

High Tide (Summer Fic Challenge)

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Rated: PG13 (a few mild swear words and some not-so-clean thoughts)

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Summary: What if Lois and Clark had made up someplace that wasn't so musty and owned by a killer?

"What time?" I glare at my work partner. I'm sure I heard him right. I just want to make sure he knows how irritated I am. It's bad enough that I had to endure an awkward drive and a long ferry ride to come interview a source who was considerably less forthcoming than we had been led to believe. Now that frustration is about to be compounded because...

"Seven-thirty," Clark says glumly and avoids meeting my eyes. "The ferry can't dock until the next high tide. And that's not until seven-thirty tomorrow morning."

I let out a long, slow sigh of disgust. Clark Kent is the absolute last person on earth I want to be marooned on an island with right now. It hurts even more when I think about the last time we were stuck on an island together. That night on Spencer's island seems further away than just a couple of months. I spent most of that night in Clark's arms, listening as he poured his heart out and confessed his love for me. It still feels like a slap in the face to know that the same man who could spout all those words of love betrayed me so ruthlessly. Sure, he has since tried to apologize, but he has to be insane to think we could simply pick up right where he abandoned me.

"So fly me home."

Clark looks around. The only other soul near us is the man who's locking up the small booth where ferry passage is sold. The guy gives us a sympathetic smile and gestures toward the small town of French Cove. "There's a B&B up the hill," he shouts in our direction. "You can get a room there."

Clark waves back and then turns to face me. "It's a small island, Lois. People are going to notice if you don't get on the ferry with me tomorrow."

"You can tell them that Superman flew me home. It'll be the truth, right?"

He grimaces as if that's a huge imposition. "Why don't we check out the B&B?"

"Why spend the money?"

"I'll pay for it."

"I'm not about to share a room with you."

"I'm sure we can get separate rooms."

"Why not just take me home?"

He sighs, but his gaze never wavers from mine. "Because we need to talk."

I narrow my eyes at him. "Oh my god. You did this on purpose, didn't you?"

"Did what?" He has the gall to look confused.

"Stranded us here. This interview was your idea. You knew the ferry schedule. You knew we'd get stuck here, didn't you?"

Clark glances down and runs a frustrated hand through his hair. "It doesn't matter what I say, you're not going to believe me."

"Try me."

"I didn't know the ferry schedule."

I want to believe him. I want to be able to trust him about

little things even if I never trust him with my heart again. But is it dangerous to trust him on the little things? If we become friends again, it's only going to be salt in the wound. Most days it's all I can do not to break down crying at how bitterly unfair this whole situation is. The rest of the time I want to scream at him or punch his arm. The fact that hitting him wouldn't hurt him only makes me feel worse. I want him to hurt. I want him to regret what he's done. I want him to pay. But, day after day, he's calm and unflappable. You wouldn't know to look at him that he'd ever cared for me as more than a work colleague.

"Just take me home," I whisper. I'm too tired and heartsick to want to talk about it anymore.

Clark hesitates for a moment and then quietly says, "All right." He glances around again before his gaze stops on a low wooden building next to the dock's entrance. He tilts his head to indicate we should go behind it.

It only takes me three steps to realize that I can't do this. If he flies me home, he'll be holding me. Tired as I am at this moment, I could face down an armed criminal or a psychopath, but I can't spend the next ten minutes in Clark's arms. I spin on my heel and head for the car.

"Lois?" he calls out to my retreating back.

"I changed my mind," I snarl. "You're paying for my room."

"Two rooms?" The proprietor of the Spindrift Inn pauses in opening the registry book and gives us a quizzical look.

"We're work colleagues," I tell him. "Trust me, this isn't a vacation."

"I see." The man nods. "Where do you work?"

"The Daily Planet." Clark pulls a credit card from his wallet and sets it on the counter.

"Ah. Doing a piece on the island? Are you travel writers?"

I let out an exasperated sigh. I'm in no mood to share my life story. "We missed the ferry. Do you have two rooms or don't you?"

