

# A Delicates Situation

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Rated: PG

Submitted: July 2020

Summary: When Lois finds another woman's clothing in Clark's apartment, he has some explaining to do...

Story Size: 8,813 words (49Kb as text)

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Author's Note: This is in response to the challenge set forth by Queen of the Capes, which stated that Lois Lane has just found an article of women's clothing in Clark Kent's apartment. What is it? Whose is it? How did it get there and how does Lois *think* it got there?

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Clark Kent yawned slightly as he made a leisurely patrol over the mostly quiet Metropolis streets. He didn't have a watch with him – Superman never wore one, as he had no need for one – but, judging by the position of the late spring moon, it was already past midnight and edging ever closer to one in the morning. He yawned again, not bothering to hide it. Up here, in the thin, wispy patches of torn clouds, no one would see it, not even an errant bird. Tiredness hit him suddenly then. He'd been kept so busy that night that he hadn't had the chance to even notice that even his normally high energy reserve had been sorely depleted. Nor had he noticed how late the night had gotten.

"I'll just finish this patrol and head home," he decided in a near-whisper, turning slightly west to check out that part of the city.

A chilly northerly breeze rifled through his slicked-back, raven hair. It felt so refreshing after the nursing home fire he'd just come from, just over the New Jersey border. Before that, he'd been soaked to the bone by a frigid, pounding rain while he'd dealt with a complicated fifteen car pile-up in Seattle. The fire had, at least, been a quick job. Just a few minutes in and out to evacuate the nearly empty building – the staff had done a great job in getting the residents out and to safety when the blaze had first broken out. He was only needed to help the three elderly men and six grandmotherly old ladies that had become trapped in the rec room, where they'd been engrossed in two, apparently very competitive, games of Canasta, before the hallway had become an impassible, raging inferno. By his last trip out, the firefighters had had the blaze nearly extinguished, and they'd confirmed that he didn't need to stay to put out the last few hotspots.

He'd been silently thankful for that. The car accident had taken him hours. Vehicles had needed to be moved carefully, so as not to cause greater harm to the trapped and injured occupants. And then he'd ferried the least severe cases to the closest hospital, leaving the professionals to tend to those whose injuries had made it too dangerous to scoop into his arms for a flight. Not to mention the assistance he'd given the authorities in moving the vehicles off the highway and to secure lots where they would be either picked up by their owners at a later time or deemed total losses and given over to a scrap yard.

He stretched his muscles as he flew, feeling and hearing a few satisfying *pops* as he worked out some kinks. Just a few more minutes and he would be done with his patrol, head home, shower

off the stench of the fire, and collapse into bed. He wished he could check in with Lois first, but it was too late in the night for that. And even though they'd been dating for a couple of months now, he wasn't ready to risk her wrath by calling her in the middle of the night, especially when she was on a stakeout. He knew, first hand, how little sleep was usually gotten while on a stakeout. Especially for Lois. She insisted on setting multiple alarms to check on whoever was under her surveillance, even when it was highly unlikely that her target was going to do anything in the pre-dawn hours.

All was still and quiet below him. Clark altered his flight path again, unconsciously angling himself so that he would pass Lois' empty apartment on the way back to his own place. Her building was just coming into view when he heard the sounds of a struggle. Instantly pulled into a more wakeful state, he paused, hovering in midair, listening so he could pinpoint what direction it was coming from. For a few tense heartbeats, he heard nothing. Then the distinct sounds of a hand slapping flesh and a woman's scream, followed by the hurried, gunshot-like *clops* of high-heeled shoes on the pavement in front of Lois' building punctuated the night.

Clark dropped into a dive, falling like a meteor from the heavens. Up just ahead he could see a young woman being angrily chased by a hulk of a man. The man's longer legs gave him a distinct advantage as he closed in on the woman, who threw an ill-advised look over her shoulder. She pitched awkwardly off the sidewalk and into the mercifully empty street, twisting her ankle before crashing to the pavement and dropping the purple duffel bag slung over her right shoulder in the process. With a vicious snarl, the man reached down, and grabbed the woman by the collar of her shirt. His free arm reared back as he forced the woman to her feet in order to face him. She tensed, shutting her eyes, but the anticipated punch never came. Clark darted in and grabbed the man by his elbow.

"Didn't your mother ever tell you it's wrong to hit a lady?" Clark growled between gritted teeth. Violence against those who couldn't defend themselves was something he would not tolerate. He shifted his grasp to mimic how the man had had the woman by her collar.

