

# House of the Phoenix

By NostalgiaKick <feli290412@gmail.com>

Rated PG

Submitted: May 2015

Summary: Lois asks a question — and gets more than she bargained for.

Story Size: 1,583 words (8Kb as text)

Author's note: This is set at the end of The Phoenix. Thanks goes to KenJ and my good friend Trina for beta-ing and to IolantheAlias for getting it ready for archiving. And thanks to Shallowford for the title!

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It had been a truly weird couple of days.

First, Clark had asked her out on a date — a real date — taking her completely by surprise. She'd thought he was dating Mayson. Then, of all horrific things to happen, Lex had come back from the dead.

After all the excitement had died down, she and Clark had come back to the Planet and written the story. Lex was behind bars, where he belonged. Everything was back to normal. The new normal, where Clark had asked her on a date and she'd accepted.

Except for one thing.

Lois knew her promise to call Clark in a few days to reschedule their date was vague at best. She'd seen the flash of disappointment that had crossed his face, even though he'd covered it well. He hadn't pushed, but she got the sense that he thought their date wasn't important to her. It was; it was just that she had something else on her mind.

Lex coming back from the dead was like something out of a bad science fiction novel, and while she was pretty sure Clark had put her abstraction down to the reappearance of her erstwhile ex-fiance, he was wrong.

Gathering her things together, she lightly touched Clark on the shoulder. He looked up and smiled at her. "Heading out, Lois?"

"Yeah. Clark, can you please contact Superman for me? And get him to meet me at my apartment? There's something I need to ask him." She caught the sudden tension in Clark's frame at her request and hastened to reassure him as he nodded his assent. "And Clark, about the date thing? I'm sorry about before. I just wanted to stop Perry and Jimmy from getting suspicious and -"

He put up a hand to stop her, a much more genuine grin on his face now. "It's okay, Lois. I understand."

She smiled at him in return. "Okay. I'll call you tomorrow. Goodnight, Clark."

"Night, Lois."

...

She paced around her apartment, waiting. Clark had never failed to contact the superhero for her when she'd asked, but she never knew how long it would be until he turned up. He had so many demands on his time, and for all she knew he could be on the other side of the world.

After what seemed like an interminable amount of time, she heard the tell-tale 'whoosh' that preceded Superman's arrival and turned towards the living room window, gesturing for him to

come inside.

He landed gently just inside her living room and crossed his arms over his chest in his characteristic manner, a quizzical look on his face.

"Lois? Clark said you wanted to see me?"

...

Clark asked the question with some trepidation. Lois didn't send for him often, and he never knew what he'd find when she did.

She looked troubled, he noticed. She did a good job of trying to push whatever was bothering her aside to greet him normally, but he could still tell.

"Thanks for coming, Superman."

She started pacing in front of him. He hid a smile. He loved Lois in any mood, but he was glad she was getting over the starry-eyed teenager mode she used to go into when she saw him in the Suit.

"Lois? Is something wrong?"

Lois looked up at him like she'd almost forgotten his presence.

"Why didn't you tell me that Lex had tried to kill you?"

"What?"

"Something that Lex said... He said that this was the second chance he'd had to kill you. Was it?"

He nodded. "Yes."

"When?"

Clark hesitated. Almost a year later, he still couldn't think back on that time without a twinge of pain. How much more painful must it be for Lois?

She was watching him expectantly, waiting for an answer. He sighed inwardly.

"Your wedding day," he replied softly.

"Oh." Her shoulders sagged and instinctively he went to take a step forward to comfort her. "That's why you didn't tell me, isn't it?"

He nodded again. "You had enough going on. I didn't want you to worry about me."

Lois was silent for a few moments. Then she straightened herself up. Her face devoid of expression, she demanded "Tell me what happened."

"Are you sure you want to hear this, Lois?"

"Yes." Her reply was unequivocal

"Okay." Clark stood for a moment, searching for the words.

"The day before your wedding, Luthor left a message for me with Clark. He said he wanted to talk to me — about you." He sighed. "I should've known it was a trap. My parents tell me I'm too trusting sometimes. But I went."

He looked at her. She was staring at him, wide eyed. "You have parents?"

Clark nodded. "Adoptive parents. They're not like me. They're... normal." He could tell that Lois was getting ready to ask one of probably a hundred questions. To forestall her, he continued.

"When I got there, he trapped me in a cage — with Kryptonite bars."

He saw her face pale. "Kryptonite? So that's where Ariana Carlin got it from?"

"Yes. I talked to Henderson about it after everything had settled down. No one found any Kryptonite — or at least no one reported finding it. I think what Luthor had is the piece that was sent to the lab by Wayne Irig, the piece that went missing." He paused. "Kryptonite exposure is... agonising. It drains my powers, and I can't touch it because it burns. Even if it didn't drain my powers, I still wouldn't have been able to break through the bars... It burned too much..." His voice trailed off as he remembered what it was like, being trapped in Luthor's cage for hours, the intense, whole-body aching, the burning of his lungs

every time he breathed, the knowledge that he was going to die.

“What happened?” Lois asked.

“Luthor came down to taunt me. He said that you were too independent, that he’d fix that. Then he wrapped a cummerbund around my neck, left the key on a barrel where I could see them, and left. I tore the cummerbund into strips and used it to get the keys.” He looked down at his hands. It sounded so simple, so easy, when in reality it had been one of the hardest things he’d ever done. He’d had to fight so hard just to stay conscious, to use the tiny vestiges of the powers he usually took for granted.

“I got out just in time. I was hiding behind a wine barrel, trying to get as far away as I could from the cage when he came back again. He took the fire axe from the wall...” Clark swallowed, trying to ease the dry mouth from the remembered terror. “When he saw I was gone, he fled. I made it outside just before he jumped.”

Clark looked back up at Lois, suddenly aware of how far he’d let the mask slip. He hadn’t sounded much like Superman in the last few minutes. Maybe it was time...

“You were outside? I didn’t see you... But why -”

“Why didn’t I save him?” He cut her off, a little angered. Of all people, she should know what he stood for. “You’ve never asked me that before. I couldn’t save him. I could barely stand, let alone fly. I may hate Luthor, Lois, but I’d never stand by and let anyone die. That’s not how I work.” The words came out clipped and angry.

“You’re right. I’m sorry; I know you wouldn’t.” Lois admitted softly.

Mollified, he continued. “I tried to save him, but getting out of the cage used the last of my powers. I couldn’t even take off.”

A wild impulse seized him. Smiling a little, he made eye contact with her. He wasn’t sure if she remembered every detail of that day, but he suspected that she did — and that she’d tortured herself with them in the aftermath.

Still holding eye contact, he said “I tried to take off, but all I could manage was a sort of jump. When I realised I couldn’t save him, I said ‘I can’t’. He hit the ground a moment or two later.”

There, he’d said it. If she remembered that day as clearly as he thought she would, she’d put two and two together.

At that moment, he heard a cry for help and turned his head towards the sound. “I have to go. Someone needs me.”

Quickly he strode to the window and took off. Behind him, he heard Lois mutter

“You’ve got a lot of explaining to do, Clark Kent.”

Grinning to himself, he flew towards Suicide Slum and the cries for help. He’d have to face the music later, but right now, Lois knew the truth. It was like a weight off his shoulders.

Life was good.

THE END