The man gives me a patronizing smile. "Half my business is from folks who missed the ferry." He sets two keys on the counter. "I'll put you in rooms two and three. Room two has a lovely view of the bay and three overlooks the garden. Breakfast is from six to nine in the front parlor."

"Thank you." Clark picks up the key for room three. I feel an irk of irritation that he's giving me the better view. Does he think that he can win me back with kindness? Fat chance, Kent.

I grab the key for room two and walk ahead of Clark up the stairs. I pause outside room two and try to fit the key into the lock. The task is made more difficult by the fact that my fingers have suddenly gone numb. It doesn't help that Clark simply stands there and watches me.

"What?" I ask impatiently.

He motions to indicate the narrow hallway. "It's okay. I can wait."

"Just go past me." I step close to the door, flattening myself against it to give him room to pass. He turns sideways and slides past, but his body still brushes mine. I shiver and close my eyes for a couple of seconds. Damn him. Is there ever going to be a time when having Clark touch me doesn't make my knees weak?

"Would you like to go get something for dinner?"

"No." I stab the key at the door again and wonder if the guy downstairs gave me the wrong key.

"Aren't you hungry?"

I glare over my shoulder at him and see that he's already got his door open. "No." I return my attention to the world's most stubborn lock. And then I nearly jump out of my skin when Clark's hand touches my shoulder. I shrug violently so that his hand drops away. "Don't! I don't need your help. I should have let you fly me home."

"So why didn't you?" He sounds almost as exasperated as I

do.

“Because I didn’t want you to touch me,” I snarl. “I don’t want to be anywhere near you.”

I hear his sharp intake of breath. In that instant I realize that I’ve finally succeeded in hurting him. It doesn’t make me feel any better. Luckily, the key picks that moment to slip into the lock and I’m able to open the door. I swiftly step inside and shut the door firmly behind me before I can do something stupid like apologize to him. I don’t owe him anything. Not an explanation, an apology, or even a friendly attitude.

The room is what travel brochures like to call ‘cozy’. In reality that means that there’s only enough room for a double bed. A door on the right wall is partially open and I can see the tiled floor of the bathroom. I cross to the window that’s just a few feet from the foot of the bed and look out. Sure enough, there’s a view of the bay. The sun is about to set and the sky has gone a romantic purplish-red. I open the window to let some air in and then sit on the foot of the bed. I can hear the waves crashing on the rocky shore that’s maybe fifty yards away. The sound is rather comforting. I immediately decide to leave the window open all night.

Now what? My stomach growls, but I’ll be damned if I’m going to eat with Clark. I dig through my purse and find the Double Fudge Crunch bar that I keep for emergencies. I sit on the end of the bed and watch the sun set as I eat the chocolate slowly, letting each small square dissolve on my tongue before breaking off a new one. Out in the bay, the fishing boats are returning, their lights twinkling as they bob on the waves.

I’m on the last square of chocolate when I hear the creak of floorboards outside my door. I freeze, holding my breath in as I wait for a knock on the door. Nearly a minute passes and there’s still no knock. Maybe I’m only imagining it? Maybe he wasn’t waiting out there at all. I blink my eyes in an attempt not to cry as I realize that Clark moved past my room and didn’t stop. The thought that Clark might be ignoring me like I’m ignoring him sends a sharp pang of regret through me.

I miss him. Clark was my best friend and I miss him with an ache so deep that sometimes it’s hard to breathe. I miss seeing him smile when I get to work. He still looks up when I get off the elevator, but nowadays his face is a careful mask. It never fails to break my heart. I miss the easy camaraderie we shared, both at work and in our off-hours. I miss watching movies on his couch. I miss his teasing. Clark never teases me anymore. He’s polite to a fault and it breaks my heart. I wish he’d do something, anything, that didn’t come across as deferential. I miss his kisses and the incomparable security of being held in his arms.

I tell myself to get a grip. It’s over. He made his bed and now he can lie in it. All by himself.

