

# After the Fall (Kerth Challenge #1)

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Rated: PG

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Summary: When Lois needs a friend after her almost-wedding to Lex, Clark is right there to support her.

Story Size: 3,427 words (19Kb as text)

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Author's Note: This fic is in response to the Kerth Challenge #1, which required the following five words to appear somewhere in the story: Rubber Duck, Bath, Rose, Flash, Deadline.

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"Here we are. Back home, safe and sound," Clark gently announced in the softest tone he could muster.

He chanced a glance at Lois, who had seemed to shrink into his side as he kept his arm around her, offering support and comfort. Though he refused to show it outwardly, he was deeply worried. She'd barely spoken two words the entire time he'd been with her. It was uncharacteristic for her, but he guessed he really couldn't blame her. Her wedding had been ruined, her fiancé had been exposed as a criminal overlord, and then, rather than face an arrest, Luthor had taken a swan dive out of the Lex Tower penthouse. Still, a part of him was surprised she wasn't raging the way she typically did when she was upset. Instead, she was sullen, quiet, withdrawn, and almost catatonic.

She nodded. "Thanks."

Clark rejoiced to hear that one simple word. It almost made the pain still radiating throughout his body vanish. It certainly made it worthwhile. Still, he was looking forward to completely healing from his near-death experience in Luthor's wine cellar. Mentally, he winced, wondering how badly that Kryptonite cage would haunt his nightmares. He dreaded to see that razor-sharp axe Luthor had wielded when sleep would finally claim him.

Clark took the keys that dangled limply from Lois' fingers and fitted them into the lock of her apartment door. Then he swung it open and let Lois enter first. But she didn't seem to want to move without him, so he walked in with her. He helped her to sit down on the couch.

"Are you okay?" he finally chanced to ask, sitting catty-corner to see her better. He'd deliberately avoided asking her that question until that moment.

"I don't know," she responded after a long moment, during which Clark began to think she wouldn't answer at all.

"I'm here for you, whatever you need," he promised her.

She turned her reddened, puffy gaze toward him, studying him for a solid half a minute. "Why?" she finally asked in a near-whisper that trembled as if she feared to know the answer.

"Because I'm your friend," he immediately replied, taking her hands in his as he sat down next to her. "Because I care about you, Lois."

"Why?" she repeated, bewildered. "After all the things I said and did. After all the warnings you gave me about Lex..." Her voice trailed off as she choked back a sob.

"It doesn't matter," Clark said, dismissing the notion, though a

residual stab of pain lanced his heart as he remembered how close he'd come to losing her to that monster – completely and forever.

"I don't deserve your friendship," she whimpered, turning away as though ashamed.

"Hey," Clark said, gently putting his hand under her chin to guide her gaze back to him. He looked her straight in the eyes. "I'm not giving up on you that easily. The *only* thing you didn't deserve was what happened today. You're a good person, Lois. I'm still *proud* to call you my friend. If you still *want* me as a friend, that is. Because, let's face it, I said and did some...pretty reprehensible things."

"No, you didn't." She shook her head as she said the words. "You *knew* Lex was evil and you tried to stop me. And I was an idiot and accused you of horrible things. You had *every* right to get frustrated with me. I'm actually surprised you didn't snap at me earlier than you did," she argued back, and Clark saw a flash of her old fighting spirit rally in her eyes.

He smiled gently at her and tried his best to hide how uncomfortable he was due to the lingering effects of his prolonged Kryptonite poisoning. "We both made mistakes. It doesn't matter to me. All that matters is what happens from this moment onward. All that matters is *you*, Lois. I'll do whatever it takes to help you get through all of the things that happened today. Just let me know what you need."

She looked indecisive for a moment, then lightly nodded her head. "Thanks, Clark. I've always been able to count on you. I wish I'd remembered that during my engagement." She sighed. "I was a real witch to you, wasn't I?"

Clark shook his head. "We *both* made missteps. We *both* fell down because of them. But after the fall, we rise up, smarter and stronger than before, right?"

