

Like a Brother

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Summary: Lois has a question for Superman, but his answer isn't what she expected.

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Author's Note: This fic is in response to a question asked by Julie, which was if there were many (any) fics where Superman spills the beans that he is Clark Kent.

Special thanks go out to Val, for looking this over for me. You rock!

"Superman!" Lois gasped as she heard the familiar and comforting *whoosh* that signaled the hero's arrival.

She could feel her heart hammering in her chest now that he was actually standing here in her apartment. It was a wonder she couldn't *hear* it smashing against her ribs as well. She could hardly trust her own eyes. After the way she and Clark had left things in the park that afternoon, it was hard to believe he'd actually followed through with her request find Superman for her.

Or had he?

Looking at Superman standing guardedly before her, she couldn't help thinking about Clark. Her mind went, unbidden, back to that afternoon and the awkward conversation she and Clark had had. He'd been unusually quiet at first – even for him. But as he'd opened up and begun to speak with her, his passion had poured forth in a way Lois had never seen before.

He'd told her that he loved her.

She'd broken his heart in return.

An involuntary shudder ran up her spine as she recalled how utterly crestfallen and heartbroken he'd looked when they'd parted ways – a man just barely holding himself together, ready to fall apart at the slightest provocation. She hated herself for doing that to him. She'd mentally kicked herself for the rest of the day, and had been running the conversation over and over again in her mind when Superman arrived. She'd hurt Clark – her best friend! – deeply, and she regretted it.

But, he'd kind of brought it on himself in a way, she'd reasoned to herself. How *dare* he question her feelings toward Lex! How *dare* he throw a confession of love at her out of the blue like that! So, as much as she felt awful for breaking his heart, she felt angry at him too. In fact, she suspected she'd be pacing the room and ranting to herself about it if not for Superman's presence.

"I heard you were looking for me," Superman replied warily, like an animal suspecting a trap, but unable to identify it.

Did he suspect why she'd asked to see him?

"Yes. Please, come in," she invited him. It wouldn't do to have this conversation while he remained outside. But, suddenly, she felt very aware that she was in nothing but her nightgown. Feeling self-conscious, she offered, "I'll just put on a robe." It was more for her benefit than for his, she knew, but she didn't allow that fact to shine in her words.

Superman gave her a look that spoke of... was that disgust?

"Unless it's lead-lined, Lois, it's a waste of time."

Lois felt her face blossom with heat as her anger and embarrassment rose. Confusion bubbled just beneath the surface too – since when had Superman become a pig? Trying not to show her offense, and knowing she was failing miserably, she scrambled for something to say.

"I guess so," she dismissively grumbled. Then, to change the subject, "Anyway, I'm just trying to figure out..." She stopped herself from sighing and began again. "Well, there've been a lot of changes going on in my life and I'm trying to make the right decisions. But I can't until I know..." She paused for a second to gather her courage. "How you feel."

Brazenly, she crossed the distance between them and put her hand on his broad chest – a chest she'd snuggled against countless times as they'd flown together, a chest beneath which she knew beat the most noble, compassionate heart the world had ever known, despite his earlier snarky comment.

"Superman," she continued, looking into his eyes, willing him to see her own heart, "is there any hope for us? You and me?" she clarified. "I'm so completely in love with you that I can't do anything else without knowing."

Pain shot through his eyes, puzzling her. Slowly, as if in disbelief, he shook his head. For an instant, Lois wondered why it was that he couldn't believe her feelings for him. She hadn't exactly been coy about how she felt about him. Or... had she? Could it be that her easy friendship with the hero had been too... *friendly* and not flirtatious enough? Or was he *such* a gentleman that he'd overlooked his effect on her?

Superman sighed heavily, pulling her out of her musings as he removed her hand and stepped back a pace. "Lois, I do care for you." Lois' heart skipped a beat. He cared for her! "But..." Her heart deflated with that single word. "There are things about me you don't know... that you may never know."

That wasn't the answer Lois had been mentally preparing herself for. But she was not going to let him leave without speaking her mind. She would argue her point – gently – and make him see how sincere she was being.

"It doesn't matter," she assured him. "I know *you*. And I don't mean the celebrity or you the 'superhero,'" she quickly amended as she caught a concealed wince from him. The next words she spoke, she was never quite sure why she said them or where the idea came from. "If you had *no* powers, if you were just an ordinary man leading an ordinary life, I'd love you just the same."

Superman looked stricken by her words.

"Can you believe that?" she pleaded. She desperately searched his eyes, looking for a sign that he could see the truth of her words.

The look of anguish on Superman's face broke Lois' heart. He looked distraught, tormented, and even a little angry. When he spoke, his voice was so thick with pain that it was difficult for Lois to listen to the way his words broke.

"I wish I could, Lois. But, under the circumstances, I don't see how I can."

It was a knife thrust into Lois' heart. What little hope she had died right there, burned away in her embarrassment at having admitted her feelings to someone who couldn't – or perhaps didn't *want* to – reciprocate them. What confidence she'd had about sorting out the perplexing mess of feelings in her heart turned to ash and blew away in the breeze left behind as Superman turned to leave, his cape fluttering with the movement.

"Superman," she called out, fighting back the tears that wanted so desperately to fall from her eyes.

He didn't even pause as he made a move toward the window.

"Please," she begged.

That stilled him for half a heartbeat.

"Lois," he almost groaned.

"I'm telling you the truth," she pressed. "I love you."

Superman had been in the process of taking another step, but he turned now, whipping around at an alarming speed to look at her. His eyes were flinty and his jaw was clenched tight. Never once had he appeared to be a stranger to her eyes, not even when she'd first met him – the mysterious, powerful man who'd saved the space shuttle and ingested a live bomb. But now, in that single look, she realized he might be right. The man before her was a stranger, and it made her ill at ease.

