

What a Gentleman Desires: The Continuation

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Rating: PG-13.

Summary: Lois and Clark bond as they fix a colorful mistake.

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Please note that this has been modified from the original n-fiction version, where I originally placed it due to sexual situations. It has been appropriately toned down, but if sexual themes have the potential to offend you, please choose a different story to read. Thank you.

Author's Note: This story is a continuation of VirginiaR's "What a Gentleman Desires". In the feedback for her conclusion, I wondered what they'd be doing in Lois' apartment for the rest of the night and she responded that I should feel free to explore what I think might have happened next. So, voila!

Thank you, Virginia, for beta reading this story and for letting me play in your universe.

"We can fix this," Clark says confidently, nodding at the computer screen.

I bury my face in my hands. "Sure, with a razor and a buzz cut." And the loss of my last remaining shreds of dignity, I mentally add.

Clark rolls his eyes over-dramatically, then taps the computer screen, indicating the web page he has found. "More like neutral brown dye, peroxide for removing any spillovers, and the patience to work through the process a section of hair at a time." He bites his lip as if he's nervous to continue, but then says, "And it usually works better if you have a partner to help you."

Partner. Yes, he's certainly that. But the word seems too small to define what he means to me. Since he's been working at the Planet, he has supported my work, helped with my investigations, shared my byline. Mine became ours — "By Lois Lane" transitioned into "By Lois Lane and Clark Kent" — and I'm not sure I can pinpoint when that shared byline ceased to be a curiosity and morphed into the default. When what was once a source of irritation had turned into a permanent status, so much so that now irritation grates at me when it's not there: when he's working a separate story, when the byline is alone.

"Will you let me help you?" Clark asks with uncertainty. He pushes himself away from the computer desk and gets out of the chair, crossing over to me. And I freeze — not with fear, but with anticipation. Because he's not just my partner anymore. I think he's my partner — a more fully realized version of the word. And it happened when I kissed him ten minutes ago, or he kissed me, or we kissed each other — the memory flows together as if it's been an infinite embrace without beginning, middle, or end. But it was both an end and a beginning, and yet really just the continuation of our partnership, the undercurrent of our partnership. The part of our partnership that was the foundation of our partnership. How could I have failed to realize that "Lane

and Kent" worked because of Lois and Clark? That part of me merged with him the first time I edited his copy?

But he's not sure I'll let him help me because this is new. It's old, but it's new. His helping me is old — I see now that he's been doing it since the beginning. Little things like getting me coffee without my having to ask. Opening doors and guiding me through them with a hand placed gently at the small of my back. Little acts of kindness that were always there, patiently waiting to be recognized.

And I finally had. Sure, the recognition had been subsumed under a fit of jealousy and an irrational rage against a perfectly normal hair color, but it was there. And I had acted on it; I kissed him, and old became new. Partners became partners.

I finger my tragically blonde hair. "Well, my attempt at helping myself was an utter failure. I doubt you could do much worse."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence." His tone is sarcastic, but the sparkle in his eye fails to mask his delight. "I'll run out to the store and get the supplies." He takes a step towards the door, then shifts his weight towards me, then hesitates. And I can see the debate he's having with himself, questioning the protocols of partnership.

I end the debate by leaning my face fractionally closer to his — a small signal, but one he instinctively understands. He slides his right hand through my hair and pulls me gently towards him. And our lips meet.

Twice in ten minutes, but undefined by time, because that kiss has always existed and would always exist. It had just been held in stasis, an idealized form waiting to be made real. And here, in reality, as his soft warm lips slide against mine, as my heart races and my breathing stops, I find the piece of me that's been missing, or that he has stolen, or that I have given away — how he has come to possess it, I don't quite know, but it clearly belongs to him. And he'll have it forever.

The kiss ends and he mumbles against my lips, "I'll be right back." He runs his fingers through my hair hesitantly, reluctantly, as if he can't tear himself away.

"I'll be right here," I say. And something in his eyes shines. I recognize it, but am reluctant to label it, even to myself. Because it comes and goes, it has left me too many times in the past, and something deep inside me rebels against it even as I'm desperate to believe it exists. But it begins with an L and it is definitely a four letter word.

He opens my apartment door and closes it behind him, and I don't want to draw the parallel, but can't stop my brain from registering the pattern. He comes and he goes. He always has, he always does — it's in his nature. He leaves, usually at the most inconvenient times, but he always comes back. And it's irritating. As irritating as Kent's name in Lane's byline used to be, because the mere fact that I noticed the pattern meant that I noticed him, and I hadn't wanted to notice him. Because men come and go, because I shouldn't expect him to be there when I need him, because Lane works alone.