The big man didn't even flinch. "Stay out of this, Superman. This is between me and the b..."

"Ah ah ah," Clark cautioned, using his other hand to pry the man's fingers from the woman's shirt. With a grunt of discomfort, the man's fingers finally dislodged as Clark applied just enough pressure to make him squeak in pain.

The woman gasped in gratitude as she scurried back a few steps, out of the man's reach. "Thank you," she said breathlessly.

Clark did a double take as he shot the woman a quick glance to see if she was alright. Her left eye was swollen and beginning to blacken. Her nose was askew, as though broken - Clark gave her a cursory scan with his X-ray vision and confirmed that it was, indeed, broken. Her lip was split and actively bleeding, as was a cut over her blackened eye. Her cheeks bore the distinct red outlines of hands that had slapped her hard. She stood favoring her twisted right ankle and held her left arm with her right. Clark scanned that too, but found no broken bones. It was possible that she was just badly bruised.

But it wasn't the injuries that gave him pause as he did his double take.

"Lucy?" he asked in shock. Then, clearing his throat, he corrected himself. "Lucy Lane?"

She gave him a shallow nod. "And that piece of scum in your hands is Ronny. My ex-boyfriend," she emphasized before he could ask what had happened.

Clark didn't need any more of an explanation than that. That simple sentence was enough. Lois' sister had either just broken up with, or had been stalked by, a man who simply would not take "no" for an answer. He said nothing, however, and mutely nodded

his understanding to her.

“She’s a liar! She attacked *me* first!” Ronny wailed, ineffectually pummeling his fists into Clark’s chest.

Clark arched one skeptical eyebrow. “Really now?” he asked sarcastically. Aside from one red mark on the man’s face, it was clear Lucy hadn’t gotten the chance to fight him off.

*Pity*, thought Clark with disgust as he eyed Ronny. *If Lucy can fight anywhere near like Lois can, he might have learned his lesson not to lay his hands on other people.*

“Are you alright?” he asked instead, aiming his question at Lucy.

“I’ll be okay,” she responded shakily, never taking her eyes off Ronny. “Just get him away from me,” she added, a touch of defiance in her voice.

Clark nodded again, but slowly. “I’d rather you not be alone. How’s your ankle? There’s a police station a few blocks over.”

Lucy shifted her weight on her feet, winced, and shook her head. “I’m not sure I can walk that far. I don’t mind waiting here until he’s in custody.” She glanced up and down the street. “Besides, nobody’s around right now. I’ll be fine.”

Reluctantly, Clark agreed. He would need both hands to fly Ronny to the police station. The big man was trying more and more desperately to break free of Clark’s iron hold on him. “It’ll only take me a few minutes,” he promised her.

Lucy nodded once and limped over to the front steps leading into her sister’s apartment building. She sat down heavily and waved Clark away. “Go on,” she urged. “My sister lives here. I’ll call her and have her come down.”

Clark opened his mouth to say that Lois wasn’t home, but remembered at the last second that *Clark* would know that, *not* Superman. He dipped his head in acknowledgment. “Back in a flash,” he vowed again. Then, taking hold of Ronny by both shoulders, he easily lifted the big man as though he were no heavier than a pillow. “Come on,” he said under his breath, half to himself and half to Lucy’s ex-boyfriend.

True to his word, Clark made the drop off at the police station as swiftly as possible. He recognized Lieutenant Delgado from a story he and Lois had covered just a few weeks back and was glad to see the woman. She had a natural knack of making people instantly comfortable opening up to her and he was sure Lucy would be willing to give Delgado her statement. When he left the station, Delgado and her partner, Smythe, were beginning the booking process with Ronny.

“Hey, I’m back,” he awkwardly announced as he gently alit on the ground before Lucy, who was looking down at the cell phone in her hands.

“My sister isn’t answering. House or cell,” she explained with a frown.

Clark nodded in understanding. “I’m sure she’s fine. She’s probably working late at the office or on a stakeout or at Clark’s place or something,” he replied, mentally slapping his forehead. What had possessed him to bring up Clark?

“I doubt she’s at Clark’s,” Lucy said thoughtfully as she began to push herself up off the concrete stairs. “Or the office. It’s pretty late.”

Clark immediately offered her a hand. She took it with a look of gratitude and hoisted herself up.

“I’d like to bring you to the police station,” Clark said after a few moments where no one spoke. “They’ll need your statement to make sure the charges against Ronny stick. And you can probably get a restraining order too, as an extra precaution.” He took a second to reassess her injuries, now that he wasn’t holding her violent ex-boyfriend back. “You should also be seen by a doctor.”

