

Truths That Deceive

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Rated G

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Summary: Clark loves Lois but wants her back as a friend; Lois thinks she might love Clark but wants him back as a friend. What can fix a premature declaration of love and a rejection? A lie, but one that holds kernels of truth.

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Clark

"I've never seen anything so beautiful in my entire life."

Stupid, he chastises himself; he didn't make even a token effort of looking at the new Daily Planet globe, and she must realize that, no matter that she's been avoiding his eyes since the immediate aftermath of her almost-wedding. And yet, even if it is stupid, he can't really bring himself to care — because it's the truth, because even if she lets them both pretend he's talking about something else, he knows that at least he was able to say it this once.

Besides, after today, after he utters the most painful lie he'll ever tell, he'll never get a chance to voice such sentiments again. All that will be left is friendship. *Platonic* friendship.

But it's what she wants. Maybe even what they need right now. She's been hurt, betrayed, disappointed, and she needs a friend right now, not a suitor. So he'll pretend that he's speaking of the Daily Planet and he'll pretend that he doesn't always think about Lois's inner and outer beauty and he'll pretend that this whole Luthor fiasco never happened.

For her, he can do all that. Or at least...he hopes he can.

She's walking toward him, and he feels his heart seize up in his chest, wonders if it's possible for a Kryptonian to have a heart attack just by looking at the love of his life, thinks it would have been nice of Jor-El to mention that in his brief message.

"You never gave up," Lois observes, her voice free of accusation or anguish or apathy, made that much more melodic because of it. "On the Planet. On your friends. On me."

He wonders if it means anything that she separated herself from the rest of his friends, divided herself into a level apart from his truly platonic friendships. That she does at all is a change, a big one, and he can't help but savor it and wish, yet again, for impossible dreams.

"I couldn't," he says instead, again relishing the chance to speak the truth without driving her away. And yet, truthful or not, it's understated, wrapped in misdirection and evasion. For being a beacon of integrity, he thinks, Superman sure leaves a myriad of deception in his wake. "You've just named probably everything in this world that's precious to me."

She pauses, puts her hand on the side of the building, and he's suddenly glad there's a barricade between them because if there weren't, even Superman might not have been able to stop Clark Kent from pulling her into a very *not*-platonic embrace.

"I don't think I've ever — *will* ever — meet anyone quite like you," she says, and for an instant, he's struck by the feeling that she's saying just as much, and concealing it in the same manner, as he did when commenting on her beauty.

He has no response to it, whether that's what she means or not. Because, really, how is he supposed to answer that without laying himself bare, without telling her that, yes, she *has* met

someone like him? In fact, Superman is identical in every way save one — he's an alien and has abilities as a result of that. And she loves Superman, or thinks she does, or *used* to think she did, but she doesn't love Clark.

Except...except for that hug right after her almost-wedding. Except for the fact that she didn't say "I do." Except for the quiet, wondering glances she's been giving him all week. Except for a hundred other things that make him wonder what could be, what might be, what the future just might bring...

But he wants to see hope so badly that maybe he's only imagining it.

And what he didn't imagine was the loneliness in her voice when she called him during her engagement, the awkwardness that had sat between them like a huge, ungainly elephant that threatened to crush them both, the long pauses and somewhat cold goodbyes they had exchanged. Or the desperation he'd felt shivering through her slender frame when she'd thrown herself into his arms outside Lex Tower, the tears that had soaked through the collar of his shirt, the tiny anguished whimper that slipped from between her lips to pierce him to his core.

She needs a friend, he knows, and maybe he does too. Maybe he needs that certainty that she'll be there the next time he looks for her, that she won't hang up her phone if he calls her, that she'll be his partner without jumping every time he smiles at her or blushing when he puts his hand on her back or making excuses every time he asks her to lunch or to watch a video or any other thing he's grown used to getting to do with her.

Maybe they both need space. Maybe they both need simple friendship. Maybe they both need each other, and as unsure about everything else as he is, the one thing he knows for certain is that they'll never be comfortable with each other, never go back to the way it was, not with his unwelcome declaration of love sitting between them.

"Lois —" he begins at the same time as she says his name, shyness and timidity evident in her tone despite her smile, which only makes him more sure than ever that, painful as it will be, he needs to speak aloud this lie that has nothing — or, well, little — to do with his alter ego. Because when has Lois ever been shy? When is she timid?