"Love me?" he snorted, each word spoken with great care, even as they dripped with disbelief. "Love me?" he repeated, sharpening the barb. "That's rich, Lois." He rolled his eyes up to the ceiling, as though it was the only thing keeping his anger in check.

"Superman, I..." she began.

He cut her off before she could finish. "Yeah, sure. You love me. Like a *brother*, right?"

"Like a...?" she puzzled.

Superman clamped his mouth shut, clearly in distress now. It was obvious he'd said something he hadn't intended on speaking aloud. Which only made Lois focus all the harder on his words. *Like a brother*. It was a no-brainer that he'd never meant to say that. *Like a brother*. Why would he use those words at all? *Like a brother*. Why did that nag at the back of her mind?

In a flash, it came to her.

Nightfall.

The asteroid had narrowly avoided killing all life on Earth, thanks to an eleventh-hour intervention by Superman, who'd mysteriously and frighteningly gone missing after his first attempt to destroy the space rock had failed.

Lois had been terrified before Superman had neutralized the otherworldly threat. With the clock ticking down to mankind's final hours, she'd gone to Clark's apartment. The poor man had been suffering from a bout of amnesia after getting hit by a car. Thinking it was the last time she would ever see him, she'd spilled the beans about her emerging feelings for him, then had quickly amended herself to keep her defensive walls up.

Clark, whether or not this memory of yours comes back, I just want you to know, I think you're terrific, she'd told him.

Likewise. In typical Clark fashion, he'd instantly put her at ease. And just for a moment, she'd lost control of her tongue and the tight reign she kept on her feelings.

I mean, I love you. Terrified of what she'd admitted, unused to allowing anyone to see into her heart, she'd instantly tried to save face, lamely adding...*like...a brother*.

Had Superman been spying on her and Clark back then?

As soon as the thought entered her mind, she dismissed it. No, that wasn't Superman's way. He would never betray their trust like that.

"What..." she began carefully choosing her words as though wading through broken glass without the benefit of shoes.

"What...makes you use that phrase?"

Superman looked petrified, like he was about to turn and fly out her window and never return. Indecision ran across his features and Lois watched the visible swirl of his emotions with rapt fascination. She'd known Superman since the moment he'd flown into the public's eye. She'd spoken with him more times than she could count. He'd saved her life on numerous occasions. They'd laughed together. They'd joked with each other. They'd faced criminals together. Superman had always handled whatever the situation was with grace, poise, dignity, and a cool confidence Lois only dreamed she could one day attain. But now, that confidence was gone and he looked lost and frightened, like a wounded, cornered animal.

Lois' instinct was to reach out for him, but she checked herself at the last moment, knowing she could very well scare him off for good if he misread her intentions. With a great effort, she kept her

hands to herself and did not approach him.

"What phrase?" he managed, and it seemed to her like it was a weak attempt to buy himself a few seconds to decide if he would fly off or stay and confront whatever was bothering him. He crossed his arms in what looked like a forced show of confidence, but which left him appearing as uncomfortable as Lois had felt just a moment before when Superman had suddenly become a stranger to her.

"You know *exactly* what phrase. What you *just* said, right now. The whole 'like a brother' line. What does it mean?" she demanded, her tone letting him know she would pester him until he explained him. "I used the same phrase when I was talking to Clark a few months ago." She shook her head, dispelling the images of how close she'd come to telling Clark about her emerging feelings for him that day. "Were you...*spying* on us?" she half accused.

Superman had the audacity to roll his eyes at her. "No, Lois. I wasn't spying on you."

"Oh, so it *just so happens* that you used the same phrase that I did?" Lois countered, aggravated with the hero for the first time since she'd known him.

"What does it matter?" he asked in return, his voice growing louder in his distress.

"It matters," Lois said brusquely. "Answer me." Then, after a moment's pause, she added in a softer tone, "Please."

Superman was plainly at war with himself. He was silent a long time. It was eerie to see him like this, Lois decided. She'd never seen him so quiet before. Reserved, yes. Contemplative, certainly. Rendered mute by things he'd witnessed, without a doubt. But this? This refusal to answer her, simply because he seemed unable to decide what to say? This was new and alarming.

"You can tell me anything," she told him in a light murmur.

"That's just it, Lois!" he exploded, as though all his energy had gone into those four words. "I can't! Not anymore!" He raised his arms out to the sides, as if trying to encompass some vast concept she couldn't see.

"Why?" She balled her fist in frustration.

"Because of *him!*" he spat out acidly. His right hand cut through the air like a knife, once more pointing at something invisible.

"Him? Clark?" Lois guessed.

Superman laughed darkly. "I wish. No, Lois. *Luthor!*"

Something about the way he flung Lex's name at her pricked at her mind, the same as his seemingly intentional usage of "like a brother." It was like he was dancing around, deliberately throwing clues at her for some puzzle only he could see. Frowning, she figured she would play his game and work out whatever it was that he was getting at. She was a reporter, after all. And not just *any* reporter. She was the *best*.

"What about Lex?" she asked carefully, ensuring that she reigned in her impatience with Superman's sudden miserable attitude.

"You're...*involved*...with him," Superman replied, gesturing vaguely to one side, as if the answer was sitting right there in her apartment. He seemed oddly unwilling to voice her exact relationship with Lex aloud.

"I'm not sure what that has to do with anything," she retorted, trying to cajole more information from him.

"It has *everything* to do with it!" Superman responded, exasperated. "He asked you to *marry him*, Lois! And even as dangerous as he is, I could never require anyone to keep secrets from their spouse."

"Why would I need to keep any secrets from him?"

Superman rolled his eyes and Lois saw how much ice was in them. But was it all directed at her? Or was some of that meant for Lex? And if some of it *was* for Lex, why? Superman wasn't the type to hate anyone, as far as she knew. He reserved a sense of reproach for criminals, that much was true. But he'd never had

such a look of...loathing...toward them. What could Lex have done to have earned Superman's hatred?

