afraid that something would happen to you, and we weren't talking, and it was all I had left of you." As if realizing he was on the verge of appropriating one of \*her\*

gifts -- babbling -- he calmed himself. "Then, when that was over, I just...I couldn't sleep without being able to hear -- or at least pretend I could hear -- your heart beating, couldn't relax unless I knew you were breathing. Do...do you mind?"

Lois cocked her head, fondly puzzled about the things this man found to worry about. "Clark, I have a confession to make. As soon as I realized how to use the superhearing, I listened to \*your\* heartbeat. Not that it helped when the Newtriches had kidnapped you." She scowled, angry at herself for not being there for him.

"Hey." One of Clark's arms left her waist so that his long fingers could tip her chin upward, yet she felt as secure as she had when both his arms encircled her. "It wasn't your fault. You were doing what you had to do. Besides, if I had really needed you, I would have called."

"Would you have?" she questioned him, suddenly intent. "Clark, you didn't call for me until after you were free. When we went back to look for them, I smelled the seared electricity in the air and your sweat. You were afraid, and you were in danger, but you didn't yell for help. Why didn't you call me?"

"I seem to remember a few instances when \*you\* haven't called for \*me,\*" he observed wryly. When she didn't smile, he sobered, halting their descent high enough so that no one could see Superman and Ultra Woman embracing in the air. "Lois, if I had called for you, Lucille and Nell would have known they were right about who you really were. You would have instantly shown up to rescue me, and that would only have confirmed their suspicions. Besides, they seemed awfully confident, and I didn't know what weapon they possessed to give them that assurance. I wasn't sure if, with the transfer, you had become vulnerable to Kryptonite."

Reassured that he hadn't doubted her ability to rescue him, Lois nonetheless found plenty to interest her in his answer. Aside from the questions about Kryptonite -- questions her investigative side found fascinating -- she was also struck anew by how desperately Clark protected his secret identity. It had probably never occurred to him to call her to his side, not even when the timer was only seconds from frying him. Not if the cost would be the end of her private, \*normal\* life.

"We really should get back," Clark said regretfully. "We've been gone a long time."

"Not as long as it takes to get across town in a cab," Lois retorted, more than ready to put aside all her unsettling questions and insights. Not to mention get out of the skintight costume that, without his powers, seemed terribly constricting.

But no matter how hard she tried to shrug aside her concerns, Lois couldn't so easily forget what had occurred. Being the superhero had been a lot different than idolizing the superhero -- or even loving him. Reminded so painfully of her own almost-fanatical crush on Superman after his

first appearance, Lois couldn't help but pass on a simple message from Ultra Woman to Jimmy, rewarded by his obvious glee.

She also couldn't help but feel guilty about lying to Perry about the story.

She and Clark had lied through their teeth throughout the entire article, from Ultra Woman's astonishing origin to her romantic disappearance with the Man of Steel, and Lois hated it. She was a reporter, and she had always been determined to tell the truth, yet this time, there was no choice but to lie. It was Clark, in the end, who wrote the story, asking her questions, accepting her input, and twisting some of his own words so that it looked more like her style. But then, he was used to lying about his alter ego; it was, in Lois's experience, the only thing he ever lied about -- or at least lied \*convincingly\* about.

Until she had had her own secret identity to protect, Lois had never realized how fiercely Clark guarded his own, how unstintingly he worked to separate himself from Superman, how definitively he drew the line between himself and the Kryptonian lest that line shatter forever. It was the one and only thing on which he allowed himself to compromise his integrity.

While they waited for Perry to sign off on their story, Lois and Clark separated to work on a few of their smaller, individual assignments, stories that weren't front page material or as urgent as the others they always seemed to stumble into. Still, Lois had a hard time concentrating. She found herself sneaking continual glances at Clark, as if she could see what was happening behind his understated appearance.

Understated.