Only when she's unsure, when she's lost, when she's afraid.

And he can't stand for her to be unsure around him. Doesn't want her to be lost when his friendship could ground her. Can't bear for her to ever be afraid of him, to think he'll expect things from her she's not prepared to give, to feel like she's disappointing him when just her mere presence and a smile or her head on his shoulder or her hand in his is enough to send him over the moon even without the benefit of flight.

"No, let me go first," Lois demands, and there's the hint of a smile in her voice now, which just might be worse because usually that smile only shows up when Superman's around, and that's not something he can face right now. Not something their relationship — just beginning to so tentatively be repaired — can withstand.

No maybe about it — he *does* need time to just be her friend again. Maybe just as much as she does.

So he pushes aside his chivalrous impulses — and his discomfort with doing so — and he says, "No, no, no. Not this time."

And then he looks at her because as many half-truths and polite evasions and excuses he's made, this is still the most blatant lie he's ever spoken to her. And he hates lying to her when lives are on the line; it's so much worse when he's doing it for selfish reasons.

Only, they're not completely selfish. It's for her sake as much as for his, even more so, really.

Because he loves her, he can pretend that he doesn't.

"Lois, I'm sorry. About a lot of things." That's not a lie, and

so it comes easily. He is sorry for cutting her off, for not being there for her, for not getting the proof they needed before the actual day of the wedding, for hurting her without even meaning to. And he's sorry for the lie he's about to tell her, the deception he may never fully recover from, the prevarication that just might doom anything all those things he thinks — hopes — he sees in her might lead them to. And yet, without this deception, their relationship may never last, not for a lifetime, not for eternity, not for as long as he wants it to.

"I wanted to bring Luthor down, but I *never* wanted to hurt you." He wants her to know that, wants that to be clear, wants her to remember that more than she remembers anything else about this conversation. "I shouldn't have said anything...about the way I felt toward you. It put you in an incredibly awkward position."

He had known it too, known she didn't love him, known she didn't need another man thrown into the mix. But he had told her anyway, with insane hope, with desperate optimism, with crushing results. It's his fault they're at this awkward place, and it's his responsibility to fix it.

So far, he's told only the truth, and that's important to him. When the day of reckoning for this moment comes, when she learns the truth and confronts him about it — and he refuses to believe that there *won't* be a time when she knows and yet still talks to him — he wants to have as clear a conscience as he can. Maybe it's semantics, but those shades of gray are sometimes all that lets him stomach another lie, another excuse, another evasion.

"No, Clark, I really —" she interrupts, and it's just like her, it really is, enough so that he knew to expect it, knew to plan on just continuing to talk over her. He's sure this tactic will work — it always does for her.

"No, the truth of the matter is, Lois," and now he's talking quickly, swiftly, propelling the words from his mouth as if speed will separate him that much sooner from the lie, will move him closer to the long-sought day when lies are no longer necessary between them. And he moves his hand behind his back and crosses his fingers, a useless, childish gesture, but it makes him feel a little bit better because it means that not *everything* is a lie — what he's saying is, but not the way he's standing, angled toward her, leaning in so that he can smell her perfume, his hand behind his back revealing what a complete masquerade this whole conversation is. "It — it wasn't true."

Very ironic words for a lie, he thinks, but it's too late to back out now because she's staring at him, her dark eyes wide with confusion, her mouth closing over whatever she wants to tell him.

And now here it is, the lie, the prevarication he'd made sure Superman avoided, the lie Clark Kent *can't* avoid, not if he wants to keep his reason for living *in* his life.

He manufactures a laugh, but it sounds as fake as his confession. "I'm not in love with you." Funny how the words get stuck in his throat, refusing to emerge into air, fighting and protesting every step of the way, scraping along the confines of his mouth before necessity finally shoves them out where Lois can hear them, where it's now too late to send them retreating back to where they came from.

"You're not?" she asks, double-checking what she heard, and it's strange that she seems to have lost all her earlier energy, that her eyes seem to be a bit darker, a bit shinier. Or maybe it's not so strange — after all, her friend is claiming that he told her a despicable lie to keep her safe.

And it's even almost true.

He's telling her a despicable lie to keep her happy.

It's not exactly the same thing, but it's close enough to make him squirm in discomfort to have to repeat the lie.