Maybe Superman's right, she thought to herself as Superman sought how best to answer her question. *Maybe there are things about him that I don't know. But that's his fault, not mine. If he could only trust me with whatever it is that he's hiding from me.*

"I can't," Superman finally replied, a little of his fire extinguished. He sounded...tortured and almost exhausted.

Lois dared to step closer and put her hand on his chest. Superman backed away as though her touch were acid. Her heart broke a little as she realized that some invisible bridge had been crossed and that her easy relationship with the Man of Steel had changed. A part of her wondered if the change was permanent. The greater part of her *feared* that it was. Uncertainly, and trying not to scare him off, she backed off, her hands up, showing him that she was giving him his space.

"Please, just let me into your life," she pleaded, the words spilling from her lips without her prior consent.

Superman laughed in a self-deprecating way. "I wish I could. I've tried, Lois. So many times. But I've never been anything more than a convenience to you. There when you need me. Cast aside when you don't. Always the big brother, there to protect you, there to be a shoulder to cry on, there to encourage you when you've needed it."

There it was again.

That word.

Brother.

"Maybe things could be different, if you'd just be candid with me," she countered smoothly, her voice even and perhaps a bit challenging.

He shook his head sadly, almost apologetically.

"You don't get it, do you?" he said in a near whisper. "That's not how I want things to be. That's *never* been how I've wanted things to happen. I've only ever wanted you to..." He clamped his mouth shut, as though he'd almost said something entirely regrettable.

"Wanted me to what?" Lois asked breathlessly.

"See me," he finished in a feather-light, tired tone. Once again, his arms crossed his chest, this time in a manner that seemed reflexive, rather than meaningful.

"I *do* see you," Lois ventured, though she was a bit perplexed. She'd *always* been the first to recognize Superman for the amazing person that he was.

Superman scowled, the change in his features so sudden and complete that it threw Lois for a loop. "No, Lois, you've *never* seen me. Not really."

Lois felt her face go hot in an angry flush.

"You're *kidding me*, right?" she growled, her hands balling into fists. She paced off to Superman's left side and felt his hard eyes following her. "I've been nothing short of your *staunchest* supporter! *I'm the only* one in this city who never believed you were responsible for that heatwave, for example."

"That's not what I meant and you know it," Superman challenged, stabbing a finger in her direction. He shook his head. "I'm wasting my time here."

He turned to put his back to her. Desperate to stall his departure, Lois stepped defiantly around him. She put her hands on her hips, daring him with her posture to push past her to get to the window.

"I don't know what's gotten into you," she began through gritted teeth, shaking her head slightly, "but I'm getting tired of this game. Stop talking in riddles and just tell me what's on your mind."

For a moment, Superman didn't respond, and Lois worried he might use his speed to zip around her and make his escape. If he did, there would be no stopping him. And Lois would likely never get the answers she sought.

"Please."

It was a statement, not a plea. She was done stooping to begging him to talk to her. She was tired, frustrated, and still very conflicted over Lex's proposal. Her head and her heart were at war and it had sapped what little energy remained, here at the end of the day. Marrying Lex seemed like the smart, safe move to make. He cared about her. She would never be lonely, the way she often was now. But did she love him? She wasn't so sure. She certainly cared for him. Otherwise she would have stopped seeing him a long time ago. But love? She wasn't convinced she was there quite yet. Could it be that she simply needed more time to fall madly in love with the man, the way movies and trashy romance novels had always depicted the feeling as being? What if she agreed to marry him and never came to love him? What if she turned him down and lost him forever, only to learn to love him from afar?

And that was nothing compared to Clark.

Not loving Lex didn't scare Lois in the least.

Her burgeoning feelings toward her partner and best friend *did*.

In a way, the idea of romantic feelings toward Clark was more terrifying than Lois wanted to admit to herself. Clark was...Clark. He was real. He could hurt her in ways Superman never could. And perhaps that was why she was pushing so hard for a relationship with the Man of Steel now. Superman was a fantasy. He was too perfect to be real. And if he wasn't real, he couldn't break her heart. The same was true for Lex, she admitted to herself, in a whispered pang of guilt and pain in her heart. By not loving Lex the way she probably should have, he couldn't touch her heart either. She was safe – protected from ever being hurt. How could she be, when her heart was never really on the line to begin with?

But Clark *could* hurt her.

Armed with nothing more than an easy smile, impeccable Midwestern manners, a gentle soul that drove his personality, and a – sometimes irritating – tendency to see the good in everything, he'd burrowed into her heart and broken down many of the defensive walls she'd long ago put in place to protect herself. She'd tried so hard in the beginning to make him leave her alone, to consider her a lost cause, to frighten him off so he wouldn't get any ideas about staying permanent partners with her. He'd ignored those efforts with such natural grace that even Lois – embittered as she'd been at the time – couldn't help but to be silently impressed. He'd become her best friend in such a short time that it seemed a veritable miracle. But, more than that, he'd made Lois believe in love again.

Was she in love with Clark?

No, she told herself.

Not yet, whispered the voice inside her mind. *If you gave him a chance, however...*

Mentally, she shook her head. It was too risky. If she tried to explore her fledgling feelings for Clark, all she would wind up doing would be to pave the way for disaster. Chances were too great that something would go wrong and she would lose Clark – and his friendship – forever. And she just couldn't bear to think about that possibility.

You're already living that scenario, her mind hissed. *You devastated him in the park. You saw the look on his face. Who's to say he'll ever want to talk to you again? And if you say yes to Lex? You'll burn the bridge between you and Clark for good.*

Maybe, she reluctantly admitted. *But if I say no to Lex and give Clark a chance and it doesn't pan out...I'll have lost everything.*

Or you might give him a chance and gain everything you've wished for, her mind countered with a nonchalant shrug in its tone.

