

Blooming Time

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Summary: Another take on the infamous declarations of love from the episode 'Barbarians at the Planet.' What if Lois had been more upset by Clark's avowal of love than she was?

Story Size: 5,570 words (31Kb as text)

Disclaimer: No copyright infringement is intended. The characters aren't mine and I am just borrowing them for fun, not for profit.

This story uses scenes and some lines of dialogue from 'Barbarians at the Planet' written by Dan Levine and Deborah Joy Levine.

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This is my first attempt at fanfic in the LnC:TNAoS fandom, and English isn't my first language.

As Lois hurried towards the park exit, Clark's declaration began a merry-go-round canter in her brain.

"Lois, listen to me. I'm not talking about the partnership. I'm talking about us."

She shook her head slightly, trying to dislodge the memory of what he was about to say. To no avail. His next words had slowly found their way into her heart, seared permanently there as they echoed through her mind. The words assembled themselves into sentences, and their meaning grabbed her heart in a vice-like grip, making her feel short of breath.

"I've been in love with you for a long time."

His eyes had held such hope she had had to brace herself to look away while his mouth shaped the words which disintegrated their friendship. *"You must have known."*

She knew.

How she had known! Without actually wanting to know, that Clark liked her, was attracted to her—heck, she had even warned him not to fall for her, a few days into their acquaintance!

Could you blame a girl for relishing that she had *it*, that such a great, sexy, intelligent guy would lo—like her?

Undeniably, they often engaged in some casual flirting and lingering touches, but that was *all* there was.

A pretense often born of danger.

A game often born of pretense.

An expression of the trust she had in him, knowing he wouldn't really cross the line.

Not Kansas born-and-raised Clark Kent.

The "Hack from Nowheresville" who had—nobody knew how—wormed his way into her heart.

But... Love?

And so she had replied, *"Clark, you're my best friend, the only partner I could ever stand to work with. I admire you, respect you, and I do love you, but only as a friend."*

Thinking over her rejection, Lois winced.

She had thrown a few stale crumbs to a starving man, expecting it would be enough.

And then she had made it worse.

Far worse.

In a predictable way, Clark had asked her if she had "feelings for Lex". Surprisingly honest—considering the circumstances—she had replied that she didn't know if she loved him. She had even added that she wouldn't say yes to his proposal "until she'd talk it over with someone else."

As her next sentence replayed in her mind, Lois missed a step and nearly stumbled on the pavement. Someone asked her, "Are you all right, missy?" Lost in her own thoughts, she kept walking, not acknowledging the stranger's concern.

With her answer, she had started a bonfire, the likes of which she had never seen before. She had truly burnt all her bridges to her old life. Only ashes remained. There was no going back, now. She was stranded on a desert island of her own making, isolated and alone. More than burning her bridges to her old life, she had also burned the ships that might have allowed her to escape the island.

Things would never be the same ever again. Clark had made sure of that.

That dolt! How could he...?

Never again would she be able to come back to her Fantasyland where she could willingly ignore all the hints that pointed to something else than their carefully defined relationship.

She now realized she had established its definition. Obviously, Clark had never felt he had to stay within the boundaries she alone had drawn.

In a few moments, with the sour lingering aftertaste of the afternoon still in her heart, she would bare her deepest thoughts to Superman, in the hopes that her exposure would give her the future she desired.

Had Clark been right when he had told her that Superman was afraid to reveal himself, his true feelings?

After all, he was in a position to know: he was one of the few who always managed to get hold of Superman. He *had* to have some privileged information. Lois trembled as she realized that she was gambling everything on Clark's word.

This undefined link between the two men had even cost her Superman's first in-depth interview. *Now was payback time*, whispered the uglier part of her brain. Much to her chagrin, she had never managed to actually lure the superhero to her: Superman visited her when he pleased, and came to her rescue, but, more and more, she had the uneasy feeling he had tried his utmost not to single her out.

But he did, her mind helpfully reminded her. *He does.*

She remembered Superman holding her. His voice betrayed an emotion she wanted to be so much more than friendly goodwill.