Lois pondered that subconscious word choice as she stared at her screen, where she was supposed to be outlining the beginnings of another story. "Understated" was certainly the word for Clark. It had taken several assignments, a trip to the Sewage Reclamation Plant, an open smile that seemed to strip away all facades, a gentle hand on her back when she needed it or a few feet of distance while she composed herself, a continual failure to betray her involuntary confidences, and a disastrous near-marriage to a man she hadn't known at all to make her realize that Clark was so much more than his mild-mannered persona indicated. She hadn't needed to know he was Superman to know he was a hero.

Once more, Lois found herself glancing at her partner out of the corner of her eye. He seemed intent on his own computer screen, his hands industriously moving over the keyboard, a pencil tucked endearingly behind his ear. And yet, Lois knew, he was also aware of the planes passing overhead, the printing of the paper in the basement of the Daily Planet building, the gossip in the staff break area, the murmur of Perry's disgruntled remarks to himself over the copy he was editing in his office. And Lois's heartbeat.

Remembering that fact made her heart suddenly decide to pound a bit faster, and right on cue, Clark glanced over at her. There was a shadow on his face she couldn't decipher -- but then, Clark was the perceptive one of their duo. His eyes narrowed with concern, and he mouthed, "Are you all right?" to her across the space dividing them. She gave him a smile and a nod and pretended to turn her attention once more to her monitor.

Clark pulled the pencil from behind his ear and bent over a notepad as he jotted down a couple notes. Lois caught her breath as a sudden thought struck her: how did he stop himself from shattering the wood and lead of the basic writing implement? Her own wastebasket had been littered with crushed sawdust during the limited times she had been at the Daily Planet instead of out on rescues. Yet she knew for a fact that even without the powers, she went through twice as many pencils as Clark.

And there, when he let out a sigh and began to retype something -- how did he stop himself from blowing all the desks clear across the newsroom? Lois dimly heard his name being mentioned in the break area, and she wondered how Clark restrained himself from reacting or responding to the gossip about him. How did he keep himself seated at his desk when his powers had just been given back to him? He could have been flying, could have been out experiencing the thrill of saving the world -- or at least individuals -- could have been spying into any building, room, or life that he wanted. And yet he dutifully sat in the newsroom, eagerly followed Lois around on their stories, meekly accepted it when Perry reprimanded him for tardiness or incorrect wording on an article, joked with Jimmy about inconsequential things, and blushed when the women of the newsroom flirted with him or the men teased him.

With a sigh, Lois shut her computer down and leaned back in her chair, resigned to the fact that she wouldn't be getting any work done. She couldn't think past the revelations living in Superman's boots -- or, well, a pastel, high-heeled version of them -- had provided her.

"Clark," she said, surprising herself, "I'm going to get some sandwiches for dinner since Perry doesn't seem to be too impatient to get to our story. What do you want?"

Clark half-rose from his seat. "I could go -- "

"No!" she blurted out. "I...I need the fresh air, and a walk."

For a long moment during which Lois almost held her breath, Clark studied her. Instead of that shift to reveal his soul to her, that indecipherable shadow once more passed across his features. Finally, he smiled politely and gave her an order for three sandwiches, a side, and a dessert. That was one side effect of the powers Lois would miss, though she did appreciate it in Clark.

Lois quickly strode down the two blocks to one of their favorite delis, but she didn't put in their order immediately. Instead, she greeted the proprietor, a friend of hers as well

as a contact, and asked him if she could use his phone to make a long-distance call. She had flown Jonathan and Martha Kent back to Smallville early that morning -- had that still been today? -- and she knew they would be home. It wasn't until the phone was ringing, however, that she suddenly wondered what in the world she planned to say to them.

"Hello?"

"Jonathan? Hi. This is Lois." She bit her lip at the awkward tone of her voice.

"Lois? Hi! It's great to hear from you. Martha went to pick up one of our neighbors whose truck broke down, so she's not here right now." There was a slight hesitation, and then the older man's voice came back on, low and worried. "Is everything all right?"

"Oh, yeah, everything's fine. All back to normal," she added, belatedly realizing that the Kents didn't yet know about what had happened that afternoon.