Lucy took a deep breath and exhaled it noisily as she considered. “All right,” she agreed at last. “Would you mind bringing me to the hospital first? My ankle is killing me. I think

it’s sprained but I want to rule out a break. And get some painkillers if possible.”

Clark smiled. “It’s probably better if you speak to the police first. They’ll probably need to see your injuries, to collaborate your story. It looks like you aren’t bleeding anymore, and it shouldn’t take too long to do.”

Reluctantly, she nodded in agreement.

True to his word, Delgado didn’t keep Lucy any longer than what was absolutely necessary. Before he knew it, they were both standing back outside the precinct Lucy yawned widely and Clark fought hard not to do the same.

“Let’s go,” Lucy said, looking and sounding relieved that she would no longer have to deal with Ronny.

“Met Gen isn’t far,” he promised.

He gingerly gathered Lucy in his arms and took her to Metropolis General. Lucy was one of only three other people waiting, and was seen within minutes of arriving. He decided to stay close by and wait for her. Normally, he would drop someone off and be on his way, but this wasn’t just anyone. This was his girlfriend’s younger sister and her felt responsible for her. At any rate, he should make sure she had a place to spend the night. Had Lois ever given Lucy a key to her apartment, in case the need arose? As he was turning these thoughts over in his mind, Lucy came hobbling back out on a pair of crutches. Her ankle was bandaged and she sported several Band-Aids over the cuts and scrapes Ronny had given her. The wider gash above her blackened eye was neatly stitched close and she had a metal splint taped to her broken nose. But she was in good spirits.

“Were you waiting for me?” she asked, stopping short as she saw Clark leaning against the cool brick wall of hospital.

“It’s a quiet night and I thought you might need a lift to wherever it is you were going,” he replied breezily. “So... what’d they say about your ankle, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“Bad sprain. Over the counter aspirin should do the trick. They gave me a couple of them inside and I think they’re already helping. I feel like the edge has been taken off. Hopefully, Ronny suffers worse than this in prison.”

Clark chuckled.

“What?” she asked curiously.

Clark shook his head. “Nothing. It’s just...you’re a lot like your sister.”

Lucy smiled. “That’s not that first time I’ve heard that,” she responded, suppressing a laugh. Clark bit back another laugh himself. “I guess you know my sister pretty well,” she hedged after a moment.

He nodded noncommittally. “She’s a good friend.” She gave him a funny look that made him uneasy. He subtly cleared his throat. “So, uh, you said Lois isn’t home, right? Do you have a key to her place? I could drop you off there.”

She shook her head. “No, I don’t.”

“Oh. Uh, do you have a hotel room then?” he asked, fighting the impulse to run his hand through his hair.

She shook her head again. “No. I was in such a rush to get as far away from Ronny as I could that I didn’t stop to really consider where I’d spend the night if Lois wasn’t home. I guess I just assumed she would be. Stupid of me, really. *Of course* she’s not always home, not with her job.”

“I see,” he said, taking the duffel bag from her and slinging it easily over one shoulder. “Well, I’m more than happy to just fly you back home.”

To his surprise, she didn’t immediately accept. “I’d...rather not,” she finally said, hesitantly. “I know Ronny’s in police custody now but, I’m not entirely sure I’d feel comfortable at my place tonight.” She paused, then pointed up, toward the rooftops. “Can we talk...in private?”

Clark looked around, shrugging. Aside from a lone car pulling into the hospital’s parking lot and a male nurse leaning against the

building on the far end of the emergency entrance and smoking a cigarette, they were alone. But he nodded anyway. “Sure,” he agreed. Then, gently lifting her into his arms, he brought them both up to the hospital’s rooftop and set her down again.

“I want to go to your place,” Lucy blurted out before he could ask her what was on her mind.

He blinked in surprise. “I’m sorry... what?”

“I want to go to your place. I’d feel better with a familiar face around... just in case Ronny... I don’t know.” She shrugged as she shuddered a little. “Calls one of his buddies to come after me for leaving him or something.”

Clark shook his head, trying hard not to stammer. “I... don’t have a place,” he gently lied.

Lucy smirked at him. “Sure you do, Clark. It’s on Clinton. Nice place, pretty open floor plan. Lois and I were there about... oh, two or three months ago after grabbing dinner together at the Lobster Shack when I visited,” she explained. Like Lois, it appeared she was immune to the need to breathe while talking. Her words came out rapid-fire and without pause.