I can't pinpoint when that irritation had ceased to be an annoyance and had morphed into a curiosity. Probably when I realized that even when he's gone, he's still there. That his presence fills my world, even when he's not present. That he's in my heart and my soul — he always has been and he always will. When I kiss him and find my missing piece, I can't take it back because its space is filled with the part of Clark that I've stolen from him.

And I know I stole it. He didn't give it away — I took it along with his breath the first day we met. I doubt he knows that I saw the look that shocked his face when he first laid eyes on me because I made sure he knew I wasn't interested in it. But I had lifted the hack from Nowheresville's heart like a pickpocket — easily and confidently.

I catch a glimpse of myself in a mirror and grimace at my lack of confidence. That I could convince myself he preferred blondes, or strangers on the street, or lawyers in a courtroom. Because I know that he prefers me. I know that he always has. I know that he always will. But it's easier to deny that knowledge — push it away forcefully with drama and tests. Push him away before he pulls.

The front door opens and I'm startled. How long have I been daydreaming? It seems as if he only left a minute ago. I recognize the feeling — I've lost time thinking about him before. Still, I can't help but draw attention to it. "That was fast."

He glances nervously at his bag of supplies before saying, "I just got it from the bodega on the corner."

"Really?" It doesn't take long for me to picture the hole in the wall that sells me nothing more than tubs of ice cream and Double Fudge Crunch Bars. "There must be aisles of shelves I've never seen."

He's about to say something, but instead flips the bag onto my sofa and takes me in his arms. His pheromones surround me, soothing my doubts and refocusing my attention onto his mouth. The protocols of partnership demand a greeting, so I tilt my chin upward in invitation and he says hello with his moist lips and swirling tongue. Infinity returns: goodbye and hello merge with our kiss.

He backs away slightly with a lopsided grin. "Are you ready to get dirty?" he says with rakish charm, and I laugh because the thought of him as a lecherous pervert is too funny to be believed.

"Definitely not," I counter before shimmying seductively in my silver evening gown. "I'm seriously overdressed." I slowly turn, swaying my hips to draw attention to my hourglass figure. I present my spine to him, then use my hands to push my hair away from my neck. "Help me with the zipper."

I hear him suck in a breath and the sound shivers its way into my core. I've never felt sexy, but he makes me feel like I am. I've never felt desirable, but that indrawn breath makes me feel like I am to him. His hands fumble at the hook and eye that latch the collar. The accidental brushing of his fingertips against the base of my neck sends jolts of forbidden pleasure down my spine. It's a feeling I've forbidden for myself — locked it away after the men who came and went made me believe that the key to breaking that pattern belonged to a chastity belt. I threw away that key long ago, but somehow Clark had found it as easily as I had found his house key under his doormat. The zipper of my slinky gown knows no resistance as Clark's fingers deftly lower it, exposing my skin an inch at a time. I stand perfectly still, and am only able to guess at the look on his face. He seems to be holding his breath; I don't think I've heard him exhale since my zipper started traveling south. I wish he would breathe, or pant, or moan, or make some subtle noise that would clue me in to his reaction. But he is silent; all I can hear is the rapid pounding of my heart.

I imagine what he is seeing as I feel the zipper open past my shoulder blades, my bra strap, the base of my spine, ending its journey at the edge of my lace thong. And that's when I hear him — a strangled, "Oh, God!" before his fingers stop touching my skin and I feel him back away from me. I smile inwardly, amused by his typically male response. Thongs are uncomfortable and impractical, and yet I had transitioned into wearing them sometime around when "By Lois Lane" had morphed into "By Lois Lane and Clark Kent." They've always been there, waiting for him to notice the absence of visible panty line when he stares at my rear. Waiting for him to catch a glance of them as I cross and uncross my legs in his direct line of sight from across the newsroom bullpen. Waiting for him to marvel at the way I bend over to reach for something, knowing that it causes the waistband of my pants to dip slightly lower than the edge of my underwear.

I twist my torso and feel the fabric of my dress bunch and

gap, exposing more skin to Clark if he dares to look. But I find him gripping the back of my sofa with white-knuckled fists and staring at the ceiling as if heaven could help him. I dip my left shoulder and feel the fabric start to slide, knowing full well that he can see me from the corner of his eye.

He can't resist — I know the moment he checks me out because he squeezes his eyes shut and tucks his head down as he slightly hunches over in pain. And though I've had little experience with the opposite sex, it's obvious even to me why Clark seems to have so much trouble standing up straight.

I decide to help him out by removing temptation, though I can't resist the tease. "I'll just go take this off so we can get started."