"Good." Relief pervaded Jonathan's tone. "Clark called to tell us...the news...but he didn't have time to give us any details."

How did Clark do it? Lois wondered in awed exasperation. How did he juggle so many pieces of two different lives? She knew from painful experience that the juggling act was complicated and that some times were better than others, but she couldn't help but wonder if this was yet another of his superpowers.

"Well, it was pretty exciting," she commented absently. Quickly, she filled Jonathan in on the details of the showdown between Clark and herself and the two Newtrich sisters. She neglected to tell him how close Nell's bullet had come to piercing Clark's vulnerable flesh, avoided relaying how frightened she had been that she hadn't fired the laser in time, and most of all, she was very careful to never say a word about her secret fear, the one she hadn't yet had the courage to address in her own mind, let alone out loud.

"Wow," Jonathan murmured when she finished her hurried recitation. "That sounds...climactic. I'm just glad you're both okay. You...\*are\* okay, aren't you?"

Lois frowned at the concern evident in Jonathan's tone. She could practically see his face, so little expression changing the features and yet so much emotion shining through. It was no wonder it had never occurred to her that Clark was adopted. "Of course I'm all right," she repeated. "I just said I was, didn't I?"

"Yes, but...well, are you okay with...being normal again?"

A tremor passed through Lois's body, more reaction than she gave when being held at gun- or knife- or bomb-point by the villains that seemed to spring up all over Metropolis. His question was too close to the fear she dared not acknowledge. "Yes, Jonathan, I'm fine. Normal for me \*is\* normal, and normal for Clark is..." She turned into the

phone when a waitress entered the room to grab a new receipt pad from the desk drawer. "...extraordinary," she finished carefully.

There was a proud smile in Jonathan's words; anyone could have heard it. "Yes, you're right. I told you he was strong where it counted."

"Yes," Lois breathed as all of her questions, insights, revelations, and thoughts crystallized into one undeniable realization.

She loved Clark.

Not only that, she admired Clark.

Respected him.

Adored him.

Truth be told, she was also a little bit in awe of him.

Suddenly, she couldn't think of anything but the image of him standing behind his desk and looking down at a small, velvet-clad box held so hopefully in his hand, that determined and optimistic look brightening his entire being. And yet she remembered that he had tucked that precious box once more into his desk. Could she blame him, though? For a man who had been rejected as often as he had, how could he find the courage to once more risk his heart and hopes and happiness and future on her?

And why should he have to?

Wasn't it time for her to risk something? To dare her own heart? To put her own hopes for the future on the line?

"Lois? Are you still there?"

Lois snapped back to the present. "Yes, Jonathan, thank you. I think you may just have given me one of the greatest gifts in the world."

"I did?" He sounded confused -- justifiably so. After all, he didn't quite have Clark's experience in following her erratic thought processes. "What was it?"

She almost couldn't speak past the shortness of breath that accompanied exhilarated fear and hopeful trepidation. "Your son."

Sight wasn't necessary to alert her to Jonathan's wide grin. "Well, you be careful with him. He's not as invulnerable as people think."

Lois squeezed her eyes shut against the memory of Clark's shattered expression when she had told him Lex had proposed, his lost look when she had told him she didn't love him, his guilt at Mayson's funeral, his guarded despair when she had dated Scardino, and his crushing disappointment when she had refused the ring even now stashed in his desk's top drawer.

"I know," she whispered. "I'll be careful."

"I know you will. We..." Jonathan paused, obviously unsure of how much he should say -- or perhaps

uncomfortable with the openly-expressed sentiment. "We love you, Lois, and you're part of the family. You know that, right?"

"I do, and thank you. I appreciate it." Lois paused to swallow the lump in her throat, gratified and amazed all over again at the Kents' wholehearted acceptance and support. It had, she knew without a doubt, helped shape Clark into the man he now was. "Tell Martha I said hi."

"I will, and tell Clark we love him."

Oh, she would do more than that, she thought, but she simply agreed and hung up the phone.