Superman's shoulders slumped, jarring Lois out of her internal debate. He seemed...defeated. He looked down to study her floor for a long moment. When he finally looked up to meet her gaze, his eyes were clear and a sense of determination was in his features. But when he spoke, it wasn't what Lois expected. But she had to admit, *nothing* that day had gone as expected.

“Lois? If I asked you to stay away from Luthor, would you do it?” he asked in a strong, clear voice devoid of any hesitation.

“I...” she stammered. “I’m not sure. Maybe. Why?”

“If I said he was hiding something...something I couldn’t prove...not yet, anyway...would you believe me?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because I trust you. I know what kind of man you are,” was her immediate reply.

Superman closed his eyes and sighed softly. “And what kind of man is Clark then?” he wondered.

“Clark?”

“Don’t pretend you don’t know what I mean,” he said evenly, without any malice. “Clark’s been telling you the same thing about Luthor. You’ve done nothing but refuse to believe him and ignore his warnings. So, tell me, what makes my word better than his?”

Lois found herself momentarily speechless as she sought an answer.

“Clark...it’s different with him,” she finally settled on.

“Between you and me, I think...I think Clark’s a little...jealous, perhaps. Of my relationship with Lex.”

Superman scoffed as the words exploded from him. “It’s *never* been about jealousy, Lois! Can’t you see that? I’ve only ever wanted to *protect* you from that sociopath!”

Immediately, his eyes widened as he realized what he’d said. His mouth clamped shut. A look of sheer terror came over him and Lois wasn’t sure if he was going to remain standing, pass out, or fly off in a blur of primary colors, never to be seen again.

“You?” she mustered, her voice cracking. Her eyes narrowed. “You?” she demanded. Then, noting his panic, “And don’t you ever *dare* think about flying out of here.”

“I...” Superman stuttered.

“Spit it out,” Lois commanded.

An angry flame kindled in his eyes, but, unlike before, this anger seemed directed back at himself, not at her. He half turned from her, giving her a view of his profile, as if he couldn’t bear to let her look fully upon him.

“Fine. You want me to say it? I’m *Clark*, Lois.”

“C...Clark?” Lois forced the word out even as it got stuck in her throat. “You’re...?” She couldn’t get the rest out.

Superman – Clark – nodded. “There. Now you know the truth.” He gestured vaguely, like he was lifting some invisible proof of his words in the palm of his hand. “There is no Superman. Just smoke and mirrors. Tell me, are you happy, now that the illusion you’ve fallen in love with has been shattered? Are you grateful the smoke has been fanned away?” Disgust dripped from each word, but it was difficult to tell who, if anyone, he was aiming his venom at. “All of this,” he said, sweeping a hand down over the S on his chest, “is nothing but a big, fat *lie*, Lois. Congratulations. You now have the power to fully destroy me.”

Lois blinked, forming a response, but in the next heartbeat, before she could finish opening her eyes again, the familiar whoosh followed by a sonic boom sounded, and she was nearly knocked backwards by the air he’d disturbed in his hasty departure.

All alone again, Lois silently began to cry.

“What have I done?” Lois lamented some time later, as she sat spooning chocolate ice cream into her mouth.

How long ago had Superman – Clark – left her apartment? An hour ago? Two hours ago? A week ago? Time had ceased to mean anything since he’d angrily flown out her window. No, it had to have been just a few hours, at the most, since she’d seen that tortured look on his face while he spilled what was likely – *no, definitely*, her mind corrected – his deepest secret.

She sighed noisily, her stomach churning as she forced another spoonful of ice cream down, willing her throat to swallow it down.

Her stomach lurched in protest and she hesitated before stabbing the spoon back down into the ice cream carton. Ice cream – she realized with a start – that Clark had picked up for her after they’d all been shaken up the night they’d been hostages in the bullpen. Queasily, she put the frozen treat down on the coffee table, no longer able to enjoy the rich, creamy chocolate.

Clark.

Her heart panged at the thought of how utterly broken he’d looked after she’d rebuffed his declaration of love in the park. A confession she knew, without a doubt, had been the truth, not some ill-thought out, last ditch effort to sway her away from Lex, as she undoubtedly knew he’d try to claim in order to save them both from embarrassment, if he ever spoke to her again at all. She knew the truth of his words now, just as she’d known their sincerity at the time, even if she’d willed herself to ignore it while they’d sat together in the park. She’d ripped his heart out and torn it to shreds. And then – stupidly, blindly – she’d poured acid in that same wound by asking for Superman just seconds after shattering that small ember of hope he’d had that he might make her see him. Not only that, but then she’d had the audacity to practically proposition him when he’d shown up wearing the hero’s costume. It was little wonder why he’d been so cold and angry toward her. How he’d even had the strength to look her in the eyes at all during that embarrassing conversation was beyond Lois’ comprehension. She wasn’t so sure she could have stayed around discussing the matter had the roles been reversed.

Clark might have lost his temper that night, but Lois admired how restrained he’d been.

He could have yelled and made a scene. But he hadn’t. He could have called her so many names – and rightfully so. But he hadn’t. He could have flown off when she’d first started to press him for a relationship. But he hadn’t.

It wasn’t Clark’s way.

Under all his hurt, he truly cared for her, in spite of how she’d treated him.

How she’d missed it or forcibly ignored it before was a wonder to her. But there it was, plain as day to eat away at her own distressed mind and heart.

A single hot tear slipped from her eye and she hastily wiped it away.

“Okay, Lois,” she said to herself, making herself stand, hands on her hips. “You messed up. Big time. So, what are you going to do about it?”

“Clark!” Lois whispered into the night, letting the soft, warm breeze lift her words away into the sky. “Please, talk to me.”