He nods as if it has taken an extraordinary effort to do so. And as I walk away from him and cross the threshold of my bedroom, I swear I hear him finally exhale.

I stride over to my closet and let my dress fall to the floor. I step out of the pooled sparkles of sequins, then pick up the material so I can place it on a hanger, saving it for another night. I move on to my dresser, intent on finding something I wouldn't mind throwing away if Clark's efforts at hair dying prove to be as inept as my own. I settle on a white spaghetti strap camisole and grey running shorts. I check the look in my mirror, unsurprised that the stretch cotton-poly blend does a terrible job of hiding my black lace bra. It almost looks accidental, but Clark will know I've done it on purpose.

I saunter out into the living room and see Clark pulling his bodega bags out of the bag, lining them up neatly on my table. "Where do you want to do it?" I ask with an arched eyebrow and poorly disguised double entendre.

He looks over at me, waggles his eyebrows, and knocks on the wood. "This table doesn't seem quite sturdy enough. Better use your bathroom." His joke and relaxed posture signal the return of his control. I can temporarily retire my playful banter and focus on the task at hand.

Clark shrugs off his tuxedo jacket and hangs it on the back of a chair. I watch him pull the knot out of his bowtie and my fingers tingle, eager to help him, aching to loosen his collar. He rolls up his crisp white sleeves methodically, baring his forearms, then picks up the supplies. He follows me as I lead him to my bathroom.

But the route necessitates traversing my bedroom, an inner sanctuary few men have ever breached. I glance at my unkempt, unmade bed. I've never understood the point of making my bed in the morning when I'm just going to sleep in it again at night. Tucking in sheets and pulling up the comforter is like perpetrating a lie — pretending that life is neat and orderly when reality is usually rumpled sheets and skewed pillows.

And that piece of furniture is messy — it makes life messy. It's too easy to imagine my body in that bed, rolling in the sheets, arching my spine in ecstasy. It's even easier to imagine Clark in that bed rolling in those sheets with me. But we only turned our partnership into a more fully realized partnership ten minutes ago and the fallout from that will probably be messy enough as it is.

I catch his studious avoidance of my bed; his eyes pointedly look anywhere else. He must be able to sense temptation, because after we kissed and confessed and turned partners into partners, we leaned against each other and it seemed like we were about to fall into the soft sheets. But he resisted temptation and left my bedroom, determined to find the solution to my platinum disaster — giving his brain a task to focus on, because letting it wander could lead too easily to messy furniture.

I flip on the bathroom light switch and bathe the tile in harsh fluorescent lighting. My tragically blonde hair reflects in the mirror and I think it looks even worse than it did in the soft ambient lighting of the other room. It's brassy and uneven and unflattering set against my dark eyebrows and light skin. "Ugh," I

say in disgust. I grab a wastebasket and swipe away the used remnants of my embarrassing attempt to prove a point to Clark that never needed proving.

Clark reaches around me and sets his supplies down on the counter, replacing old with new, clearing away the memory of failure and promising a hopeful future. He stands behind me and pushes his hands into my hair, slowly pulling on sections as he examines the damage I've done. I watch his progress in the mirror as he fingers the strands and works out a strategy. And then his eyes shift and meet mine in the reflection.

"We can fix this," he says for the second time in ten minutes and I believe him — I want to believe him. He's supremely confident, or well-practiced in projecting supreme confidence, almost as if he's used to succeeding in whatever he sets out to do. It's an odd contrast to the modesty he usually displays, the ingrained polite deference to others, the downplaying of his own abilities. He's incapable of vanity, content to follow rather than lead — at least that's what he'd have people believe. But he's always shown me a layer beneath his mild manners. Cocky smiles, cheeky remarks — constantly directed at me but carefully hidden from everyone else.

And it makes me feel special, worthy of being teased and taunted, mocked and rebuked. That for me, he lowers his shield and reveals the less polite, less deferent, less perfect man he really is. He's done it since we became partners, and now that we're more fully realized partners, maybe he'll do it more. Maybe he'll be worthy of me by matching me flaw for flaw.

Then his eyes narrow playfully and he says, "Maybe you don't want to fix it after all." He lingers behind me and toys with a strand of my hair, tucking it behind my ear, exposing the right side of my neck. I watch him in the mirror and his eyes are locked with mine as he rests his chin on my shoulder. His arms wrap around me possessively; he locks his fingers together and hugs them against my belly. My hands cover his, seemingly of their own volition, and I smile at how natural it feels to place them there.

He glances at the platinum reflection in the mirror. "I think it's growing on me. You were right, Lois. I have a thing for blondes."