Somewhere around one in the morning, I give up on the idea of falling asleep. I’ve tossed and turned for hours. It’s hell, knowing that Clark is just across the hall and yet completely out of reach. Of all the mean things I’ve said to him over the past month, telling him I don’t want him near me feels like the most spiteful. I should have told him that it was too painful being close to him, but no, I wanted to hurt him.

I did it, too. I finally succeeded in landing a solid blow and I didn’t even stick around to gloat. I guess our breakup isn’t a zero sum game, after all. Nobody wins. The most insane part is that I still want to apologize to him. That’s right, me apologize to Clark. I want to say ‘I’m sorry’ to the man who broke my heart.

I flip the pillow over and find a few seconds of bliss in having my cheek pressed to the cool side. And then I realize that I’m snuggled up to that pillow like it’s a person and my mind instantly goes to the room just across the hall. Is he awake over there? Does he ever lie awake at night and wish I was there? Ever since we returned from Spencer’s island, there hasn’t been a

single night that I haven’t remembered being in his arms. At first, it was the thought of someday spending all my nights in his arms that made me restless. And then it was the realization that I would never be in those arms again that kept me wide awake and staring at the ceiling.

Would it be too much to ask to have him bitterly regretting his choices right now?

Even as I think about that possibility, I know it’s not happening. Clark is so stubbornly certain that he’s right. It’s one of his most irritating qualities. That’s another thing I learned about him on Spencer’s island. Once he’s made a decision, he’s impossible to sway.

I hate that he’s a better person than me. I hate that he’s always looking at the ‘big picture’ and puts everyone else first. What if I was the bigger person for once? What if I apologized? I tense, but don’t actually sit up. If he is awake, surely the man who can hear things on the other side of Metropolis will hear me apologizing from across the hall.

“Clark?” I whisper.

I wait, straining my ears to hear something, anything. But there’s no creak in the hall or knock on my door. Hell, he’s probably asleep right now and, if he did hear me, he thought it was part of a dream. I listen harder and realize that I can’t even hear the waves.

For a moment or two I puzzle over why that is. Then I remember — slack tide. When the tide is at its mid-point the water goes calm because it’s not rushing out to sea or being pushed inland. Just like the bay outside, my life is at slack tide right now. Nothing’s moving. I’m not going forward or backward. One way or another, I need the tide to turn.

I sit up in bed and swing my legs over the edge. Only that’s as far as my sudden urge to be decisive goes. I just sit there, my heart hammering and my throat too dry to speak. What was it I thought I was going to do? I can’t exactly march across the hall and pound on Clark’s door, not right now. Certainly not when the only thing I’m wearing is my underwear.

No more excuses. I grope in the dark to find the inn’s plush robe that I left lying across the bottom of the bed after my shower. I stand up and pull it on and even manage to take a step toward the door before I freeze again. Should I get dressed? Does it send the wrong sort of message if I show up at Clark’s door in the middle of the night wearing nothing but my panties and a robe? Deep down, I realize that my hesitation is not from the fear of a fashion faux pas. I’m scared of what Clark is going to say. Or, even worse, that he won’t talk to me at all. He may choose to slam the door in my face. But would he? The way he broke up with me was cruel in its abruptness, but even I have to admit that Clark did try to do it gently. He would never slam the door in my face, even though I did it to him.

Before I can change my mind, I open the door and step into the hall. The overhead light is blinding after the dark of my room. My breath is stuck in my throat and my knees are shaking. Somehow I’m suddenly standing in front of the door for room 3. I clench my right hand into a fist and raise it and make a light tap-tap on the door.

Then I wait, my entire body shivering with the effort not to flee across the hall. The seconds drag on and I’m debating whether I should knock again or go back to my room when I see the handle start to turn.

Oh god. He heard me. He’s awake. He’s opening the door...

I suck in a quick breath and look up. My heart squeezes at the sight of him, so close at last. Clark’s hair is tousled, he’s not wearing his glasses, and he, too, is wearing a fluffy white robe with the Spindrift’s logo embroidered on the chest pocket. He doesn’t say anything; he just looks down at me with tired eyes.

“Hi... uh... Did I wake you?”