It was after midnight now and Lois was at her wit’s end. She’d been everywhere in Metropolis that she could think of where Clark might be, only to be disappointed each time when he hadn’t been there. The bullpen had been empty save for a handful of security guards and overnight reporters that Lois didn’t know. His favorite places to pick up a late-night snack has been woefully devoid of his presence. His apartment had been dark and quiet, but Lois had been encouraged to see – after letting herself in with the key he’d long ago given her – that at least it hadn’t been empty or in a state of being packed up for a move.

Still, she was worried about him. Superman or not, it was still Clark out there somewhere, suffering from a broken heart, shattered dreams, and what had to have been an excruciating confession of who he really was underneath the Spandex suit. And while she didn’t necessarily feel like she was at fault for his secret being exposed, she *had* to admit that she’d been responsible for hurting him so deeply. She felt absolutely awful about what she’d done. She was ready to do everything and anything necessary to apologize to him and work to regain his trust and friendship.

But first she had to find him.

At three in the morning, she admitted defeat and returned home

to sleep fitfully, with dark nightmares robbing her of rest until she gave up a mere five hours later. Zombie-like, she shuffled through the day, ignoring the repeated calls from Lex, spending all her time searching for some sign of where Clark could be. But Clark was still missing and Superman was a ghost. She heard no news reports about the Man of Steel all that day or the following day. Her overactive imagination was working overtime now, concocting all kinds of horrible situations, none of which made even the slightest bit of sense.

Clark beaten up, bleeding in an alley somewhere. Clark laying dead in a ditch out on some deserted country road. Clark caged like an animal by some terrorist organization. Clark roaming the world, looking for the one place where Lois would never find him – and she swore to herself that she would stop at nothing, spare no expense to find him if it came down to it. Clark leaving the planet behind to make a new life elsewhere, perhaps finding other Kryptonians out amongst the lonely stars. Clark...

She shook her head, forcing her train of thought to derail. She could *not* entertain any ideas that led to a life without her best friend in it.

"Time to call in the big guns," she said as she paced her living room two nights after she'd last seen Clark.

She tossed the remains of her Italian hero sandwich into her garbage pail. She'd downed the meal in record time, wanting to get back out on the streets to look for Clark, knowing it was a lost cause, and hating that she'd needed to stop and take a break at all. She picked up the phone and dialed, purposefully stabbing each number with a trembling finger.

"Well, that got me nowhere," Lois softly lamented as she once again prowled the peaceful, deserted pathways of Centennial Park.

Clark's parents had sworn up and down that they hadn't seen him or heard from him. And after Lois had explained the situation, down to Clark's distraught and accidental revelation, Jonathan and Martha had sounded very worried. That, in turn, had made Lois even *more* concerned about Clark. She was used to people lying to her – to her face, over the phone, it didn't matter – and she'd gotten extremely good at pinpointing when someone was trying to pull a fast one on her. The Kents had *not* been covering for their son.

"Clark," she whispered. "How am I ever going to find you?"

She kept walking, hoping without any *real* hope to hear the familiar sonic boom overheard that would announce to Metropolis that Superman was in the neighborhood. Or, even better, the tell-tale *whoosh* that heralded his landing nearby. But the night was still and quiet – as much as the city ever grew quiet, that was. Lois was deep into the park now, and most of the traffic noises had been left behind. She could hear the joyful chirping of crickets and the croak of small toads that inhabited the grassy, shaded areas.

She stopped for a moment and leaned up against the skinny trunk of a white birch tree. A piece of the bark flaked off to lay by her feet. She hung her head to her chest for a long moment, then looked up at the sky above. There were too many lights on the path to see many stars, but she wondered if Clark was out there, somewhere.

"Clark, where are you?" she lamented. "Please, come home."

She closed her eyes as she fought off a heaving sob. A gentle burst of wind swept over her body, and she could almost imagine Clark had caused it. She opened her eyes, her gaze still skyward. A gentle sound caught her attention, like someone clearing their throat. Immediately, her body snapped to attention, ready to identify any potential threats and flatten anyone who thought they might be able to take advantage of her previously distracted state.

"You called?" Clark asked softly, stepping out from the shadows of two maple trees growing close together, still clad in Superman's uniform, as she'd last seen him. She nearly cried as she realized he was really there and not some cruel hallucination conjured up by

her tormented mind.

"Clark!" A rush of relief flooded Lois, making her feel weak in the knees. It was an effort to retain her composure and not rush into his strong arms. "I've been worried sick about you!"

He regarded her cautiously, but the fire that had been burning within him the last time they'd spoken was gone now. Ashes stood where the bonfire had raged, leaving him to appear to be a shell of his former self.

"What do you want, Lois?" he asked wearily, not moving from his spot.

"To talk. But not to Superman," she added, gesturing to his attire. "I called for Clark, not the Man of Steel."

"Fair enough," he conceded, then swiftly formed a mini tornado as he spun out of his costume and into his civilian attire. He was a sight for sore eyes in a pair of faded blue jeans and a black leather jacket, beneath which she could just see a hint of a pale gray t-shirt.

"Wow," Lois breathed in awe, finding that that was the only word she was capable of uttering.

"Better?" he asked, his glasses in one hand. He looked at them for a second or two, as if contemplating whether or not to put them on. He finally settled on wearing them.

"Much," Lois said with a single nod. "It's *you* I wanted to talk to. Not your...alter ego."

Clark nodded in turn. "I'm...not sure I know what to say here..." he admitted, his words fumbling as they were voiced. He shoved his hands into his pockets.

"Actually, *I'm* the one that needs to talk," Lois offered contritely. "Let's sit." She motioned to one of the wooden benches nearby.

Reluctantly, he followed her the thirty or so feet across the pathway and sat at the far end from her. She couldn't blame his skittishness. He probably didn't trust her at all. The thought sent a stab of guilt through her.

"I owe you an apology," she began as she sat down, clasping her hands together in her lap. "What I said and did the other night... there's no excuse for it."