His tone lacks all sincerity, but he should know better than to joke about a sensitive subject. I bring my arm back sharply and elbow him in the ribs and he laughs like I tickled him instead of taking a jab. "I will kill you in your sleep."

His eyes widen and his hands hug slightly harder against the flat plane of my stomach. And the tease reappears. "Oh, so you're inviting me to stay over?"

My jaw falls slightly open because I'm shocked by the answer I hear in my head. I close my lips firmly, carefully protecting the secret.

The answer should be no, because it's always no, or at least it has been since the comers and goers caused me to remove the other choice from the realm of possibility. The answer is always no because my couch is uncomfortable and he's too much of a gentleman to assume I'd imply a more comfortable solution. The answer is no because we're never in this apartment when the suggestion is made — we're always in the opposite apartment, with the comfortable couch, where the default answer is the other choice.

But the protocols of partnership demand an answer. And I use my mistake as an excuse to make another. "I'm sure every blonde bimbo you've ever laid your hands on has said yes."

The corner of his lip pulls upward and he scoffs as he runs his fingers through my hair once again and looks back into my reflected eyes. "Yeah, every one of them."

And I selfishly hate them, every one of his comers and goers, because they've had what is mine, what should be mine, what has always been mine. I'm jealous of the untold number of partners

who have shared his byline. Because "Lois Lane and Clark Kent" is the default, and it always has been — an idealized form held in stasis, waiting to be brought into reality.

I grab the neutral brown hair dye, twist away from his loose embrace, and shove the box into his chest. "You need a stronger challenge."

He catches the box, then leaves the bathroom, and his playful voice floats behind him. "Lois Lane, determined to prove that brunettes have less fun."

And I smile wickedly at his retreating form. Because I know how to have fun.

He returns with a chair and drapes a rag over the fabric seat. He bows dramatically, flaring his hand through the air. "Sil vous plait, mademoiselle."

I roll my eyes at his French, dismissing his mastery of languages as if it were unimpressive. He doesn't need me to stroke his ego. I sit and watch him read the directions on the box. He mixes the dye, carefully following every instruction, silently determined to make this work. And I believe that it will, because Clark can make anything happen.

He turns his head and smiles as he finishes his preparation. "You ready?" he asks with amusement, as if this weren't a life or death situation.

I grin and stand up. "Yeah, I am. But you're not." I skim my fingers over the collar of his formal dress shirt. "This is going to be a mess. You should take off your shirt."

He tugs at the collar as if the garment is too tight. "It'll be fine," he lies.

I move my fingers to the delicate button at his throat. "Look at the mess I made the first time." I nod my head towards my dirty sink basin and heaping trash can. "Trust me, you won't do any better." And I unbutton the collar, because I know how to have fun.

I watch his throat swallow air. "Okay." The word is said casually, as if Clark needs to pretend that standing half-naked in front of me is a casual thing. As if he's done it hundreds of times before. But we both know it's only happened once. His fingers unbutton the second fastening and exposes an inch of golden tan skin. My fingers respond by slipping the next button out of place and my mind follows the memory of one wet drop of water sliding over that smooth skin in the Apollo Hotel. Then his fingers find the last button, releasing his sculpted chest from the crisp white cotton.

I know he's looking down at me as he rolls his shoulders and slips the material off his arms, catching the shirt before it falls to the floor. But I'm looking at his manly chest, at his perfectly defined abs, at his solidly built arms, and I think he should put his shirt back on because I don't know how to have fun, because it's been too long since I've had fun. Because I'm doomed to have platinum blonde hair for the foreseeable future if I act on the primal response my body is urging me towards.

So instead, I take the shirt from him and leave to find a hanger for it, needing the space and time it takes to care for the garment in order to regain a measure of control.

I turn towards the bathroom and see Clark hunched over the counter, pulling on the protective gloves. The rippling muscles in his back are stunning: the fluorescent light seems to dance over every contour and I imagine how much more glorious he would appear to be if he were outside on a summer day, letting the yellow rays of the sun soak into his skin.

I hum to myself in appreciation, then blanch when he turns as if he heard me. Because he shouldn't know how close I am to suggesting he remove his tuxedo pants, too. And we haven't yet defined the protocols of partnership, but I'm pretty sure there's diplomatic courtesy involved in building relationships slowly over time.

I return to the bathroom and see that Clark has taken a

relaxed attitude, trying to defuse the sexually charged atmosphere inherent in our immodest states of dress. I sit back down on the chair; he tucks in a towel around my shoulders, obscuring my chest from his view. He pretends it's done to protect my skin, but I'm sure it was done to protect his sanity.