And she recalled his scorching kiss. How she had luxuriated in that kiss!

He had said, "You were the first woman that—" She had never known what "that" was, but how she hoped it was...

Shaking her head to stop that train of thought, she remembered that Superman *had* rescued her from countless perils.

Would he also save her from herself?

Lois's hands began to shake, and she clutched the strap of her handbag tighter to stop her fingers from trembling.

Would Superman save her from her wavering certainties? From a dark future?

Unbidden, the image of Clark's tightened lips, as she none too gently turned him down came back to haunt her.

How dare he do that to her?! Clark had no right to break the most important tenet of her "rule"! No talk of anything beyond friendship. They were colleagues... friends. Now they could never go back.

Fighting down her distress and dismay, Lois hurried home.

Lois waited all afternoon for him. And still, he did not come. She reorganized her drawers, threw away five-year-old bills and sorted her shoes.

Then she turned on her laptop and half-heartedly added a chapter to her novel. To her increasing irritation, her male lead kept using Clark's sentences. With them, images came: everyday occurrences, small gestures, fugitive expressions of friendship and respect.

This was intolerable!

Unable to keep memories of the past months from flooding her mind, she saved her work and closed down the file.

Her spirits weren't even raised by rereading her best articles on Superman. So she turned the computer off, and began to pace, feeling more and more on edge as time went by.

She had phoned LNN, fibbing about a family emergency to explain her hasty departure, and let her answering machine pick up Lex's calls. After the third one, he had hung up after her recorded message.

At least, Lois believed he had.

The fragrance of the huge bouquet of roses Lex had had delivered the day before was slowly smothering her, bringing on a headache. The three dozen flowers sat on her coffee table, in the bowl-shaped ugly crystal vase Lois had inherited from her Great-Aunt Nancy. She had no other vase that could hold the ridiculously impressive bouquet. As the roses fully opened and bloomed, their sugary fragrance had slowly invaded her living room.

Lois glared at the ancient variety Lex had lectured about during one of their dates. Modern roses mostly don't smell, she vaguely remembered. Why did she feel like Lex lectured during his explanations when Clark, the "King of Useless Trivia", playfully informed?

She realized suddenly these roses were like Lex: attractive and somehow unsettling.

Lois brooded, rehashing the events of recent weeks.

For days, she had been petrified by the sudden end of her dream job, which she feared also meant the end of her professional life. Her fear had overwhelmed her, and like dormant flowers, she had been at a standstill. After being jarred both by Lex's unexpected proposal and by Clark's sudden declaration of love, she felt like she was finally coming alive again.

She looked at the roses with more empathy. Did they feel the pain of blooming, too? The process was painful, even if the results could be lovely.

On impulse, Lois took the vase and roses, and with some effort, managed to stuff them into an empty kitchen cabinet. All at once, she felt marginally better.

As the evening turned into night, Lois finally disrobed out of her rose-pink suit, hesitated between a silk pajama and a nightgown, and chose the latter.

She wanted to look nice, if *he* came by, she reasoned.

Heck, she *needed* to feel her best. What better choice than the previously unworn satin nightgown she had bought on a whim a few months before? She ruthlessly repressed on which occasion, when she gazed at herself in the bathroom mirror.

Still, her reflection did not really cheer her. Above the deep cleavage of her brand-new nightgown, her white face stonily looked back, eyes sparkling with apprehension.

Would he come?

Had Clark even passed on the message?

Again, the thought that Clark might have refrained to do so came back uneasily. She banished it, as quickly as the thought had crept up.

Maybe Clark hadn't seen Superman today.

That annoying tiny voice added, *Or maybe, Clark doesn't*

want to grant you any more favors.

She gnawed on her upper lip and seized her hairbrush, polishing her tresses into perfection.

If that were so, maybe she had it coming. But still, she couldn't really believe it of Clark.

Tired of uselessly puttering in her apartment, Lois sat down on her sofa, sighed again disconsolately and began flipping through the channels.