"Lois, you don't need to..." Clark began, uncomfortably.

"No, *I do*," Lois gently interrupted. "I was scared. I was scared and I let my judgement lapse. As a result, I put you in an awkward position that I had no right to."

"An engagement," Clark said, and it was clear it was an effort to get to word out, "is a big deal. Being a little nervous is natural."

"It wasn't the engagement that scared me," Lois corrected. "At least...it was the *least* scary part of things. I'll admit, I wasn't sure I was ready to accept Lex's proposal. I wasn't sure I was ready to reject it either. But then you and I talked in the park and..."

"Lois," Clark cut in softly. "I never should have said anything. I was scared too. I would have said *anything* to sway you away from Luthor."

She managed a weak smile for him. "I knew you'd say something like that. Only, the thing is, I don't believe you. I *do* believe what you said in the park. About being in love with me."

"It...doesn't matter," Clark said, looking off into the distance, as though he couldn't bear to look at her. "You're with *him*. It wasn't my place to say anything."

Lois reached out and gently cupped his cheek. With feather-softness, she made him look at her again. For a moment, she thought he might nuzzle against her palm, but if anything, she felt his body stiffen in residual mistrust.

"It *does* matter, Clark. I believed you. I still do. And *that's* what scared me. Not the prospect of marrying a man I'm...not entirely sure I'm in a forever kind of love with." She dropped her hand from his cheek and took his hand in her own instead. "For a while now, I've been...battling...with myself. The idea of giving you a chance terrified me. It still does. Because if we dated and it didn't work out and I lost you forever...I don't want to risk that. I'm not

strong enough to handle that.”

“So you rejected me in favor of...propositioning Superman?” Clark asked, a hint of self-directed cynicism in his voice.

“Well...kind of,” Lois admitted. “I don’t even know what I expected when I asked for Superman to visit me. I don’t think I really *believed* he’d say yes to me.” She gave him a playful sideways glance as she tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear. A tentative curve of her lips gave him the barest impression of a conspiratorial smile. “But I had to try.”

“Why?” That single word was so fragmented and loaded that Lois wasn’t sure that Clark even wanted to know the answer.

“Because,” she said, looking her gaze on his, “a part of me realized that Superman was nothing more than a dream. A fantasy. And if he wasn’t really *real*, he couldn’t break my heart.”

“Only...he did,” Clark supplied bitterly.

Lois shook her head. “Not in the way you think. You could have said no to me a thousand times, standing there in the blue suit. It *never* would have hurt as much as it did when I realized what I’d done to you. How I’d hurt you. How I’d broken your heart. How I’d unintentionally humiliated you by putting you up against yourself, comparing you to yourself, rejecting the real man to chase an illusion.”

She squeezed his hand, as though it would help him understand how sincere she was being. “I’m sorry, Clark.”

For a long moment, Clark didn’t respond. He closed his eyes for a few seconds and sighed, his shoulders slumping, the remaining fire – if any still burned – extinguishing within his soul. When he opened his eyes again, he fixed his gaze just to the side of where she sat. His expression was troubled and his features were pinched tight in his inner turmoil.

“I’m sorry too, Lois,” he finally said in a near-whisper. “I acted like a jerk. You’re right. I was...devastated when you asked Superman for a relationship. I shouldn’t have blamed you for not seeing that you were promising that you’d love him even if he had no powers, when you’d rejected the regular man he really is just a few hours before. But I did. It wasn’t fair of me. After all, no one is *supposed* to know who Superman is when he’s not stopping mudslides and saving people from fires.” He gestured vaguely. “It wasn’t fair of me to want it both ways – to keep my secret *and* expect you to recognize that Superman isn’t who he says he is. I guess...a large part of this is my fault.”

“None of this is your fault,” Lois asserted. She shook her head, searching for the right words to say. “This is *all* on me, Clark. I’ve been selfish. I was so busy focusing on my own fears and insecurities that I never stopped to consider your feelings. Or Superman’s.”

Clark sighed again. “Maybe we’ve *both* been selfish lately. I tried to sabotage your relationship with Luthor when I had no right to.”

“You said you were trying to protect me,” Lois pointed out.

“And I was,” he said with conviction. “He’s dangerous, Lois. I just...wish I could prove it.”

“Dangerous how? You keep saying that but you’ve never given me any examples.”

Clark gave her a wary, uncertain smile. “You’ve never given me the chance to,” he lightly teased.

Lois laughed a little, mostly because it was so good to see that tiny flicker of the old Clark returning. “I guess that’s true. But I’m giving you that chance now. I’m listening. I mean, *really* listening this time.”

“Why now?” Clark asked, turning serious again. “Because Superman doesn’t trust Luthor?”

“Because I’ve been dodging Lex’s calls for two days now. Because I’m not convinced I can say yes to him. Because I’ve come to realize that I trust you more than anyone I’ve ever met. Because I’ve come to realize that, this whole secret aside, you’ve never lied to me before.”

“Because of Superman,” Clark offered again, stronger this time.

“No, lunkhead! Because Clark Kent is my best friend! Even if I was too blind to see it.” What had started explosively ended in a whisper. “I know you probably have no reason to trust me. And I don’t blame you for that. But I *am* telling you the truth. I *want* to know. Tell me why you don’t trust Lex. Please.”

Clark regarded her for a moment as he collected his thoughts. “It’s not just one thing, Lois. It’s a lot of little things. Comments he’s made, to both Clark *and* Superman. Not just little, offhand comments. I’m talking about thinly veiled threats. I’m almost positive he was behind that string of ‘tests’ when Superman first showed up on the scene.”

“Those were *more* than just tests,” Lois added thoughtfully. “Lex or not, whoever was behind them tried to kill you by setting off that bomb just after you entered that building.”