A spark of determination kindled in her eyes and she nodded once, firmly. "Right." The moment was short-lived, however, and a weariness and a pain flickered in her features again. "Can I ask a favor? Maybe I haven't earned that right back yet but...I...I don't think I want to be alone right now. Would you stay for a while?"

Clark's smile widened but he kept it tender. "I'd be happy to stay." He patted her knee gently as a thought occurred to him. "I'll tell you what. I'll run down to the store and pick up as much ice cream as your freezer can hold and some movie rentals."

She actually smiled at that as he'd expected she would. Lois Lane was never one to pass up on ice cream and a movie, especially when she was upset. "I'd like that." She glanced down at her clothing, sneering at the pristine and expensive wedding dress she still wore. "Ugh, I need to get out of this thing."

"I've got an idea. It'll take me a little while to get the ice cream and movies. Why don't I run you a hot bath? You can relax and get changed while I'm out."

"You'd do that for me?" she asked, a little surprised.

"Lois, you're my best friend. I'd do anything for you." He gingerly pushed himself off the couch.

Lois saw his obvious discomfort and her brow scrunched in concern. "Are you okay? You look...sore."

"Oh, uh, I probably pushed myself too hard over the last few days," Clark nervously lied, eager to move the spotlight away from his lingering Kryptonite poisoning. "I'm sorry, Lois, but it was *my* idea to work so hard to expose Luthor. Jimmy, Jack, and Perry were willing to help, and I'll always be thankful that they pitched in as much as they did but...if you want to blame someone for what happened...it was me."

Her eyes narrowed and a steely look entered them. "Don't apologize. You did the right thing. I'm glad you and Perry and Jimmy and Jack did what you did. And I want you to know...when I was up at the altar and I didn't see...when the Archbishop asked me if I took Lex to be my husband..." She blushed, faltering in her words for a moment.

"What?" Clark breathed in curiosity.

"I said 'no,'" she said in a barely audible voice. She cleared her throat and spoke with more conviction. "Before Perry showed up with the police, I mean. So, please, don't *ever* think that you ruined my wedding. Please? I couldn't stand it if I thought that you thought you were responsible for something like that." Her voice was stronger now but still half-pleading with him not to blame himself for her aborted wedding.

"You...did?" Clark blinked in surprise. Of all the strange, unbelievable, and downright terrifying things that had been happening lately, this was *not* something he'd been prepared for.

Lois nodded, uncertainly, as if trying to gauge his reaction to her confession. "I was standing there, looking at myself in the mirror, pairing my name with his and...nothing felt right. I realized I wasn't excited to be getting married. I felt...empty. And then, when I was standing there, on the altar, and I didn't see..." She sighed heavily. "I saw the empty seats where my friends should have been...where *you* should have been...and I realized all the things I'd be giving up for someone I wasn't...maybe I *could* have *learned* to love him, but..." Her voice trailed off helplessly.

"But you didn't," Clark finished for her, his voice almost a relieved sigh.

She shook her head. "No. I didn't. I think I realized it then, when I tried out 'Lois Luthor' for the first time and it made me cringe inside, instead of smile. The butterflies in my stomach were the nervous kind that appear when I'm facing some kind of dangerous situation, not the happy, excited, nervous kind that come out when I'm facing something I'm looking forward to." Embarrassment tainted her words.

Clark closed his eyes for just a moment as he let himself absorb her sincerity. Then he opened his eyes and smiled at her. "For the record? I think what you did took a lot of bravery, Lois."

"Bravery? To back out of a wedding at the *last* possible second?"

He nodded. "Well, sure. You were standing in front of your family, your friends, your fiancé's friends and wealthy business partners." God, how it burned his tongue to use the word 'fiancé' in reference to Luthor! "Everyone had such high expectations of you. And you had the guts to follow what your heart was telling you to do...or not to do, as the case may be. That's brave, Lois. Not everyone could find the courage to say the word 'no' in a situation like that," he assured her.

Lois stood then and, before Clark knew what was happening, she was in his arms, hugging him tighter than she ever had before.

"Thank you," she whispered against his ear.