No Superman sightings tonight.

Where could he be?

Lois stopped her frantic search as she reached the LNN channel. She put the remote down on the side table, letting the muted sound level of the television set nurture her thoughts, as she watched the latest news flash of the day without really seeing it.

Did she really want to be part of LNN?

Without Clark, what was the point?

It was fast-paced, and exciting, but... *sterile*. Clark was right. Again.

It irked her.

Hadn't she often mocked the shallowness of LNN's news making? Hadn't she regularly praised the depth of the written word? The deep investigations it allowed? Gloated for being top banana at the *Daily Planet*?

She had frequently joked about those stationed before a closed door, doomed to repeat the same meaningless statement before a camera crew, while the *real* story unfolded inside.

Inside. Where only a certain three Kerths-winner *newspaper* reporter could be found.

She had always believed her job was to see beyond the external, and there she was, seriously considering taking a job that was no more than glorified window dressing help. Restricted by the sacrosanct camera.

Writing had a power television often lacked. And she was a grand master when it came to using that weapon.

What was wrong with her? How could she consider uprooting her career to television?

The *Daily Planet* was no more. That's *what* was wrong with her life. *And...*

Again, she banished the thought so swiftly that it hadn't even the time to materialize on the surface of her mind.

She would never ever work for the *Star*; but, there was a whole plate to choose from: the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, the *Daily Bugle*... even the *Gotham Times*.

Any newspaper.

Anywhere.

They *would* fall over themselves to interview her, a three time Kerth-winner, and...

The idea lifted her spirits for a minute, before the exasperating tiny voice she hadn't been able to smother all day, meanly whispered, *Whatever. You won't have your partner back.*

No. She wouldn't.

The brazier of the bridge she had set fire to was now reduced to glowing embers. Yet, curiously, the remembrance of its blaze left her feeling frozen, huddled on her uncomfortable sofa. Her chills had nothing to do with her half-opened window and the cold draft that sneaked into the room.

Lois switched the television off, and got up.

Chocolate, she needed some chocolate. There might still be some ice cream in her freezer.

She brought her last carton back. After sticking her spoon firmly into the last remaining chunk of ice cream, she selected a book. Reading would take her mind out of this uneasy carousel of hope, regrets, and anxiety.

NGL Hammond's *Alexander the Great* would take her mind off her waiting. She knew Lex would be pleased to discuss it with her. So why had she procrastinated so much, opting instead to reread *To Kill a Mockingbird*, at Clark's unintentional prompt?

The telltale sound of his landing startled her. Like an idiot, she turned towards the window and blurted out, “Superman!”

Superman’s eyes briefly followed her hand movement as she set Lex’s book on the sofa and took a step closer to him. His mouth settled on a grim line.

Lois paused. Something elusive flickered on his face, half-shrouded in shadows and the still-fluttering drapes of her curtains.

The superhero deliberately crossed his arms. Cutting to the point, he flatly stated: “I heard you wanted to see me.”

No “Hi, Lois”. Not even the more formal “Good evening, Lois”. This was not good. Not good at all.

For once, Lois’ eyes didn’t linger on his bulging biceps, focusing instead on his impassive face and his unsettling eyes.

“Yes,” she answered quietly, “Please, come in. I’ll just put on a robe.”

She suddenly felt naked, frozen to the core; be it fear, or the cold of the night air. Never in all her life, had she felt such trepidation.

As she stirred, intending to follow through, Superman’s voice stopped her. “Unless it’s lead-lined, Lois, it’s... a waste of time.”

Lois flinched. Then a spark of fury, some leftover from the afternoon brazier, unexpectedly flared up, and she heard herself fling back: “Who gave you the right to insult me?”

As Superman grimaced, she gasped at her own audacity, then took a step forward, tentatively raising a placating hand in his direction and mumbled, “I-I guess you’re right.”

His mouth stretched in a sardonic line. Her hands slowly fell back and awkwardly covered her cleavage, as he deliberately stripped her with his eyes.