When Lois stepped out of the restaurant with the bag of food in one hand and the other clenched into a fist as she tried to imagine what that beautiful ring she hadn't had the chance to adequately admire would feel like on her finger, she didn't notice that it was twilight. She didn't notice how empty the streets were, or how dark was the alley she passed, or the two nervous men fingering the blades in their pockets and searching for a likely victim. She was so caught up in images of Clark that she didn't realize what was happening until too late.

The bag of food fell to the ground and was trampled.

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Lois had been gone a while, and Clark was afraid he knew the reason why. He had seen the sidelong glances she had been casting him ever since she had given his powers back to him; he had been aware of her scattered thoughts as her graceful hands rested limply and uselessly on her keyboard. He was also terrified that he knew the direction her thoughts had been headed.

A sick feeling was lodged in the pit of his stomach, no matter that he was again invulnerable and impervious to Earth diseases. He hadn't been able to shake it since she had pulled away from his kiss in the skies and stared up at him with a searching look. He had been too much of a coward to ask what she was looking for within him, not when he already knew the answer.

She had been looking for the hero.

Clark slumped lower in his seat as he gave up all pretense of working. Lois had always loved Superman -- admired him, even all but worshipped him -- but it had only been recently that she had loved Clark. She said she loved him because he was the reality, the normal person who could be there for her, the opposite to the fantasies she had chased before.

But now she knew, firsthand, just exactly how \*not\*-normal he was. And she knew that anyone with his powers could be a hero. And she knew that without those powers, he was nothing exceptional. He hadn't been able to stop the Newtrich sisters, hadn't been able to track them down before they had attacked the security guards, hadn't been able to stop Lois from being thrown around by Lucille -- in other words, without his powers, he wasn't much of a hero.

The sound of Perry's door opening pulled Clark from his thoughts, and he looked up to see the Chief striding toward him, their story in one hand, his customary red pen in the other. Lois hated that Clark edited their copy, but Clark hated seeing the black and white of his -- their -- stories marred with red. Of course, Lois was gone now, fled from his presence, so he wouldn't get to listen to her complain about the changes Perry would doubtless insist upon.

"This is great stuff, Clark!" Perry called out jovially.

Clark rose to his feet, a bit surprised. He had been sure his preoccupation over his own worries and his returned powers -- not to mention his discomfort with the lies peppering that story -- would have shown through loud and clear to the sharp-sighted editor. But then, Perry had been going through almost as tough a time as Clark in the past three days, and anyway, Clark reminded himself, the Chief didn't have any reason to think Clark or Lois should know anything more about the mysterious female superhero.

"But," Perry added, "we still don't know where this Ultra Woman came from. And are we ever going to see her again?"

The familiar, uncomfortable guilt at his constant deceptions caused Clark to shift his weight. "Well," he began, ready with his rehearsed answers. Lying was always easier when he practiced beforehand. "She said she was a really close friend of Superman's, and that's about all either of them would say."

Perry nodded, uncharacteristically accepting the holes in their story. "All right, let's slap this on the front page and head for home."

Clark accepted the pages, glancing down only long enough to note with relief that there was hardly a red mark at all.

"Does that mean you're not sleeping here?" Jimmy asked, never too far from Perry and therefore close enough to have overheard the conversation.

Perry's face fell. "Uh, Alice is staying with a friend, and, uh, I'm going to be moving out at the end of the month."

A pang shot through Clark's heart, a twist of compassionate empathy. He couldn't imagine Lois kicking him out of her life completely, and yet she had nearly done so just a few weeks ago, after his disastrous attempt to protect them both from future hypothetical harm. "We're sorry to hear that, Chief," he offered, knowing full well how little those words helped.

"Well, you know," Perry said, shaking his head, "the fact is I've lived and breathed the Daily Planet for thirty years. And Alice says no matter how much I promise to change, that's the way it'll always be. She feels that she has the right to play first fiddle with somebody, and, uh, I can't disagree."