"I would have said anything to stop you from marrying Luthor," he tells her, and that's the truth too. If he hadn't been

stuck in Luthor's cage, if they hadn't gotten the proof they needed, he had been planning to tell her what he did in his spare time, and if that didn't count as telling her *anything* to keep her away from Luthor, then nothing did.

"Oh," she murmurs. And now he's afraid because she doesn't seem more comfortable with him, doesn't seem ready to go back to their easy, companionable friendship. Instead, she seems even *more* uncomfortable, more uncertain, more alone, and that wasn't what he meant to accomplish at all! "Well, if — if that's how you feel..."

It isn't, but he's not going to lie yet again. As it is, he already feels like he needs to go speed through the ocean as fast as possible with his mouth wide open in order to wash out the stench and taste of this lie he'd never thought he'd speak.

So, carefully, he goes back to one of his favorites: misdirection.

"I want the same thing that you want," he assures her, and he does, as far as that goes. He'll certainly never force her into anything she doesn't want, but if she one day wants more than friendship...well, he wouldn't object and the only delay would be in getting him back down off the moon. "For us to be friends and partners. Forever."

His fingers aren't crossed anymore because this at least is the whole, unvarnished truth. Even if it is said in a way to make her feel safe with him and for him to feel safe spending so much time with her while hiding so much of what he feels for her.

Then she smiles at him, quieting and softening, and he thinks that maybe this lie is worth the anguish it feels to speak it aloud.

"Forever," she echoes him, half an affirmation, half a question.

But he doesn't know what the question is, exactly, which means he doesn't know how to answer her. So he just gives her the hint of a smile. He can't tear his eyes off of her, glad his self-appointed task is finally over but uncertain where to go from here. It's disappointing, this moment, because he's spent the past week convincing himself that if he told her this lie, they'd be just as they had been before, be just Lois and Clark again, hardly even any spaces to separate them, their names blending and merging together in everyone's mouths.

But they aren't Lois and Clark right now. They're still Lois standing there and Clark standing here, and they might be close physically, but there's still a distance that has yet to be bridged. And that hurts, but he can't convince his battered heart that he's only imagining all the things he thinks he sees in her, and he's nothing if not patient, so he firms up his smile for her and asks, "Now, what did you want to say?"

Lois

"Now, what did you want to say?" he asks her, and she's at a complete loss because what can she possibly say after that bombshell he's just dropped on her?

A minute earlier, and she would have been telling him that she might just possibly love him as more than a friend. She hadn't thought she loved him, but that mirror in Lex Tower that had framed her in her wedding dress had certainly been revealing, pulling out of her the simple "Lois Lane Kent" that betrayed the fact that she *did* think of Clark as a possible romantic partner. Since then, all week long, she'd been looking at him in a new light, sneaking sidelong glances at him and wondering what it would be like to have him as a boyfriend or as a lover or — and this surprised her, but she blamed the wedding dress for it — as a husband.

And what she has decided, what she so badly wants to tell him, is that he will make a great boyfriend, a wonderful lover, an amazing husband. He's always there for her, always looking out for her best interests, always putting aside his own concerns to address hers. She knows that maybe best of all about him, and

that's why she's suddenly afraid to say anything while she replays the last few minutes through her mind.

"I'm not in love with you," he'd said, but he's shifting his weight uncomfortably, and he's a bit too intent on meeting her eyes, and he can't quite rearrange his features to erase any hint of the complete and utter sincerity that had touched every millimeter of his being when he'd told her he loved her.

It'd be so easy to believe him at this moment, so easy to snort derisively, and enter this onto her mental balance sheet as the final proof that men will always betray her, and wash her hands of him.

And yet...in all the weeks she was engaged to Lex, she couldn't make herself forget the little things Clark always did for her, the smiles he unveiled for her, the touches that told her he cared for her, the cups of coffee and donuts and lunches and Double Fudge Crunch bars when she was stressed, the tasks he'd done before she could that he never really mentioned or held against her, the soft, endearing light that unfailingly gleamed in his eyes every time he looked at her. She'd first seen that light over Chinese food at her desk, and it had scared her then even more than it scared her now.

She'd shot him down, then, warned him not to fall for her. But he'd gone and done it anyway, and she'd have to be an idiot to ignore the memory of his manner every day they'd worked together and spent together in favor of the words he was telling her now.