He engages in inane banter, trying to replicate whatever conversation he guesses takes place at a salon. I laugh and play along because it passes the time and distracts me from the oddly pleasurable tingle I feel every time his fingertips rub against my scalp. He studiously follows the directions he found on the internet, painting the dye methodically from root to tip. He radiates confidence and I know he'll fix this because Clark can do anything and, admittedly, he's doing a much more patiently thorough job than I did.

"I think I'm done here," he concludes as he removes the towel from my shoulders and wraps it around my hair. "We just need to wait for the dye to set." Clark stands in front of me and offers his hand, pulling me up from the chair. "We seem to have missed dinner. Why don't I go out and get us some?"

"Sounds perfect," I say, because the thought of us casually eating takeout in my apartment really does sound like the perfect date. As perfect as every casual meal we've shared at the opposite apartment — the comfortable familiarity of our partnership that so often ends up with us cuddling on his couch. Because cuddling is our default — we did it as partners and I'm sure we'll do it again as more fully realized partners.

I follow him out to my living room and see him continue on to the kitchen and set the timer on the microwave. He's clearly determined to follow the meticulously detailed instructions from the box of dye to an exacting standard. He returns to me, takes my hand, and kisses it with an adorable smile. "What do you want?" he asks.

And I know better than to answer that question with the first response that flashes through my body. So I instead reply, "Chinese, from the good place."

He winks. "Anything for you." And it's all too obvious that he means that as literally as he can.

"It'll just take me a few minutes," he says, as he starts to let go of my hand. But I grip a bit tighter, because the protocols of partnership demand a goodbye kiss — that's clearly been established. I tug him towards me and he follows, instinctively bending his head down at the perfect angle to avoid noses and touch lips. This kiss lingers blissfully as I run my hand over his chest. I smile against his lips. "I think you forgot something."

He's confused. I tap his chest and he looks down, shaking the fog out of his eyes, and realizing he's not fully dressed. He laughs lightly at himself. "I think you distracted me."

I turn back to my bedroom to retrieve his shirt. Not looking at him lets me have the confidence to tease him. "You can thank me for that later." When I return, I catch the unguarded four letter L word shining in his eyes and know that my playfulness has hit its mark.

I hand him the shirt; he slides his arms through the sleeves. Before he has the chance, I take the edges of the crisp white cotton and bring them together. I begin fastening the shirt for him, slowly, starting at the bottom. My eyes are lowered in deep concentration as I hide his beautiful body button by button. I'm waiting for his soft breath to blow gently against my head; I revel in the fact that it's not there, that I've taken away his breath once again. I leave the top button undone, then look up and his lips are an inch away, so it's natural to kiss him again. And as our lips meet, I slide my fingers into his waistband, tucking in the hem of his dress shirt.

But the clock is ticking and Clark is determined to follow the dye's directions to the letter, so he breaks our kiss and goes to get our dinner, but I know that he'll come back. Because he doesn't come and go, he goes and he comes.

I look out the window, hoping he'll return soon, hoping my hair color will return soon, hoping my confidence will return soon. I understand now that I only lacked confidence in him because I lacked confidence in myself, in my ability to understand myself. That my jealous accusations and colorful hair were a manifestation of my struggle to admit my wish for our partnership to transform into partnership.

But now I know that he wants me and I can admit that I want him. He confessed his love for me and I've done it in return, and we're partners now, and it suddenly seems so obvious that's what he's always wanted and what I've always needed.

Clark opens the front door, returning with the food, and again I've lost time, because the Chinese takeout place next to the corner bodega should have been shut down by the health department years ago and there's no way his amazing food comes from that hole.

He sets his bamboo containers on my table and I'm about to say something, but he again distracts me with a kiss and I want to believe that he's just engaging in the protocols of partnership, but there's something he's avoiding: the distraction is wonderful, but not subtle. Still, the food smells delicious and my stomach rumbles, so it's easier to pick up a pair of chopsticks than to pick apart his story.

I retrieve drinks from my refrigerator. Clark takes two plates and some serving spoons from my cabinets and drawers, displaying his casual familiarity with my apartment. Returning to the table, he opens the bamboo steamers and the sumptuous scent of Shanghai surrounds us. We sit and I look over the dishes. "This certainly looks better than Ralph's Pagoda."

He chuckles. "I hope so." He scoops out samples of each dish onto our plates, then watches expectantly, waiting for me to render my verdict. I crunch a dry fried green bean and look over my plate. "What's that?" I ask, pointing to one of the choices.

"Drunken chicken." He picks up a piece with his chopsticks and brings it to my mouth. I take the bite as he continues, "It's marinated in rice wine overnight."