All Clark could manage was a pathetic clearing of his throat as sudden panic assailed him. Did Lois still feel as if she were playing second fiddle to Superman? He knew how

much she loved being in the middle of the action -- would she come to resent him for taking back his powers? Oh, he knew that she was overjoyed for him and that she had been worried about him over the past three torturous days, but still...Clark couldn't quite convince himself that his vibrant Lois would be happy to return to the deaf, blind, slow, and feeble world of normality.

Oblivious to Clark's distracted thoughts, Perry tried to brighten. "But I want to...I want to thank you all for your concern and understanding that my, uh, fuse has been a little short lately." He forced a chuckle, almost Lois-like in his desire to ignore the issue by concentrating on work. "Well, uh, okay, let's hit it! We've got a paper to print!"

"Sure, Chief," Clark said, but he paused to put a comforting hand on his editor's shoulder, dismayed that he had been so caught up in his own fears that he had almost ignored Perry's. "I'm sure it'll all work out eventually."

"Yeah, well...Thanks, son." Perry clapped Clark on the shoulder and then fled to his office.

Clark glanced down at the pages in his hand; then he shook his head to clear his thoughts.

"Hey, that's for the front page?" Jimmy reached over to take the story just as Clark's head snapped up and to the side.

"Help, Superman!"

"Here!" Clark shoved the story into Jimmy's hands. "I've got to meet Lois -- see you tomorrow."

"But, CK -- " The rest of Jimmy's words faded away, eclipsed by the sound of Lois's scream. Clark almost imagined he could hear her heartbeat racing, though he knew that even his hearing couldn't pinpoint that quiet a sound from so far away.

"Superman! He -- " Lois's cries were abruptly silenced.

Clark had barely reached the stairwell before he spun into the Suit and flew up the stairs, onto the roof, and into the sky. He couldn't take the time to luxuriate in using the powers he had often feared, occasionally resented, usually appreciated, and always missed when absent -- not when Lois was in danger. If it hadn't been for the imaginary sound of her heartbeat still racing, he might have screamed in despair as he blurred into the twilight. He couldn't go through the anguish of her death, not so soon after the last scare with Bad Brain Johnson.

A scuffle and the low sounds of a man's voice menacing a victim drew Clark's attention. He used his x-ray vision to peer through the buildings near the deli he and Lois enjoyed so much; then he sped down to a rough landing in the alley where two scruffy-looking men held Lois against the wall. One held his hand against her mouth while the other searched through her purse. Lois was glaring at both of them, her hands clenched into impotent fists. At that moment, no matter how useless and pointless he had felt without them, Clark wished Lois still possessed his powers,

particularly the invulnerability.

"Excuse me," he called in his patented Superman voice and watched as the criminals jerked to face him. Having never seen himself except in the mirror or on television, where he spent the entire time wondering how his mother had ever convinced him to pick a skin-tight Suit, Clark had no idea how intimidating he looked to everyone else. Having begun the habit of crossing his arms in front of his chest to hide how self-conscious and shy he felt under public scrutiny, he had no idea what impression the stern posture gave to the criminals he faced down.

"D-don't come any closer!" stammered the criminal holding Lois against the wall. "We'll -- "

A gust of superbreath knocked the two criminals to the ground, well away from Lois; a flash of heat-vision caused them to drop their weapons before they could land on them and damage themselves; a burst of superspeed saw both of the criminals bound together with a length of rusted pole that had previously been leaning against a garbage dumpster.

"Are you all right?" Clark asked worriedly, stooping to pick up Lois's purse and the items that had been carelessly tossed from it.