I see his jaw tighten and then he steps back and, for a

heartbreaking second, I think he's about to shut the door. But no, he knew it was me before he opened the door or he would have put on his glasses. His door opens wide and Clark silently gestures for me to come inside.

Only I can't move. I stand frozen in the hallway and watch as he turns on the bedside lamp and sits down on the edge of the bed. Clark looks over at me and, after a few seconds, he asks, "Would you rather we talked in the hall?" His voice sounds husky, like he hasn't used it in days.

"No. We, uh, we can talk in your room." I take a few jerky steps forward and suddenly I'm standing in his room with the door shut behind me as all my senses start to panic. What was I thinking, coming in here? The lamp is nowhere near as bright as the hallway. His room is just as snug and cozy as mine. Oh god, oh god — I'm alone with Clark in a romantic hotel room. I can see his clothes draped over the bed's footboard. There's no way in hell I could sit next to him on the bed right now. Instead, I lean back, resting my shoulders against the door. My right hand closes over the doorknob behind my back so that I have options for a speedy exit. Clark's dark eyes look into mine, his gaze steady as he waits for me to speak.

I take a deep breath and let it out in a shaky exhale. Apologizing to him, especially under these conditions, is a lot harder than I thought it would be.

"I'm--." I have to pause to clear my throat. "I'm sorry about what I said earlier. I, uh... When I said that I didn't want you to touch me. What I meant was that it would just be too painful, being that close to you. I'm sorry if I hurt you. I mean, I said it because I knew it would hurt you. But then I was sorry that I did it."

Clark doesn't move. He doesn't even blink. Did I say any of that out loud? Do I look just as sleep-tousled as he does and he's wondering what he ever saw in me to begin with?

"I'm saying I'm sorry." That sounded a little more irritated than remorseful, but he should be glad I'm in here at all.

Finally, he nods. "All right."

I let out a sigh of relief. "Good. I'll let you get back to sleep then." I turn to leave but, quick-as-that, he's standing next to me with his hand on the door to stop it from opening. A flutter goes through my chest to have him so near to me.

"Lois, wait, please." His voice is still husky and it makes this moment feel as intimate as that night on Spencer's island. I stare at his hand, unable to look at him when he's this close. "You don't have to forgive me," he continues in that gravelly tone. "I know that I hurt you and I would give anything in the world to take it all back. I can't change what I did. But, please, can we still be friends?"

I hesitate. I can feel the pull of Clark on me, a tidal draw as strong as the one changing the current out in the bay. Could we be friends again? Do I dare allow him that close? I can't stop staring at his hand and thinking about all the times he's touched me. I'd give just about anything to have him touch me right now.

"I miss you, Lois," he adds softly after several seconds have gone by without an answer from me.

I start to shiver even though it's warm in this room and I'm wearing a fuzzy bathrobe. I desperately want to be friends again. But if I'm standing here wishing he'd touch me, it means that we probably wouldn't be just friends for long. I can see it now — I forgive him and we hug, and then we kiss, and... It would only take seconds for us to lose these robes and there's an unmade bed only a few feet away. And then, in a week or a month or next year, something's going to happen that makes him freak out and he'll break my heart all over again. I can't be friends with him. I can't be anything with him.

"It's not that easy," I choke out. "I don't know if I can be friends with you."

"Why not?"

"I can't be just friends with you. I'd want more than that."

"Me, too."

My breathing turns shallow as I picture us entwined on the bed. This is bad. This is beyond bad. This is a disaster just moments away from happening.

"I don't know if I can trust you," I whisper.

His hand disappears and I hear a sigh from the bed as he sits down again. My right hand tightens on the door knob but I can't seem to make myself leave. *Stop me*, I silently plead with him. *Say something — anything. Tell me you're sorry or that you'll never do it again. Anything.*

"I deserve that," he says softly. "I deserved what you said earlier about not wanting me anywhere near you. You don't need to apologize to me. I'm the one who should be apologizing. This whole mess is my fault. Even this, being stuck here, is my fault. You were right. I knew the ferry schedule. I lied to you earlier, and I'm sorry about that, too."