Lois looked down at herself, her eyes lingering on the satin which clung to her figure, emphasizing her curves in gleaming shades, and flushed: “I-I understand how it might look.” She forged on, diffidently: “Anyway, I’m just trying to figure out... Well, there’ve been a lot of changes going on in my life and I’m trying to make the right decisions.” She swallowed hard and continued, “But I can’t until I know...”

Superman’s stance settled into a grimmer version of his usual authoritative posture.

Lois stammered and shut up. Her right hand, which was fiddling with her hair, fingered instead the material of her nightgown then hung dejectedly by her side.

Superman had not moved; only his eyes seemed alive in the chiseled planes of his face.

Lois tried again: “I need to know...”

Again she faltered, overwhelmed. The stern faced figure in front of her observed her as if she was the basest kind of criminal. The gentle man who had told Amy Platt he was “a friend” had entirely disappeared, leaving in his place this disturbing stranger whose presence made her tongue-tied.

She took a deep breath and asked him, in a brisker tone, “Clark told you everything, didn’t he?”

The statue in front of her nodded briefly.

Mortification flooded into her. Yielding to an irresistible urge, without quite knowing what she did, Lois went back to the coffee table on which her tub of ice-cream was slowly defrosting, bent down, and began scraping the bottom of the carton, gathering the remains of the half-melted chocolate mess into the spoon, then dropped it back inside.

It was hopeless.

A fluttering sound penetrated her confusion. Lois raised her head; Superman had turned away from her, his foot on the windowsill, his intent obvious.

Before he flew away, she cried out: “Wait! Please, wait!”

The superhero halted, poised for flight.

“Please...” Lois’ requested, more softly. “Hear me out...”

“As if...” Frantic, her heart racing, she searched for the words that would crack the stone. “Please... As if you were—As if you had *no* powers—as if you were just an ordinary man leading an ordinary life—”

As if you were Clark, her mind suggested.

Her voice broke. “Please.”

If he had been that ordinary man, he couldn’t have heard that last whisper.

As the plea left her mouth, Lois saw his back stiffen. He hovered for a second—that stretched into infinity for her—before turning back to face her, his face a mixture of uncertainty and... was it distress she saw?

That anticipated chink in his armor suddenly shattered whatever composure she still had. She started to shiver, the sensation of cold increasing all of a sudden. Goosebumps started to form on her icy arms, and she hugged herself, trying to stop that pervasive numbness from spreading.

She wasn’t really aware that her face had grown damp from her tears. But she felt that the chilly draft which penetrated her skin suddenly paused when Superman locked the window and drew up the curtains.

Whatever the reason, he stayed.

And in a remote recess of her mind, she rejoiced.

Twenty minutes later, Lois’s cup of instant coffee was drunk, and the heavy robe Superman insisted she put on enfolded her.

He had been right to urge her to wear it; goosebumps were already stealing up her spine when he had helped her into it. At his urging, she had also thrown in her heaviest woolen socks, the yellow-dotted ones whose color clashed with the soft russet of her robe and the muted blue of her nightgown.

The flimsy nightgown she had bought after the Revenge incident, so she could seduce even the likes of Clark Kent, if she chose. Even if he would never *ever* see her wearing it.

Seated once more on one of her sofas, Lois’s outpouring dribbled to an end. She had blurted out most of her fears without seeming to take a breath to a stoic Superman who had declined her offer of coffee.

He seemed less intimidating somehow, now that he sat next to her, in that familiar setting. Strange how Superman’s present position changed him. He looked more—human—somehow. Even his eyes had lost that sheen of ice that had cloaked their depth.

Lois sniffled again, and snatched another paper towel.

“Sorry, no tissues.” Lois blew her nose decisively. “You live so much above us, and when you walk among us, all we have to show you are our weaknesses.”

She looked down at the soiled towel, before crumbling it into a ball. “Thank you for listening. For being my friend tonight. I needed a friend, and—” her voice caught at the realization, “you’re the only one left.”

“Lois—”

“No. Please, don’t even think it. Clark—” She took a deep breath. “I lost Clark.”