"Mmmmm. It's amazing." I use my chopsticks to select a piece of red pork. "And this?" I ask, as I bring it to his lips.

He smiles and eats the piece of meat. "Hongshao rou." A drop of sauce dribbles off the end of my chopstick and onto his chin. I wipe it off with my index finger. He impulsively licks out his tongue, sucking the sauce from my finger. His glasses do nothing to hide the sparkle of seduction in his eyes. I giggle and continue the game, trading bites of food and coy smiles.

I survey the remains of the meal. "Where are the fortune cookies?"

"Well, they don't actually have them in China. They were invented in San Francisco." Clark stops short and there's an odd flash of fear on his face, but I can't understand what's so frightening about random trivia. Then he quickly adds, "I guess they just forgot to throw them in the bag." And it's a reasonable explanation but sounds curiously like a lie.

The timer on my microwave goes off, startling both of us. Clark gets up, takes my hand, and helps me up, too. I lean against his body and am so close to him that I can see a crumb stuck to the corner of his mouth. I brush it off with my thumb, but continue to drag my thumb along his lower lip a moment longer than necessary, and the sexually charged atmosphere returns. He scrapes my thumb with his teeth and looks at me with a blinding radiance.

"Come on," he says with a smile, leading me towards my bathroom. As he walks through my bedroom, he unbuttons and takes off his shirt, tossing it onto the bed as if it belongs there, as if he belongs there. He pauses outside the bathroom, toeing off his shoes and removing his socks. I watch him walk barefoot into my bathroom, pausing to consider the sink. Then he turns to the shower and nods his head. "I think this will be easier if we use

the shower.”

“Ah,” I say with as much seduction as possible. “You just want to get me out of my clothes.”

And he visibly swallows and seems to blush, but we’ve teased each other with sexual innuendo before, so that’s old. But it’s also new, because we’ve never done it with my black bra testing the limits of my camisole’s ability to hold my modesty or with Clark’s body hidden only by tight black trousers. He squeezes past me, moving the chair to a location just outside the bathroom and retrieving more towels. He lays out the towels over the tile floor and directs me to sit down next to the bathtub. He bunches another towel along the edge of the tub for my comfort. He turns on the shower, resting the shower wand on the bottom of the tub and letting the water warm up. The shower curtain is pulled halfway closed, preventing the water from splashing out of the tub basin and onto the toilet and floor.

Then he unwraps the towel from my head, tossing it over the shower curtain rod. “Here goes nothing.”

He starts to kneel down beside me, but is blocked by the toilet on one side and the wall on the other. He laughs nervously, then gets down on his knees directly in front of me and says, “Well, this is going to be kind of awkward.”

And I know what he’s going to do, can see that it’s a rational choice, but my body suddenly screams its desire to do irrational things. I try to smooth over the awkwardness by making a joke. “Not as awkward as platinum blonde hair.”

He smiles, then nervously says with a tone so low and sexy that I shiver, “Lean back.”

I tilt my head backwards, letting my hair fall into the tub, and he crawls over me, straddling his knees around my legs and reaching for the shower head. His movement brings his chest so close to my lips that the slightest of motions could allow me to taste his golden tan skin.

And he’s not oblivious because I hear him catch and hold his breath as if he’s aware that the rise and fall of his chest could be enough to bring his firm skin against my hopeful lips. He takes the shower wand in his left hand and places his right hand behind my neck, cradling my head. I feel the water rain down the back of my hair.

“Is it too hot?” he asks with concern.

“It’s perfect,” I sigh, but I’m not entirely sure if I’m answering his question or talking to his chest.

He looms over me, balancing his weight on his knees, and gently releases the back of my head. His right hand pulls through my hair, washing the water through the strands. His fingers massage my scalp, intent on removing the residual dye, but the back and forth rhythm stokes my arousal and the accidental rocking of his hips in time with the motion reminds me too much of a primal cadence. His body shifts with each pass of his fingers through my hair; his pelvis is a whisper away from touching mine. I bite my lip to prevent myself from revealing to him how much his proximity is affecting me.

Clark sets the shower wand down in the tub and runs his fingers through my hair, examining it for any remaining dye he might have missed. He tilts his head approvingly and says, “I think it may have turned out all right.”

“Thank you,” I sigh, but the words don’t adequately express the totality of my feelings towards him.

I touch his chest with my left hand, slowly but deliberately caressing his pectoral muscles. My right hand presses against his hip, holding him steady. Then I slowly pull his pelvis down against mine. He groans and I feel what his trousers have been concealing — it seems that he’s very good at hiding things.

I slide my left hand off his chest and place it on his shoulder blade, then push down, directing him towards me. And he complies: his chest presses against mine and the weight of his body is exhilarating.