Because that soft, endearing light was still gleaming in his eyes. Because it had shone like a beacon when he said he thought she was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen in his life. Because it had flickered and burned when he said he couldn't give up on her. Because it's glowing like embers now, as he patiently watches her with a smile ready to flash at her should she need it.

It hurts to hear him say he lied, but she knows that's because it's hard to envision Clark lying to her at all. He told her the truth about Luthor, about his feelings, about everything...until this moment when he actually is lying to her.

But he's so transparent, so predictable. She should have known he'd do this, should have guessed he'd be trying to find anyway to make her more comfortable, to be her friend again, to correct what he surely has to think was a mistake. She knows exactly why he's lying to her, and it's disappointing, but she's nothing if not flexible, so she discards her own prepared speech and smiles back at him. It's a tiny smile, not quite real yet, but then, none of her smiles have been real since before her wedding—that-wasn't day.

"Oh, nothing," she answers him. She's a much better liar than he is, but she can't quite make that sound convincing, so she keeps going, trying desperately to recover her footing and reclaim the Lois Lane she used to be before Lex had wrecked her. "Yeah, uh, what you said. I'm just...that. Sort of," she can't resist adding because that "forever" he mentioned sounded somewhat final, and she's not sure she wants to lock herself into this lie for quite that long.

His shoulders relax a bit as tension bleeds from him and his smile suddenly looks a bit less forced, and she thinks she made the right decision in going along with his lie. Maybe there is regret evident in his expression, and maybe she too thinks wistfully of the confession she had been going to give him, but she isn't the only one who's been hurt in the past weeks. Clark was the one who bravely uncovered his heart only to have it broken, and he's the one who'd held her while she cried after Lex's death yet selflessly refrained from saying a single I-told-you-so.

And, really, what had she planned to confess to him today, anyway? She can't tell him she loves him, not yet. She's not ready, not yet convinced that she does. She thinks she could,

thinks she might, but she doesn't know yet, and if she told Clark that, what would that do? It'd make him wait, trap him in an uncertain in-between that would keep him always on edge. It'd make her feel pressured to decide *right now* whether she loved him or not and how could she expect to know for certain if she's pressured into it?

Besides, she misses Clark, misses him even though she's been with him for most of the past week. She misses when they could tease each other without worrying about offending or hurting the other, when she could place a hand on his chest to emphasize a point without guiltily worrying that she was giving him a false impression, when he could smile at her without throwing her into a tailspin wondering what he was thinking or imagining when he looked at her *that way*.

She misses being his just-friend and having a just-friend.

And maybe he does too. Maybe this isn't only about her. Maybe he's afraid of what his confession might mean to their friendship. She's never felt so comfortable with anyone in her life, and that's been something she's known for months now...but she's never stopped to wonder if maybe he feels the same. Has he ever had a friend as close as her? Has he ever been able to be himself around someone as much as she can be herself around him?

Maybe he needs her just as much as she needs him.

It's a scary thought, and she looks down, breaking their gaze, while she thinks it through. She's never had anyone who depends on her like that, not really, not totally, not enough so that the wrong reaction from her left him destroyed enough so that when he'd looked away and run a hand through his hair, she'd thought he might actually crumble into little pieces.

But...she *wants* to be there for Clark. He's been there for her; surely she can be there for him too.

So she smiles at him, unable to help the way it turns wistful and longing. She sees the effects of it in Clark, the way his smile dwindles away to be replaced by that same look he'd worn over the best Chinese food she's ever had. And she wonders if he realizes just how transparent he is, wonders if he knows that she knows he's lying, wonders if that made this lie — so contrary to his basic personality — easier for him to give her.

And despite being slightly disappointed that she won't be able, after all, to tell him what had been playing through her mind while she walked up the aisle toward Lex, she can't help but be glad to see her friend Clark. Inside herself, she feels some tension she hadn't even realized she'd been feeling unwinding, uncurling, evaporating under the bright gleam in his smoky-brown eyes.

There's a waist-high barricade between them, yet she forgets that for a moment as he leans the slightest bit toward her. Like magnets, she's drawn forward too, and she knows they've barely finished agreeing to be just friends, but if they do kiss, as it seems like they might in an instant, would that really be so bad? She's having a hard time remembering all the reasons she had come up with to not tell him that she's been watching him now and liking — a lot — what she sees.