At this admission, she felt her eyes began to fill again with tears. She angrily wiped her eyes. Hadn’t she cried enough today? She had thought she had no water left in her tear-ducts.

“Lucy’s—she’s my sister—she’s right. I don’t have dates or true friends, I have interviews.” She clasped her hands tightly, fighting her tears. “And Lex... I guess I can’t make myself confide in Lex. I understood that this afternoon, waiting for you.”

Her voice went from despondency to shock. “Oh, my God! I lost Clark because of a man I’m no longer sure I really want to marry!”

Superman sighed with something that looked like discomfort at her outburst. “I’m sure you haven’t lost Clark, Lois.”

“Haven’t I? I treated him like dirt, took him for granted... How could he forgive me?”

Her question went unanswered.

Lois shivered with misery, and added in an undertone, “How will I ever forgive him?”

“Forgive him?” Superman parroted, looking absolutely stunned.

She waved his question away, in a wild sweep of her hand. This was no concern of his!

Despite her determination, she stole a glance at Superman and saw a demand in his eyes that made her resolve thaw. She reluctantly added, “Clark knew I was seeing Lex. Couldn’t he keep quiet?” She seized another paper towel and began unconsciously to shred it. “He had no business loving me. He knew my rules: no sleeping with anyone I work with. What could he expect?”

A lot, that tiny annoying voice helpfully added. *Who did the Dance of the Seven Veils?*

Considering the mess she had made with the towel, Lois tossed it disgustedly on her coffee table.

Another thought took root in her mind, and she wailed, “How can I look Clark in the eyes, knowing what I did? I asked him for you. Talk about adding insult to injury!”

“I’m sure he’ll forgive you, if he hasn’t already.” Superman didn’t seem so sure about it, either.

“If he does, it means he didn’t really love me...” The idea saddened Lois further, and it startled her.

“I’m sure Clark doesn’t say things he doesn’t mean.”

“Do you know him that well?”

Lois raised surprised eyes to him, but Superman focused anywhere but on her. She hunched over with her elbow on her knees, eyes engrossed on her carpet. A dust bunny stuck on its right fringe. She’d have to vacuum during the week.

Silence stretched between them, and the figure seated on the other side of her sofa began to fidget. Or did he? She sneaked a look towards him. Superman *did* seem uncomfortable.

As she opened her mouth, he beat her to it, “Lois... You asked for me... What did you really want to tell me?”

“Haven’t I said plenty already?”

He smothered an awkward smile, but not quickly enough for her to miss it.

She *had* said plenty, maybe too much: from her newly found insecurity at the destruction of the *Planet* to her misgivings to work at LNN without Clark; from her reticence to call Perry for paternal advice to her rage at Clark for breaking their partnership.

Clark.

It began and ended with Clark. Her mind drew circles around him, it seemed.

Oddly enough, she had not confessed what she had summoned Superman for, her love and her hope for a shared future. Instead, she had hiccupped, “Partnership is like marriage, and Clark just made me *divorce* him!”

What made her break up with Clark uppermost in her mind?

Her shock and anger at his confession, simmering all afternoon while she anxiously awaited Superman’s visit?

Her seduction attempt lamentably backfiring after Superman’s crack about her robe?

Her blindingly sudden awareness that Superman wasn’t the perfect selfless hero that she needed?

That he could be mean and hurtful?

Maybe.

The “*God in a cape*” had feet of clay, like any other man. Like any *earthman*, she amended, and then blew her nose another time. The realization left her reeling, but she was too drained to understand why it affected her so. Why she could not earnestly bring up her declaration of love.

She now realized that during her earlier weepy tirade, she had somehow replaced Superman with Clark. She had let go as if Clark were facing her.

Her best friend. Her *former* best friend.

The man she already missed desperately. She frowned.

How could it be she already felt the loss of him so acutely? Seven hours had not elapsed since Clark had offered her his heart on a plate, and she had stomped it into the ground, effectively pulverizing what was left of their friendship.