“Lois, we shouldn’t...”

And he’s right, of course. We shouldn’t, but we should. We might as well. Because that’s what people do; that’s what people who come and go do. They come with their sweet confessions and sizzling bodies, and then the taste sours and they go. And I shouldn’t expect him to be any different since he sounds so sweet and sizzles so hotly, so we should do what we both want to do before this turns sour.

I watch a conflict playing out inside him, only partially obscured by his glasses. There’s a desperate need to run, to go before this goes too far. I recognize the look — his fight or flight response that kicks in when I get too close to whatever it is that he hides from me, what he’s afraid I won’t like if I see. But there’s also a desperate need to stay, to come closer to me, to reveal the depths of his soul, to trust that I won’t go.

Or maybe I’m wrong. Maybe I don’t understand him or his conflict. Maybe the hopeless romantic buried deep inside me is seeing what it wants to see. After all, buried deep under his mild manners and kind words, he’s just a man, and all men have a base instinct to come.

“Okay,” I say. It’s a statement, an agreement to his statement, but it’s also permission. He can choose to interpret the syllables in whatever way he wants. Though as I watch his mind, his heart, and his body whirl through the choice, shifting between should and should not, I believe he’s unable to choose.

So I choose for him.

I place my hand on the back of Clark’s head and softly pull him towards me. He complies with the silent request and dips his head, stopping an inch away from my lips. I see him catch and hold his breath as I wind my fingers into the hair at the base of his neck. His right hand cradles the back of my head as I stretch up to join our lips.

I feel like I’m floating as my lips slide over his and my eyes flutter closed. My right hand reaches around his back, desperate to close the distance between us. He understands what I want and we scoot our bodies along the floor so I can lay flat against the tile. His right hand remains at the back of my head, acting like a pillow. I moan softly against his lips and hear his soft echo.

Then he releases the tension in his body and rests his chest solidly against mine. I’m enthralled by the warm heat radiating off his skin and I wish my top would disappear.

He kisses me again — there’s an insistent quality to it. I part my lips as he demands entrance; my head swims in the sensation of his questing tongue. I open my eyes and see that his are squeezed painfully shut. I roll out my tongue and lick his throat, feeling the quiver of his vocal cords as he utters an unintelligible sound.

I move my right hand south and cup his butt cheek. I should have guessed how firm it would feel: I’ve groped it in my mind an inordinate amount of times. He’s towering above me and a visceral delight at the thought of being dominated by him glimmers through me. I shouldn’t feel it — it contradicts every feminist ideal I subscribe to, but I can’t deny that I like that he’s on top, that he’s taken control of this situation. Because confidence is sexy and I don’t always have to be in control.

My hands wander over his body and his slide over mine. Clark’s body shudders and he groans, “Oh, God!”

Then he scrambles off me, backing away to the other end of the tiny room. He sits on the floor, bracing his back against the wall, visibly trying to slow his breathing. I sit up and look at him curiously, but he averts his eyes. “You should dry your hair,” he says.

I’m confused. I start to say something, start to ask something, but can’t formulate the words. Because in the space of a second, he lost his confidence and seems to need a distraction. So I get up from the floor, turn off the shower, and retrieve my hair dryer and brush. I catch my partially undressed state in the mirror and

decide I look ridiculous, so I rearrange my shirt. I plug in the blow dryer and turn it on, running the brush through my hair in long, even strokes.

Clark stays seated on the tile floor, but seems to return to a normal breathing pattern. He's looking up at me with an odd smile and this scene feels so domesticated, like we've been sharing counter space forever. My hair tussles around in the artificial wind. He stands up as I set the blow dryer down, then takes the brush from my hand. He runs his fingers through my hair once before using the brush to straighten the style. We both look into the mirror to admire his work.

"I think we fixed it," Clark says with a smile.

I toss my hair, catching it in the fluorescent light, then touch the strands, relieved to feel like myself, thrilled the brown hair is back. "You're my hero!"

And Clark smiles radiantly, like it's everything he's always wanted to be for me.

Confidence is the color of cocoa and I make a move. I push my hand into his chest, pressing him against my counter. I wrap my arms around his neck and smother him in desire with my wet lips and darting tongue. He responds, wrapping his arms around me, sliding his hand from the small of my back to the curve of my butt. And I remember why I like to be on top, why I enjoy being in control, and flashes of dirty dreams I've had about him flip through my mind.

I rock slightly backwards, putting space between our bodies, then unwrap my arms and take hold of my camisole's hem. I strip the shirt off, tossing it onto the floor; Clark gasps and bites his lip. I reach behind me and unhook my bra. I push the straps down and let the lace fall away off my arms. Then I press my chest against his, reveling in the joy of our naked flesh together at last.