A jolt of pure love raced through Clark's body. He didn't know what to say and his mouth went bone-dry as he fought to control his emotions. He simply hugged her back. For a long moment, Lois didn't move. Then, slowly, she slipped out of his embrace.

"I really should get out of this thing. Just the *thought* of it is making me nauseous."

"Fair enough," Clark chuckled easily.

"I have a robe in my bedroom. Can you do me a favor?" Lois asked, sounding a little tired.

"Anything."

"Can you get rid of the dress for me? I don't care what you do with it. Donate it. Throw it in the dumpster. Sink it in the harbor. Ask Superman to burn it to ashes with his heat vision. Whatever. I don't care. I just...I *never* want to see it again." Fire flashed in her eyes and Clark was thrilled to see it.

"Absolutely," he responded, probably a bit too quickly and eagerly, but Lois didn't appear to mind.

"Thanks."

She turned and made her way down the hall to her bedroom. Clark took the opportunity to enter her bathroom and started the tub for her. He should have felt more awkward about it than he did. After all, drawing a bath for Lois felt oddly intimate, but he

could see the way her heart was hurting and he wanted to do whatever he could to help her in any way possible. Carefully ensuring that the water was hot but not scalding, he found a bottle of bubble bath and poured a generous capful of the pink gelatinous liquid into the steaming bath. Instantly, the entire bathroom was filled with the scent of roses. Clark inhaled deeply, relishing the pleasant aroma. Then, as quickly as his still-aching body would allow, he vacated the bathroom to allow Lois her privacy. He retreated to the safety of the living room and waited until he heard Lois' bedroom door open.

There was a sound of rumpling fabric as she unceremoniously plopped the dress onto the floor in the hallway. Clark resisted the insanely strong urge he had to turn around to look at her. A moment later, she ducked into the bathroom with a muffled word of thanks for getting the bath started, then the door closed. Clark took that as his cue to move. He scooped the detested dress up off the floor, grabbed Lois' apartment keys, and made his way out of the building. Once out in the sunlight, he found a deserted alley and tested his powers. With a great effort, he found flight just barely attainable. Fearing he might be able to fly somewhere and not get back, he decided against using the ability. His heat vision also proved unreliable, at best, so instead of doing the deed himself, he walked a few blocks over until he found a couple of homeless men and women huddled around a metal trash bin in an old parking lot. The group scowled at him but allowed him to approach.

"I'll give you a hundred dollars to burn this dress," he said with cool detachment, holding the mass of white fabric out before him like an offering at a sacrifice to some vengeful god.

An older man, perhaps the leader of the ragtag little bunch, smiled at him with a mouthful of broken teeth. "You messing with us?" he asked harshly.

"No. Here." Clark dropped the dress on the ground and swiftly extracted five crisp twenty dollar bills from his wallet.

It would have been more satisfying to set the garment ablaze himself, if he'd only *been* his normal, super self. But he would take what help he could get.

"You sure about this?" the man asked dubiously.

Clark nodded and pressed the cash into his hand. "My friend doesn't ever want to see this dress again. Please, burn it."

The man shrugged. "Suit yourself." He gestured to one of his younger counterparts. "Doug, you heard the man. Toss it in. Kim, Nick, go get us some sandwiches or something." He handed over the money without even glancing at his friends, and looked Clark dead in the eye. "You know, this'll be the first night in two or three days that we'll have a proper meal. I don't know the story behind this dress and I don't *want* to know. But...thank you."

Clark shook his head. "No. Thank you." He watched dispassionately as the one called Doug stuffed the dress into the bin. Black smoke plumed as the imported silk and lace caught fire and began to burn. Satisfied, he put his back to the blaze and walked stiffly away to fulfill his other promises to Lois.

He lingered in the video rental store as long as he could, choosing six of Lois' favorite, non-romantic movies and poring over the snacks. On an impulse, he picked up a few boxes of Lois' favorite candies, then he left the store, heading across the street around the corner to the grocery store. Once inside, he quickly stocked up on chocolate ice cream for Lois and a single, small vanilla chocolate chip for himself. The place was next to a decent pizzeria, so he ordered two large pies for them to share as well, figuring Lois would likely want to spend the next few days living off the leftovers.