Clark nodded. “I’ve always thought so too. That *wasn’t* a test. It was a deliberate attempt at an assassination. And what’s worse, you got caught in the crossfire. Seeing you get hurt because of me...it was almost enough to make me hang up the cape and chalk Superman up as a horribly failed experiment of using my powers in public. And I would have, if you hadn’t talked me out of it, simply by defending Superman to me during the course of a normal conversation.”

Lois scowled, fighting off a feeling of nausea as her stomach roiled. The thought of someone trying to kill Clark was unbearable.

“What else?” she asked, half dreading the answer.

“Are you *sure* you want to know?”

“I *need* to know.”

Clark fidgeted in his seat for a few seconds, clearly ill at ease. “Okay,” he finally relented. “I believe he’s The Boss, or at least connected to The Boss. You know, the shadowy figure at the head of the city’s organized crime. I’m also fairly certain he was behind the space shuttle disaster. I just don’t have proof. Yet.” He sighed, rolling his shoulders in a half-shrug. “Lois, you know me. I’m not usually afraid of things. But Luthor sets off every single alarm bell for me. I’m worried about you, Lois. You’re the best reporter I know. Sooner or later, I feel like you’ll stumble upon some incriminating evidence against him if you marry him. And when you do, I have no doubt in my mind he’ll kill you rather than risk that information going public. That’s to say nothing about if he ever found out that you know I’m Superman.”

The tremble in Clark’s voice struck Lois hard. He truly believed every word of what he was saying.

“I believe you,” she simply said.

A spark of hope kindled in his eyes and he nodded solemnly. “Thank you.” He looked thoughtful for a moment. “You said you’ve been dodging his calls?”

Lois nodded. “I was too worried about you to even *think* about Lex. Which, now that I think about it, is pretty telling, isn’t it? It’s *always* been you, Clark.” She reached over and took his hand in hers, studying his soft skin as though trying to memorize every part of him. “I can’t...I can’t say yes to him. Not when it means I’ll lose you. And now, hearing why you think he’s dangerous... knowing he’s threatened you...”

“Please, Lois, I don’t want you making such a huge life decision...” Clark began, looking guilty as he clumsily withdrew his hand. He seemed uncertain, but why, Lois wasn’t sure. Did he still not fully believe her? Did he feel she had no right to touch him? Did he feel somehow...unworthy of the small, affectionate touch?

She cut him off before he could finish. “I’m not making it based on what you’ve just said. The truth is, even if you hadn’t gone missing the last few days...I think I would have been dreading making my decision anyway. I should be over the moon that there’s someone out there asking me to marry him. I always imagined that, if the time came for someone to propose to me, that

saying yes would be this instant, exuberant response. But Lex... I couldn't do that."

She pulled her gaze from him and looked out into the darkness beyond the lightly wooded area across the pathway. "Given the choice between a marriage with Lex and losing you or a lifetime of being single but having you as a part of that life... I'd rather have my best friend. Even if I don't really deserve that friendship," she hastily added. "And maybe... maybe you'd rather *not* continue to be friends with me. I couldn't even blame you if you choose not to associate with me anymore. But... I promise. Your secret? It's safe with me. I'll never tell anyone."

Clark nodded a little in acknowledgment. "Thank you, Lois. But, if anyone doesn't deserve friendship here, it's me. I've been lying to you since almost the moment I met you." He clasped his hands in his lap as he spoke, looking for all the world like a sinner asking for penance. "I was so afraid that the Planet's top reporter would be too tempted by the lure of a Pulitzer to keep my alter ego a secret. Even when I *knew* you had more integrity than that. And then, the way it all came out... the venom in my words..." He stopped and sighed, shaking his head. "I always knew I'd have to tell you one day. Either you'd come close to finding out on your own, or something terrible would happen, or my lies would strain our friendship to the breaking point... to say nothing of if we'd ever... move past the point of *just* friendship. I knew it couldn't stay a secret forever – even my parents thought I should tell you, and they've always been more afraid of my secret getting out than I have. I may not have known the when or the how of how I'd tell you the truth, but the way it came out the other night? That was *never* the way I wanted it to happen. It just sort of... slipped out in the heat of the moment. It was never meant to be a slap in the face to you."

"We *all* say things we don't mean when we're hurt," Lois said, putting a hand on his knee and gently rubbing it in comfort.

"Maybe," he conceded.

"Like when I said I love you like a brother," Lois ventured in a soft murmur. "I didn't mean it."

Clark peered at her curiously. "Oh?"

Lois stood and paced, burning off some of her nervous energy. "It... there was so much going on... your amnesia, Superman missing or dead, the world just hours from obliteration. I was terrified. I was losing you, Clark. One way or another, I was losing you. You barely knew who I was... and that was only because Perry and Jimmy and I had to tell you who we were. There was a possibility, no matter how stronger or faint, that you might *never* be your old self again. And even if you'd remembered right then and there who you were, who I was, how close we are... what did it matter? Metropolis was about to become a crater. None of us would be left alive after Nightfall. Admitting that I was starting to see you in a different light... I was already feeling vulnerable, Clark. So, I covered and said that I love you like a brother."

She stopped to watch as he raked a hand through his hair. "Is that true?" he finally asked, a tremble in his voice.

"Yes. I'm not saying I would have been ready to accept a proposal or something but... yeah." She gestured to him. "Clark, look. You're my best friend. *No one* in my whole life is closer to me than you are. Not even Lucy. That's what makes all this so *hard*, Clark! *I can't* lose you! I've thought about our friendship... where it might lead in the future. But just the *chance* that things might go wrong and push our friendship to the breaking point..." She sighed, unable to finish, leaving the implications hanging in the air between them.

Clark reached out and took her hand, then gently tugged it to get her to sit down again, this time, much closer to him than before. She did so, miserably, wishing he would just tell her how much he despised her now that she'd crushed his heart.

"All I've ever wanted," he said instead, in a tone soft as angels' feathers, "was for you to choose Clark. Not Superman. I wanted

you to choose the man, not the myth, if we ever came to a point where we might consider dating."