He whimpers and looks to the heavens as if he's summoning strength and willpower. I run my fingers down his torso and rub lightly against the top of his leg. Then I slide my hand between our bodies and solidly stroke him over his pants.

His hips buck against my hand and he softly cries, "Lois, please." But it sounds more like a mournful need to halt than an uncontrollable urge to continue. And I don't understand because whether we should or we shouldn't, it certainly feels like we both want to. But now the sweet moment is starting to turn sour.

Clark removes his hands from my butt and places them against my shoulders. He stops me. "We don't need to do this now."

I'm embarrassed that he doesn't want me and feel the swelling of irrational anger. "Oh, you only say yes to blonde bimbos." I can't help the jealousy slip from my lips; I thought I had buried it along with the tragic hair dye, but it's hard to transition from partners to partners when the old insecurities are still there.

"I'd only say yes to you. Lois, there have never been any blondes or bimbos. There will only be you."

I have no idea how he expects me to believe his confession because no man is that patient, so his rejection hurts that much worse. "But you didn't say yes."

"I didn't say no either. I'll say yes in the future. We have all the time in the world, Lois. There's no need to rush this."

And I should be content with that answer, because comers and goers stay and then leave, but Clark is a goer and comer, so he'll leave but then stay. But I don't want the past or the future, the going and the coming. I want the present. I want his presence. Because he told me he loves me and I told him I love him and it happened tonight on my bed and I want to hold onto those words and that emotion and his body and if he walks out the door I'm terrified that he'll take that love away with him like every other man has.

I shut my eyes tightly, afraid that the welling tears will leak from my eyes, spilling the truth onto my cheeks. Because

confidence is sexy and blondes have more fun, but I am a brunette and if he sees my roots he'll know that no amount of hair dye can mask pain.

But Clark is telepathic and he doesn't need me to tell him how I feel because he already knows. He's always had an annoying ability to read me like no one else ever has. He knows when I need him and he knows what to do. So I don't say anything to him and he doesn't say anything to me. He just pulls me into a hug and surrounds me with love. I place my head on his heart; one wet drop of water escapes my eyelashes and slides down his golden tan skin and an infinity loop completes itself because we were partners then and we're partners now — we always have been and always will.

He pulls out of our embrace. I can feel him looking down at me and am compelled to return the gesture. He brings his left hand to the side of my face and slides his fingers through my hair. The apartment is silent and still and we're temporarily lost in our own universe and I know that shouldn't be the right choice.

Then he suddenly glances away from me, as if he's looking for something beyond my bedroom walls, but shakes his head like he's talking to himself. "It's been a long day," he finally says. "Why don't you get ready for bed? I'll turn off the lights." His hand caresses my cheek before he lets go and walks out to the living room.

I slowly walk into my bedroom, cross over to my dresser, and strip off my running shorts and underwear. A light clicks off in the other room as I pull on a soft t-shirt and comfortable sleeping shorts. Then I pick his crisp white dress shirt off my bed and place it on a hanger in my closet.

He returns to my bedroom and I switch off the bathroom light. The apartment is lit only by the moonlight that creeps in from around the edges of my window treatment. I crawl onto the left side of my bed as he circles around to the right. I pretend to avert my eyes as he removes his trousers, folding them and placing them on top of my dresser. His tight white briefs fill me with relief: there's a comfortable familiarity in strolling around half-naked without expecting it to lead any further. He lays down on the right side of the bed — his side, because partners always have sides of the bed — and that becomes part of the established protocol.

I lay on my side, facing away from him so he can't search my eyes for more truth. He's learned enough about me tonight; I don't think I have any more secrets that need to be shared.

I sense that he's waiting for me to signal my intentions. I scoot backwards until my back rests against his chest and my butt molds against his hips. I hear him sigh as if he believes that was the perfect thing for me to do. I feel his fingers curl my hair behind my ear. I listen, because there's a pause to his breath and it seems like he wants to say something. But the moment passes, and instead I hear the clink of his glasses being placed on my bedside table. A blissful sense of security blankets me as Clark wraps my comforter over us and curls his right hand around my waist.

"Good night, my love," Clark whispers into my hair. He says it casually, like it's been rolling off his tongue since the day we met. And I finally understand that he has been saying it forever — I just needed time to hear it, accept it, and reflect it back.

"Good night, my love," I say, I mean, I feel. Because "Lois Lane and Clark Kent" is the default, and whatever problems we will face as partners or as partners, we will fix them.

Together.

THE END