But then, unexpectedly, inexplicably, he tears his gaze away from her, cocks his head as if he's suddenly remembered something. And suddenly, he's not content to stand there anymore; instead, he's filled to bursting with energy, with purpose, with *life*. It's a transformation she's seen before, and yet she's never really taken the time to wonder at it. It's a habit he's had since she's first known him, a quirk she's accepted, but now, maybe for the first time, she actually wonders what it is that transforms him from her still, steady rock to suddenly being a fountain of vitality and intensity that needs to move *now*.

"Uh, could you excuse me for a second, Lois?" he asks, already moving, already making a meaningless gesture with his hand, yet still watching her, hesitating an instant, slowing the burst of that energetic fountain for her. "We can continue this

later. I have to go.”

She turns to watch him go, running from her, and a swell of confusion surges within her. But it’s a familiar confusion, a familiar sight — him running in a hurry to some task she doesn’t quite understand — a familiar event. And strangely, as odd as it is, this makes everything complete, sends them back to their comfortable, familiar friendship.

“Sure,” she says because she wants to say something after so long a time of *not* saying anything, because it seems like the thing to do, giving him permission to complete whatever so wholly captures his attention. “Why not? Go. Run off and disappear like you always do when we’re having a discussion.”

Her curiosity, never far away and yet driven into hiding all those weeks of her engagement, slips interestedly after the matter of Clark’s quick exits, yet she doesn’t really turn her attention to it. Clark’s her friend and he was there for her when even she let herself down — the least she can do now is not investigate him. She hadn’t investigated Lex, after all; how can she not give this much more worthwhile man the same courtesy?

Besides, unlike with Lex, she is sure that Clark will tell her what his secret is, if it becomes important. But for now, after having just been given the gift of their friendship back, she’s not ready to so soon endanger it, not eager to test boundaries mere moments after they’ve established them.

Friends. It’s not what she thought they’d be this morning, when she’d given herself a rousing speech meant to motivate her into confessing her maybe-feelings to Clark. And yet, she thinks that maybe it’s enough for the time being. She’s had boyfriends before, even had a fiancé now, but none of those relationships have, in the end, meant nearly as much to her as her friendship with Clark.

And that’s enough, for now, to keep her whole, to keep her sane, to keep her from ripping herself to shreds for not having seen through Lex.

“Well,” she muses, “I guess everything’s back to normal.”

But her thoughts are tossed and scattered by the sudden shock of a sonic boom, a flash of blue and red from high up in the heavens.

Superman.

That, too, is something — someone — she hasn’t considered much lately, not since a midnight meeting that both shames and angers her. His absence over the past week has made it easy to push him aside; Clark’s now-noticeable presence has made it almost impossible to spare the superhero a thought at all.

She had thought Superman was different, or not what she had thought at all, after his response to her declaration of love, but now, with the echoes of Clark’s apology and gift still ringing in her ears, she thinks that maybe she can understand Superman a bit better. After all, she’d been the one playing his part in the park the afternoon Clark had made *his* declaration of love.

So she looks up at the sky where Superman’s bold, entrancing colors splay out in a ribbon threaded through the clouds, and she feels a short smile twist her lips. Because she may be able to love Clark, but she already knows that she does love Superman. And maybe it’s not a love that can last forever, maybe it’s not a love that can exist in the real world, but it’s love nonetheless, and she likes to keep her options open.

Because, for her sake or not, today Clark lied to her.

But Superman has never lied to her.

“I’m not done with you either, big fella,” she whispers, a silent promise to both herself and Superman.

Clark has a secret; she has Superman. One day, maybe they’ll tear down these last barriers — maybe Clark will tell her what keeps him running away with such purpose in his gaze and maybe she’ll finally be able to give up her dreams of romance with a superhero and give Clark what he deserves. But for now, she’s been given a second chance. And that’s something, really,

that she hadn’t thought could be hers, that had sounded more unlikely than unicorns in those moments when Henderson and Perry had burst into her wedding ceremony.

But it’s hers now. Clark gave it to her, and she’s accepted it.

So she’ll take this second chance, this opportunity to start over again and maybe fix the things that went wrong the first time. And maybe, somewhere along the way, she’ll find the answer to doing things right.

For Clark’s sake.

And for hers.

THE END