I turn and see that he's talking to my feet. His shoulders are slumped and his hands clasped nervously together. He's right to be nervous. I can't decide if this is another act or if he's actually coming clean. Am I supposed to forgive him, applaud him even, for being so open and honest? Congratulations, Clark, you've realized you're a huge jerk. Of course I'll take you back.

"You did this on purpose?"

He nods and looks up to meet my eyes. His are full of misery. "I didn't know what else to do. You barely talk to me at work. You won't answer my phone calls. It's killing me, Lois. I need you in my life. I need you. Please, I'll do anything you want, pay any penance you ask, but please don't shut me out of your life."

Well. Okay. That's definitely something.

"How was this supposed to go?" I ask, curious to know what he thought would happen between us. "We miss the ferry and then what?"

His eyebrows furrow. "I don't know."

"Yes, you do. If you want me to trust you again, you're going to have to tell me the unvarnished truth. When you planned this, did we share a room?"

He shakes his head emphatically. "No. We had separate rooms. We, uh... we would have talked over dinner and made up."

"Where were we going to eat?"

"Fontana's. It's a little sea food restaurant a few blocks from here. They have outside dining on a deck over the water."

"What would you have said at dinner that would have magically made me decide to give you a second chance?"

"That I love you. That I'm always going to love you, even if you hate me."

"I don't hate you."

I resent him. I feel guilty for punishing him and yet I still think he needs to pay for hurting me. Most of all, I love him. I want him in my life again. I wonder if his feelings are really that simple or if he's a mass of contradictions like I am. Somewhere, deep down, he must still be scared. But he is scared of commitment or some nameless, faceless evil that's supposed to hurt me?

"You don't like me very much these days," he mutters.

That kind of self-pity makes my hackles rise. "Gee, I wonder why."

"I'm sorry. That's what I would have said at dinner. I would have told you how sorry I am. I would have promised you that I'd never make another decision about our relationship without talking to you."

"Would you have told me that you knew the ferry schedule?"

"Probably."

"And then what?"

"We'd walk back to the Inn, holding hands."

"Would you have kissed me at the door?"

His dark eyes never waver from mine. “Yes.”

I tremble a little at the sense memory of his lips on mine.

“What if I’d asked you in?”

I hear him swallow before he answers, “I would have come in.”

“And then what?”

“That’s entirely up to you.”

I realize what he’s doing. He’s admitted he was wrong and now he’s giving me control of our relationship. It’s so tempting, the idea that right here, right now, all this could be over. We could be friends again. We could be more than friends again. And then he can break my heart again.

“I can’t.” I blink to stave off the tears that are suddenly blurring my vision. “I can’t do it, Clark. I already told you, I won’t survive it the next time you break my heart.”

Even through my tears and the dim light of the room, I can see him go pale. “You were dead weight in my arms, Lois, after that explosion. Do you have any idea what that was like? I couldn’t survive it if anything happened to you, especially if it was my fault. You are everything to me. Absolutely everything.” He stands up and my pulse rockets into hyperdrive at the thought that he might be about to touch me. “I love you, Lois. I need you in my life. I need you. I promise you, I will never hurt you like that again.” He doesn’t move any closer, he just stands there with an anguished look on his face.

I believe him. Even though we’re in this room together because he lied to get us here, I believe him. He’s only two steps away. Two steps that could change both our lives. Two steps that mean I trust him again. Two steps that will seal my fate, one way or another.

And that’s just it. Do I want my fate sealed to Clark? Or do I want the rest of my life to be spent with him at arm’s length? When I put it that way, I don’t even have to think about my answer.

In the space of heartbeat, I have my arms around him. His arms encircle me and the weight of his hand cups the back of my head.

“I promise,” he whispers near my ear. “Never again.”

I absolutely believe him.

THE END

This story started out with the idea that Lois wasn’t going to forgive him. But every time I finally got them talking to each other, she caved. I guess those crazy kids really are meant for each other.