“I’m sorry. I guess I did confide to the ‘ordinary man’ who you’re not, and not to the superhero.” Lois smiled weakly. “I’m not usually this messed up”.

Superman flashed back a real smile this time. “Do you still need my help sorting it out?” Now his voice held nothing more than concern and friendship.

Lois stayed silent.

How could she repay his kindness by blurting out, “I wish you were Clark?” It would be mean and she had already used up a year worth of cruelty today.

So she settled on the more considerate “Can you travel through time? And take me back with you?”

He shook his head. “Sorry, no.”

“Too bad it’s not one of your powers. Would it be too much to wish for H. G. Wells’s Time Machine?”

At his mystified look, believing he didn’t grasp the reference, she explained: “A dead English writer. It’s one of his better known works. The book’s boring, really, but I wish it were true...”

“What would you undo, if you could?” he cautiously asked.

She focused inwardly. “Easy.” She leaned towards him, her eyes intent. “I’d go back to early afternoon and tell Clark that—”

A heartbeat later, Lois lowered her red-rimmed eyes. “I can’t—”

She shrugged. “Well, it doesn’t matter, anyway.”

“It does to you.”

She surrendered to his quiet urging.

“I’d tell Clark...” she began slowly. “I’d tell him that I’m miserable without him.”

She got up, and began to pace between the kitchen and the sofa, waving as she passed by Superman. “I’d tell him—” she suddenly grinned, “there is an eensy-weensy, microcosmic although highly likely possibility—that I could feel some sort of *something* for him.”

“Huh?”

Superman sounded thunderstruck, but she went on, anyway.

“I’d tell Clark I’m not sure this *something* could develop into *anything*, but... since I’m going to dump the third richest man in the world in order to find out...”

“But—” Superman’s flabbergasted face was so incongruous that Lois stopped her pacing.

“You mean, why did I change my mind?”

“Yes.”

Whether he was super or pretending to be ordinary, the poor man seemed completely baffled.

Lois answered slowly, knowing her heart as she spoke.

“You’ve been a real friend to me tonight. But, all the while, to tell the truth, I really needed Clark.” She stopped in front of him, looking down at him. “It has to mean *something*. Even if I can’t understand why I still...”

It looked to her that Superman wasn’t breathing. Puzzled, she paused as he inhaled sharply.

“So I was a substitute for Clark?” The idea didn’t seem to pain him at all.

“Err, yes. The longer you stayed, the more obvious it was how—uh, weird it was—I say weird, but it’s a good kind of weird, you know...”

She blushed when he smiled affectionately. “I understand.”

“You never linger, Superman. You fly in, save the day, and fly off. Never say more than a few words. Even to me.”

She stopped, puzzled.

“It’s like you’re not really here at all, except when helping

out!” Lois abruptly exclaimed, feeling as if she had touched some truth so glaringly obvious she should have grasped it before.

Swiftly, that truth flickered out and died.

Superman looked back at her, his face serious: “Is that such a bad thing?”

“Yes. No.” She paused. “Maybe.”

Another truth bumped into her, and she resumed her agitated pacing. Anything not to dwell on how she had nearly thrown herself half-naked at him. *Oh God*. Would she ever live that down?

“You know I can’t help lov—you know I admire you, respect you, and I *do* love you, but—”

She suddenly froze in her tracks.

Maybe the irony of her declaration was lost on him, but Lois blanched, suddenly realizing what she was saying.

She mumbled: “I *do* have you mixed up with Clark.”

She flopped down on the sofa nearer to Superman and, her voice wavering, asked him: “Do you love me? You said you did, once.”

He seemed embarrassed. “Lois...”

“I might as well ask you. I wanted to ask you, the minute you came in, tonight... if there was some hope for us, but—”

“You got sidetracked.” Some ghost of a smile came and went on his mouth.

“Yeah,” she admitted sheepishly.

Before Superman had the chance to answer, Lois quickly spoke. “I know you weren’t yourself. You were sprayed, too. All the same... if I can admit I *actually* was... um—I am—*attracted* to Clark, you can tell me the truth, too.” Softer, almost to herself, she added, “I never focused on you when I was drugged. Not even once. It *should* have told me something. Still...”