"Yes." Lois turned to glare at the criminals, and they should have been grateful she no longer had heat-vision. "How dare they? I mean, really! After all we've been through today, they have to pick \*now\* to try to mug me! Why don't these guys ever pick a good day to try this type of stunt? Of course, I don't know what exactly a good day for it would be. After all, if I'm having a good day, I certainly wouldn't want them to ruin it with their ridiculous attempts at crime. On the other hand, the last thing I need on a bad day is a mugging attempt. Don't they have better things to do with their time? And, come to think of it, why \*do\* they pick the days they do? It's not as if -- "

If Clark didn't stop her soon, he knew he would grin in a decidedly un-Superman-like fashion. It was too bad, too; he loved listening to her babble. Her voice could wash over him, taking with it the cares of the world he sometimes, probably melodramatically, felt he carried on his shoulders. Even before she had known he was Superman, she had been able to unsuspectingly help him deal with the tragedies he sometimes had to witness or endure before coming into work as if nothing had happened.

That thought ensured that the grin didn't break through Superman's façade.

'I'm never going to be satisfied with getting there five seconds too late.' Lois's words from the night before rang through his mind like an indictment, reminding Clark that the Suit and the flying were no longer enough to convince her that he was worthy of her love.

"Lois," he interrupted, gently, but her rambling ceased immediately. She looked at him with that searching expression, and he couldn't help but look away, shrinking a

little with the realization of what she must see when she looked at him. She had worn a Suit, too, and she had been the hero; she knew what it felt like to be standing where he was.

"I'll take these to the police station," he said quietly. "Will you go to the Daily Planet?"

"Where else would I go?" she retorted flippantly, but he heard the note of something in her voice, the same note that had infused her voice when she had asked him if he listened to her heartbeat.

Before his blush could redden enough to be seen in the gathering shadows, Superman swept up the two criminals and headed for the nearest police station. He deposited them quickly, hurrying through his statement and promising to have Lois come in the next day. He didn't want to leave Lois alone too long; much as he loved her, she was a magnet for trouble.

Lois was sitting at her desk when he arrived in the newsroom, stepping from the elevator dressed as Clark. She looked up at the ding of the opening doors, and a small smile curved her lips. Clark's heart skipped a beat as he looked at her, comfortable in the newsroom as she was nowhere else, as beautiful as any view he had ever seen from the land, sky, sea, or space.

"Clark, there you are. I must have missed you coming back from the deli," she added for the benefit of the few people still remaining in the newsroom. When she stood to meet him on the ramp, she kept her left hand in her pocket for an instant before tucking her hand in the crook of his elbow.

"Are you sure you're all right?" he questioned as he obediently turned back the way he had just come and followed her into the elevator.

"Please!" Lois scoffed. "Those amateurs are hardly worth mentioning. Why let them ruin our evening?"

Neither of them spoke again until they had exited the lobby of the Daily Planet building and emerged from beneath the canopy. Clark couldn't help but glance up at the metal planet facing the building, remembering the stench of smoke and the roar of incredibly hot flames being quenched by the arrival of the woman he still hoped would one day be his wife. He had hoped to propose for the second time two nights ago, but instead she had been busy helping his mom design her costume while he had covered for her here in Metropolis. It was hard to believe that it had only been four days since, courtesy of Tim and Amber Lake, they had faced one another in their individual cages -- painful light fields separating them -- and confessed their secret fears to each other.

Almost unconsciously, Clark pressed her hand against him a little tighter, purposely noting the steady thump of her heartbeat. "Some week, huh?" he finally commented, content to slowly walk down the streets with her at his side.

"Yeah." Lois ruefully shook her head. "It's been a little crazy."

Clark hesitated, but since they had agreed to talk through their fears together from now on, he couldn't keep the question to himself. "Any regrets?"

Lois peered up at him quizzically. "What do you mean?"

Clark came to a halt, took a deep breath, and turned to face her fully, her hand still resting on his arm. "Do you regret giving the powers back to me?"

"What?" Lois gaped at him. "How could you even think that, Clark? I told you I didn't want them. I told you they were yours. You were the one born to be a hero, not me."

She didn't balk when he pulled her closer to him. "You are a hero, Lois. Every day, you commit yourself a hundred percent to making the world a better place. Every day, you succeed in doing just that. And in the last three days, you've certainly proven yourself to be just as much of a hero as Superman."

Her smile was a trifle tremulous, but the hug was spontaneous and genuine. "Thanks, Clark."

