

Clearing the Air

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Rated: G

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Summary: After the events of the episode “Fly Hard,” Lois Lane has a few words for a certain partner of hers in private. (Part of the “Muddying the Waters” series)

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Lois stayed with Lex while he was loaded into the ambulance, making surface conversation while she seethed internally. With relief, she noted that he'd called his assistant, the oft-mentioned but elusive Mrs. Cox. It absolved her from the necessity of accompanying him to the hospital and then dancing attendance on him until he was discharged- a prospect that she'd been dreading. Many things had changed since she'd figured out Clark's secret. For one thing, she'd been forced to admit that Clark's suspicions of the billionaire had at least some merit; and although Lex's pursuit of her had made it easy to get close to enough to investigate him in good earnest, sometimes keeping up the pretext was exhausting.

It wasn't the only relationship giving her trouble, either.

In the month since Lois had discovered the truth about Clark Kent, she'd come to realise one thing. He was absolutely, ridiculously terrible at keeping his secret identity a secret.

She understood why his excuses were so awful. The amount of time between Clark disappearing and Superman saving the day was usually so small, he almost had to be thinking of a reason to leave while trying to figure out what he- as Superman- needed to do.

But that didn't explain why he was so careless about his identity on a daily basis. The amount of times she'd caught him doing something Super while he was ostensibly Clark Kent was staggering; enough that she'd perfected her ability to appear completely oblivious. She'd tried to overlook it, reasoning that he knew what he was doing; after all, he'd been protecting this secret his entire life.

On top of that, she still wasn't sure exactly how she felt about Clark Superman Kent- and until she was, she was reluctant to let him know that she'd seen through his excuses.

Today, however, had been too much.

He'd not only stepped so close to revealing his secret to a room full of people- including Lex Luthor!- that she'd had to warn him, reminding him that he wasn't Superman at that moment, but then he'd pulled the boneheaded move of jumping off the Planet building after her! Was he actually trying to be discovered?

Once the ambulance had pulled away, she walked slowly over to where Clark and Jack stood, waiting for them to finish their conversation. Finally Jack left, and Clark greeted her with a smile.

“I thought you'd go to the hospital.”

“I doubt Lex will be there long.” She paused, considering.

There was a lot she wanted to say, but out here in the street really wasn't the best place for it. “Walk me home?”

“Sure.”

Something was going on.

First Lois had stayed behind while her date had gone to the hospital, and then she'd practically commanded him to walk her home. And it hadn't been a companionable walk, either- Lois had barely responded to any of Clark's conversational gambits, and now, as they rounded the last corner before her apartment building, she seemed almost angry with him.

She jerked her head in the direction of the entryway as they came level with the outer door, treading up the stairs as if she took his following her for granted. Not a word was spoken by either of them until they reached her apartment door.

“Lois? Is there something wrong?”

She shook her head tightly as she unlocked her door. “Not out here.”

Mystified, Clark watched as she swung the door open and gestured for him to precede her.

The apartment door had barely clicked shut behind them when she rounded on him.

“Are you crazy? Are you completely out of your mind? What were you thinking, jumping off the roof like that? All it would've taken is someone looking up at the wrong moment, and it'd be out, Clark!”

He stiffened as the implication of her words sunk in.

“You know.”

“Of course I know! You have Superman's suits hanging in your closet, Clark! What, did you think I wouldn't put two and two together?”

His shoulders slumped. He'd wondered, after Perry had found the Suits, whether Lois and Perry had bought his explanation. He'd been so panicked at the time that he couldn't be sure just how convincing his excuse of storing the superhero's Suits had been. Now, weeks later, he had his answer; Lois had seen straight through him.

Up until now, only one person had found out that Clark Kent moonlighted in tights; and that person was dead. Now, Clark apparently had at least one more to deal with. And of everyone he knew, Lois was possibly the most dangerous person to have that particular piece of information. They were friends, sure; but if she found out that Clark had been lying to her for a year, would her sense of betrayal be strong enough to lead her to publish the one story virtually guaranteed to get her the Pulitzer Prize she wanted?

If that happened, life as Clark knew it would be over.

Although... she'd apparently known for over a month. If she was going to expose him, surely she would've done it straight away? Instead she'd done nothing with the information.

“Why didn't you tell me you knew?”

What was she supposed to say to that? Tell him the truth? That he'd inserted himself into her life so thoroughly that she could no longer imagine life without him- but that she wasn't ready to take that leap? That she was scared of the depth of her burgeoning feelings for him and thus hidden her knowledge of his secret so she didn't have to admit she had them at all?

No.

“That's not the issue here, Clark,” she sidestepped.

“So what is?”

“How careless you are with your secret! Do you realise just how close you came to Lex finding out that you're Superman tonight, Clark? Do you realise what would happen if he did?” Lois planted her hands on her hips and glared at him. “Lex finding out is your worst nightmare, Clark. He hates you. And if he found out... he'd find a way to use it against you.”

Involuntarily, she shuddered. Once she knew the truth about Clark, it was easier to accept the credibility of his suspicions of the billionaire- after all, it was entirely possible that Superman had had dealings with Luthor that she wasn't aware of. A few days after her discovery, she'd kept a date with Lex. With the wool no

longer over her eyes, she'd subtly needled Lex about the superhero- and seen the flash of pure, implacable hatred in his eyes before he'd been able to cover it with his usual suave manner. It had been that moment that had sparked her investigation, covert as it was.

Clark's brow furrowed. "If you believe that he's a criminal, why are you still dating him?"

"I'm investigating him, you lunthead!" she retorted. "And if you're not more careful, he's going to be the one doing the investigating! All that stuff about trying to get to the bomb? He's not stupid, Clark. He will put two and two together, the same way I did. And it's not the only slip I've seen you make. You've got a secret the size of- of Jupiter and you're terrible at protecting it!"

"I've been Superman for a year and no one has figured it out- well, except you," he amended.

"Then you've been lucky for a year." She paused, feeling the anger drain away. "What if something like tonight happens again? What if Lex or someone like him finds out, Clark? They'll destroy you. One life- my life- isn't worth giving away your secret."

"You're wrong." Now it was his turn to get angry. "Do you really think I'd sacrifice you or anyone else just to protect myself?"

"The world needs Superman, Clark."

"And the world would still have Superman whether they knew the truth or not!"

"But would you still have Clark Kent?"

Clark stared at Lois for a moment. How had she managed to get right at the heart of things so easily? How did she know just how much he feared losing himself to the blue and red suit? It was insights like that that made her such a superlative reporter, but she seldom expressed them about subjects other than the stories she wrote.

She was right. If the world found out the truth, the pressure to be Super all the time would be intense; would Clark eventually fall by the wayside?

He didn't know.

And it was yet another reason to be more careful, more protective of his secret. Was it possible that he'd become complacent? That he'd been so successful at pretending to be two people that he'd started taking risks that he maybe wouldn't have taken before creating Superman? It was possible, he acknowledged silently.

"Why is this so important to you all of a sudden?"

"Because you're my friend. And I don't want to have to go to the trouble of breaking in a new partner."

She coloured as she spoke, belying the light tone of her words. Unexpectedly touched- Lois didn't admit to affection easily- Clark gave her a lopsided smile.

"I'll be more careful, I promise. If-" he held up a finger "- you are too. Going after Luthor alone, Lois? Don't you think that's dangerous?"

Lois raised an eyebrow. "This had better not be like the Metro Club all over again, Kent."

Clark shook his head. "No. Let me help you."

She studied him for a long moment, apparently considering. "Okay. Let me fill you in on what I've found..."

THE END