"I guess I screwed that up the other night, huh? Asking Superman for a relationship," she lamented, sniffing just a little as she bit back her embarrassment.

"No." He shook his head.

Lois blinked in disbelief. "Huh?"

"What you just said... I believe you. Okay, yes, we're not ready to cross the bridge to a more intimate relationship," he admitted with a casual shrug that seemed a little forced as he shoved back disappointment that they weren't already at that point. "And yeah, you're right. I *did* mean what I said in the park – I should never have tried to pretend that it wasn't the truth. It still wasn't fair of me to spring it on you like that. I won't even *try* to justify that."

"So... does this mean... we're okay?" Lois asked tentatively, after a brief silence fell between them.

"If you can forgive my attitude the other night, and the way I sort of... bombshelled you with the Superman thing," Clark replied with a sideways glance at her and a mischievous, but genuine, smile curling the corners of his mouth.

Lois good-naturedly scooted even closer and bumped him with her shoulder. "There's nothing to forgive."

Clark chuckled lightly – a sound as pure and precious as all the Heavenly choirs Lois had heard tale of throughout her life. "We're a pretty messed up pair, aren't we?" he mused.

Lois couldn't help but to laugh too. "Completely dysfunctional," she teased back, leaning into his chest. "Which is why it's probably a good idea that we stick together."

"Who else could possibly tolerate us?" Clark shot back, clearly biting back another burst of laughter, his arm encircling her waist.

"No one in their right mind," Lois agreed with a nod.

Clark lost it. He laughed deeply, Lois joining in a heartbeat later. In that moment, Lois was certain she'd made the right decision. Whatever life held in store for her, she would find out with Clark by her side, not Lex.

"So... can I ask you something?" she ventured a few minutes later, as they walked side by side down the illuminated paths through the park, heading in the direction of Lois' apartment.

"Yeah?" Clark asked, sticking his hands into his pockets, as though unsure what else he should do with them.

"I looked everywhere in Metropolis for you after you left. Actually, I spent the last *two days* looking for you. Where were you?"

Even in the lamplight, his blush was unmistakable. "Um... Switzerland," he confessed.

"Like... the country?" It shouldn't have come as a surprise, but it was still so odd to hear Clark talking so casually about something like that.

He didn't seem offended, and even let out a single chuckle. "Well... yeah." He shrugged, like it was no big deal that he'd spent two days in another country, all because she'd angered him enough to reveal his secret.

"I mean, of course, the country," she reflexively corrected herself. "Where else?" She shook her head in amusement. "So, um... what were you doing over there? I didn't exactly hear of Superman saving some skiers from an avalanche in the Alps or anything."

Clark's right hand left his pocket to rub at the back of his neck in embarrassment. "I sat. On a mountaintop."

"You... sat? On a mountain? For two days?" Lois repeated, stopping in her tracks and stepping in front of him to look him in the eyes.

"I just needed time and space to think," he defended himself weakly. "I was embarrassed about how I'd acted. And... I won't lie. Your rejection? It... hurt me. A lot."

He gave her a pained sideways glance as his cheeks reddened in a blush. His hand flew from his neck to rifle through his hair in the

endearing manner Lois had seen so many times before, but had never *really* taken note of. But now, as she watched, it made him look so young and adorable that it was hard not to smile.

I was even *more* hurt by the...request...you made of Superman,” he continued after a brief sigh. “I felt like such an idiot for throwing my secret at you the way I did – like it was a spear that I’d launched at you. I wasn’t even sure if I’d even meant it, on some level, as a way to lash out and deflect some of my hurt back at you, or if it was just some unfortunate confession that I thought would clear up any...misunderstandings between us.” He looked down at the ground and toed the concrete path with his sneaker. “I felt like a coward, hiding from the world. But...I needed time to get my head right.”

“You’re not a coward,” Lois said, putting her hands on his shoulders. He peered up at her with embarrassment in his eyes. “You’re only human. Everyone has moments where it’s easier – even needed – to shut the world out for a little while so we can heal. Everyone does it in different ways. For some of us, it’s sitting in our apartment, stuffing our faces with chocolate ice cream. For others, it’s camping for a weekend on our own. For some others, it’s staying late every night at work until we can’t put off going home any longer. And for some of us, it’s sitting on top of a mountain.” She gave him a tender smile.

Clark nodded, but Lois could see he was only partly convinced. “Maybe,” he allowed.

“Trust me,” she replied. “I’m kind of an expert on shutting the world out. I even went so far as to consider marrying someone I’m not sure I ever could have really loved.”

He nodded again, but didn’t comment.

“Come on,” Lois said, looping her arm around his, taking the lead, and beginning to walk again. “We have work to do.”

“Work?” Clark questioned. “The Planet’s been destroyed, Lois. We don’t have jobs anymore,” he reminded her bitterly.

“Exactly,” she replied with a twinkle in her eye. “We have to figure out what happened. Clear Jack’s name. See what we can do about resurrecting the paper. Talk to Perry.” She ticked off the points on the fingers of her free hand. “But first thing’s first.”

“What’s that?” Clark asked, arching an eyebrow at her. But she could see his spirit returning. His passion had been stirred at the prospect of setting such a grievous wrong right again.

“I have a proposal to decline. And *you* have to call your parents.”

“My...parents?” He blinked in surprise. “What do they have to do with anything?”

Lois laughed nervously and gave him a sheepish smile. “I...may have called them when I was looking for you. I also may have told them what happened. But, in my defense, I was going out of my mind worrying what might have happened to you after you left.”

Clark laughed then and untangled his arm from Lois’. Then he slung his arm around her shoulders and drew her closer to him. And in that moment, Lois knew that things would be okay between them. He would never be like a brother to her, but she would fight to prove that she was worthy of his love.

THE END