When she began to walk again, pulling him along with her, he didn't resist, though he was surprised when she took the turn into Centennial Park instead of continuing toward her apartment.

"There's something else, isn't there?" she asked him after a moment. "You're kind of withdrawn. Don't you like having your powers back?"

"Of course I do!" he exclaimed instantly. "I have to admit that I didn't...feel quite right without them."

"They're part of you," she said matter-of-factly, seemingly unconcerned that her own words meant he wasn't the normal man she thought she had chosen. "You \*shouldn't\* feel right without them."

"Lois." Once more, Clark pulled her to a stop, halting them at the crossroads that could lead them either to the fountain where he had disastrously proposed once before or to the bench where he had -- with equally disastrous results -- told her he loved her. "Are you disappointed? I mean, now that you've experienced the powers, seen what anyone could do with them, are you disappointed that Superman is..." He looked away, pulling his arm free so he could stuff his hands into his pockets, internalizing his fear. "Are you disappointed that Superman is just me? Me with a couple of incidental powers?"

"Disappointed?" Clark was startled when Lois laughed. "And here I was afraid that you would resent me for being the one with your powers, for making you sit on the sidelines and watch while I did what you've been doing for more than two years -- well, really for your whole life. And all this time you've been afraid that I'd be \*disappointed\* with you?"

"Well," Clark said, shifting his weight, "anyone with the

powers could be Superman."

"No, Clark, they couldn't." Lois's voice was filled with such assurance that Clark couldn't help but meet her eyes. "Superman is more than a distracting Suit and some extraterrestrial powers. He's more than saving people from mudslides or bombs on planes, more even than taking down greedy robbers with a stash of red Kryptonite and a knowledge of lasers." She reached up to cradle his face between her hands. "Superman is having who you are taken from you and given away to someone else, yet still retaining your gentle grace. Superman is supporting someone you could so easily resent or envy and selflessly teaching them how to take your place. Superman is refusing to be embarrassed at a lack of power while still doing what you must to ensure that justice prevails. Superman is stopping a mugging with powers or without, protecting someone else's life even at the cost of your own, and persevering even when I'm sure you felt too tired or weak or, I don't know, \*human\* to keep going. \*You\* are Superman, Clark Kent, and I don't think that has ever been illustrated so clearly to me."

A swelling of warmth and affection almost choked Clark, and he couldn't help but bend his head and kiss her gently on the forehead. "Thank you," he whispered to her. "And just for the record, I'd rather you have my powers than anyone else in the world."

"Besides you," she clarified mischievously.

Clark chuckled, feeling the weight of the world lift from his shoulders. "Except for me," he admitted, slinging his arm around her shoulders as their steps mirrored each other. Before them, he could see the fountain where Lois had first seen him as he truly was, Clark and Superman, both together, both loving her with his whole being.

"You know," Lois said conversationally, playing with his hand, just as she had done on the night of his failed proposal, "if somebody had asked me three days ago who the one person in the world I admired most was, I'd have said -- you. But," she continued before he could respond to that startling statement, "without really knowing what that meant. And without understanding that the hardest thing about being you is all the things you can't do. All the cries for help that you can't answer -- and how that quietly tears you apart."

Her hand tightened over his as he tensed, her words from the night before once more echoing in his head as if she had just spoken them.

"But it never stops you," she stated quietly. "And after living a little of that myself, I realized something -- something that I never thought was possible."

That sick feeling returned in force, freezing Clark in his tracks. "What?" he managed to ask, not sure he wanted to know the answer. Would she condemn him for accepting the fact that he couldn't always be there? Was she disappointed in him for arriving five seconds too late all too often? Even \*once\* was too often.

Lois looked up at him and met his eyes firmly, the merest hint of nervousness noticeable to him only because he had learned to look past what she showed on the outside, just as she had learned to look past the bland suits and the Superman colors to see who he really was. "I love you more," she almost whispered. "More than I ever have -- and more than I ever thought I could love anyone. And so..." With her hands in his, she indicated that he should sit on the fountain -- somehow, she had maneuvered him so that it was just behind him.