Back in the apartment, Lois wasn't out of the bath yet, though his super hearing kicked in just enough to hear the sound of the shower running. He set down his precious burdens, carefully stocking her freezer with the ice cream, before slipping out the door again, this time in search of Lois' landlord. He needed to let

the man know that Lois would probably be staying in her place after all, unless she decided that she needed a fresh start in a new place. The deadline for her to move out was quickly approaching, and the last thing Lois needed was to deal with details like her lease. He found the landlord at home, quickly and vaguely explained the situation, and was satisfied when the man agreed to talk to Lois the following week about the lease.

Lois was sitting on the couch in her pajamas when he let himself back into her apartment. That stopped Clark dead in his tracks. He'd only ever seen Lois in her pajamas once, and that had been completely by accident. Even when they'd been on a stakeout in the Lexor, she'd slept in sweat clothing or old T-shirts, explaining that, on the off chance they had to leave the room swiftly to catch their target in his tracks, she wouldn't need to waste precious time putting on proper attire. Clark had accepted the explanation, but had always felt there was more to her refusal to sleep in pajamas back then. Perhaps it had felt too intimate to her or left her feeling too vulnerable to allow him to see her in her night attire. But now, she was *choosing* to let him see her in her pajamas. She was *choosing* to let him see her in an oddly vulnerable state of being.

"Nice pajamas," he quipped lightly. "I wish I'd known. I would have gone to the store and picked out some myself."

She smirked at him, a laugh dancing around the edges of her mouth. "Oh yeah?" she baited him, and for a single, perfect flash in time, it was like the past few weeks and months hadn't happened at all. Any awkwardness Lois might have felt around him was gone.

He smiled. "Well, maybe not the exact same kind, but something similar. I'm not sure they make that print in men's fashion." He pointed to her shirt.

He was teasing her, but he couldn't help but fall head over heels for her all over again as she sat there in sky blue pajamas printed with white soap bubbles and rubber ducks all over the drawstring pants and button down top.

"Too bad. You'd probably look good in a rubber duck print," she offered with a suppressed laugh.

Clark chuckled. "Maybe," he allowed.

"Thanks for the pizza. And the ice cream," Lois said, opening the box she'd brought to the coffee table and lifting a slice out for him. "And the movies," she added as an afterthought.

"My pleasure," he assured her, accepting the slice of gooey cheese pizza on the paper plate that she held out to him.

She served herself a slice and bit into it blissfully. "So good. I've been avoiding stuff like this like the plague to fit into that stupid dress. Dare I even ask where that stupid thing wound up?"

"Someplace where it will never return from, as promised," was all Clark would say.

"I should have driven it out to the woods and built a bonfire with it," she grumbled half-heartedly.

Clark merely chuckled. "I spoke with your landlord," he said, deftly changing the subject. "He said he'll swing by next week and check with you about if you want to renew your lease or if you rather make a fresh start elsewhere. But in the meantime, he's not expecting you to be moved out anytime soon."

He was shocked when he saw the offended look that crossed her features. "I'm not going *anywhere*," she vowed. "Lex almost took my friends from me. He took the Planet away from me. He's not taking my *home* too. I'm staying."

"Glad to hear it, Lois," Clark said approvingly. "I've always felt like this place suits you."

"That reminds me. I want you to take your key back. When I demanded it back, I... wasn't myself. I was who Lex was molding me to me. I realize that now and I'm sorry. I want us to stay friends. Is that...okay?"

"Lois, it's *more* than okay," he replied, his voice as reverent as any oath. He raised the can of Coke she'd left out for him in a

toast. "To new beginnings and a stronger friendship."

"Hear hear!" she replied, lifting her cream soda.

Later, as they sat together on the couch watching Lethal Weapon, he felt Lois snuggle into his side and drift off to sleep. And he sent up a silent prayer of thanks that, even if Lois never chose to see him as more than a friend, she'd chosen to keep him in her life after all the things he'd done wrong.

THE END