Superman didn’t answer her at first, looking at her as if he was seeing through her for the first time, past her robe and the satin nightgown she really should have saved for Clark.

Past her stupidity, and her waverings and uncertainties, to her heart.

Then he gently said: “I *do* care about you Lois. But there are things about me that you may not know for a long while.”

“But...”

“Superman can give you no more than friendship.” His tone was final.

She processed it and sharp pain stabbed at her heart.

However she still felt that strange connection between them, that vibrant connection that always tugged at her soul when she felt him nearby. That bond that confused her even more, now that she had acknowledged that Clark owned a not so microscopic part of her soul, too.

She raised her eyes to his face and whispered, “I know. I guess I’ve always known. Surely, you can’t blame a girl for trying, can you?” Her laugh was brittle.

He smiled almost tenderly, “Believe me, I’m honored.” Suddenly, his face took on a comical look of dismay, and he added, “You can’t imagine the—um—people who have propositioned me.”

She laughed. “In that case, I’m glad you stopped me before I did.”

“Lois, you could never be one of them.” He looked at her earnestly. “May I ask you a question?”

“Sure.”

“Can we still be friends? True friends?”

Despite her new-found knowledge, she fought down a flicker of disappointment, and replied flippantly, “I only bawl on my friends’ shoulders, so I guess the answer’s yes.”

“Then, as a friend, may I ask what your intentions are?”

“Regarding Lex?”

“Yes.”

She looked him in the eyes, seeing passionate entreaty flare

out, quickly hidden behind the blandness of his question.

“I already told you. I’ll decline his proposal.” She sighed. “I’d hate to be on my best behavior all the time—”

“It must be a real strain,” Superman deadpanned.

Lois’s eyes flashed. “—I confess not having to pay the rent would be lovely, but— At least, my address book of the best takeout places won’t gather dust. Lex isn’t a beer and pizza kind of guy, even if he *sometimes* eats ice-cream out of the carton.”

“Be careful with Lex. You don’t know him like I do.”

“Don’t I? I’ll be the judge of that!”

Another elusive memory flashed through her brain. Again, she could not quite grasp it. It maddened her, and she took note of it to track it down.

“What it is with you and Clark? Lex *this!* Lex *that!* What it is you both *think* you know and didn’t tell me?”

“No rock solid evidence, but nothing you’d want to be entangled with. Ask Clark, he knows all I know.”

Lois frowned in annoyance, and was about to reiterate her query, when Superman quickly said, in a more forceful tone, “Ask Clark.”

“Okay”, she reluctantly agreed.

Suddenly his head tilted on the side, and he seemed to focus elsewhere. He sighed. “I’m sorry, Lois, I have to leave.”

“Someone else needs you.”

“Yes.”

He rose from the sofa, his cape falling in soft waves behind him. Once more, she was struck by the elegant sparsity of his gestures. She moved closer, went on tiptoe and kissed his cheek. It was a butterfly-light kiss and she didn’t linger. “Thanks for taking care of me tonight.”

Superman’s hands remained on her shoulders, and drifted down as if he was about to hug her. His unfinished gesture moved her as if he had actually completed it.

He strode to her window, and, flinging apart the curtains, he let the night intrude between them. Then he put one foot on the windowsill, mirroring his aborted first departure.

Lois looked at him for a second before speeding into her kitchen. She called out, “Superman, can you do something else for me?”

He levitated back into her apartment.

She snatched Lex’s bouquet from its hiding place, cursing when she scratched herself with the thorns. “Can you toss them into Hobb’s Bay?”

He took the expensive flowers from her, and nodded wordlessly.

“Do you think Clark’s still awake?” she asked.

Superman’s face lit up with the radiance of his smile, and her breath caught.

“Why don’t you find out?”

As he flew away, he heard her whisper: “I will.”

Fin.

The story continues with “Revealing Time.”