A wild hope began to stir inside Clark, but he kept it from his face, not sure he could face another disappointment like the last time they had visited this fountain. He couldn't help but glance up at the skies to make sure there were no rain-clouds this night.

"I want to ask..." Lois knelt before him, and Clark knew he had lost his battle to hide or ignore his desperate longing. From her pocket, she withdrew the engagement ring he had optimistically purchased months ago. With anyone else, he would have wondered how they had found it; with Lois, it seemed only characteristic. "Will you marry me?"

The answer was a foregone conclusion, Clark knew, but he couldn't help himself. With only the slightest hint of a smile, he reached out a hand to cup her cheek, savoring the sensation of feather-soft hair. "Who's asking?" he teased hoarsely. "Lois...or Ultra Woman?"

Her smile was brilliant, blinding, and beautiful. "Who's answering?" She kissed the palm of his hand, sending a jolt of pure joy through Clark's body. He had to use his free hand to hold onto the rim of the fountain lest he find himself floating through the air, springing into the skies like a celebratory firework. "Clark...or Superman?"

Clark was astonished to see the uncertainty in Lois's eyes as she waited for his answer. How could she not know that he could never deny her anything, least of all this -- the very thing he himself wanted the most? He rose to his feet, pulling her upright as well. Letting go of the fountain was a calculated risk, but Clark couldn't bear to hold onto cold stone when he could be touching Lois.

"\*I'm\* answering," he stated definitively.

"I'm waiting," she replied, her tone now definitely bordering on nervous.

Clark's eyes bored into her, devouring her as if he had never seen her before, falling in love with her all over again. He had known the moment he saw her, filled with bursting with brilliant energy, that he could love her; he had just never realized how much until now. "Yes," he said intently, never meaning anything as much as he had meant that word.

There should have been music swelling with romantic overtones, or real fireworks exploding in the sky, or cheering coming from a worldwide audience, but there was nothing but the tinkling of the fountain, the twinkle of the stars overhead, and the quiet chirp of nearby crickets.

It was enough.

The slender, understated ring slipped onto Lois's finger, and Clark suddenly felt whole, accepted, filled with life as he had never been before. Lois smiled at him, her smile so wide it might have been a grin. Clark couldn't return it -- what was a smile compared to the jubilation exploding into life within him?

Almost solemnly, Clark bent his head and met her lips tenderly, aware that this was their first kiss as an engaged couple. He had thought before that nothing could top kissing Lois, but he had been wrong -- it was infinitely better kissing his fiancée.

He felt Lois grin again against his mouth, her hand tightening over his as if to reassure herself that the ring was still there. She pulled back for an instant to meet his gaze. "You know," she confided, "I thought flying by myself would be easier than anything, certainly less scary than some of the other powers."

"And was it?" he asked, content to listen to her ramble on about whatever she wanted so long as she kept that ring

on her finger and that sparkle in her eyes whenever she looked at him. It made him feel far more powerful than his superstrength ever had.

"It was all right," she said with a shrug, "but it wasn't as exciting as I thought it would be."

Clark was vaguely offended. He loved flying and couldn't imagine not finding it exhilarating or comforting, depending on his mood. And despite his fears, he had enjoyed sharing the experiences of learning his powers with someone else.

As if reading his thoughts, Lois grinned at him. "It could never beat flying with you. That's the best. When I'm in your arms, I feel like I'm lighter than air."

Now Clark did grin, slipping his arms around Lois's slender waist as he bent to kiss her again, thrilled that he could so freely do so now. Strangely enough, his feet stayed firmly on the ground even when Lois kissed him back with abandon. But then, maybe it wasn't so strange after all. As much as he loved flying, being in the sky kept him trapped between the stars and Earth. Now, however, he *did* belong. Lois had made him a home, and nothing could ever tear him away. She was, he decided rapturously, much better than gravity.

THE END