Clark stood in stunned silence for half a second too long.

“Don’t bother trying to deny it,” Lucy added, crossing her arms awkwardly as she tried to juggle the crutches in the same motion. “I *know* it’s you. You slipped up and used my name when you realized it was me on the street with Ronny. Clark has met me but Superman never has.”

“Those must be some *strong* painkillers,” Clark weakly joked, but internally, he felt like vomiting.

If Lucy could see right through him, surely it wouldn’t be long before Lois would. And though they were a couple now, their relationship hadn’t been without its fair share of struggles. Most recently, he’d been targeted by the unrelenting – and very unwanted – advances of the late Mayson Drake, which he hadn’t been entirely sure how to handle. He hadn’t wanted to hurt the woman, who, as luck would have it, had absolutely loathed Superman. He hadn’t wanted her to despise his Clark side as well. Lois hadn’t taken his soft approach to Mayson kindly. It had been a wonder that Mad Dog Lane hadn’t ripped the Assistant D.A.’s throat out in a territorial display of power.

But Mayson hadn’t been the *only* recipient of Lois’ ire. Clark himself had found himself in hot water over the whole thing too. Not that he blamed Lois. Hindsight being 20/20 and all that, it had been his own fault. He should have been assertive with Mayson from the start and gently, but firmly, rebuked her advances. It was just... nice, to know that Mayson had adored his Clark side – something Lois had only seemed to like, at the time.

If Lois were to find out that he was Superman now, there was no telling what kind of trouble he’d be in with her. Of course, it also stood to reason that no matter when or how she discovered his secret – and Clark was *certain* he would have to tell her eventually, no matter what happened in their relationship – he would still be neck-deep in trouble with her. He was in no rush to wade into that mess, though he’d been toying with the idea of telling her for some time now. It was, simply put, terrifying to imagine that conversation and what the possible ramifications would be. And besides, with Lois still seeming to carry a bit of a torch for Superman in some ways, he wanted to make *sure* it was Clark that she was choosing, and not the phantom avatar of Superman.

Although, she *had* said yes to dating Clark, so perhaps that meant she was over her infatuation with Superman. For a few months now, he’d noticed that she hadn’t been trying flirting with the hero when she came across him.

On the other hand, if she ever discovered that Lucy had known before her...

A shudder ran down Clark’s spine at the thought.

“Sudden chill, Clark?” Lucy asked knowingly, her eyebrows arched up halfway to her hairline. She smirked at him for a

moment, then softened. “Look, I’m not gonna tell anyone, okay? Not even my sister. But you... probably should,” she tacked on as an afterthought.

“I never said you were right,” Clark countered, hoping to buy himself some time by making her second-guess herself. He resisted the urge to rake his fingers through his slicked-back hair. “Look, I can take you to Clark’s place,” he offered, perhaps a bit too hastily, figuring he could drop her at the front door, fly around the back, and answer the door as Clark to throw her off the trail. It was risky; he knew that. But what other choice did he have?

“Good!” She clapped her hands together once. “Let’s get moving! I don’t know about you, but I’m tired of being out and about tonight, and it’s getting a little chilly now.”

Clark said nothing. He merely nodded, then gathered Lucy in his arms once more, her duffel bag still securely draped over his shoulder. Silently, he took her directly to his front door, then he set her down. As she steadied herself on her crutches, he took the opportunity to set her bag down against the door.

“It was nice to meet you,” he told her, a little too stiffly. “I hope you’re feeling better soon. Goodnight.” He turned to fly off.

“Wait!” she called after him, halting him before he could even begin to hover off the ground. She waited until he turned back to look at her. “Aren’t you going to hang around, to make sure Clark answers the door?” she asked smugly.

“I, uh...” He pointed vaguely into the distance, as if he had somewhere else to be.

“Is it because you... *can*?” she pressed, a look of triumph on her face that was identical to Lois’. “Because you can’t be here *and* inside your apartment at the same time?” She never raised her voice above a soft whisper, but Clark panicked anyway. What if a neighbor overheard?

“Lucy,” he replied softly.

“It’s okay,” she assured him. “Your secret is safe with me. And honestly? I’m too cold and tired to stand here and continue arguing. My ankle is throbbing again. Please. Just let me in.”

Something about her plea stabbed at Clark’s heart. With any luck, she would one day be his sister-in-law, and the truth about himself would probably come out in some fashion or another. He’d rather her not carry around any anger over him lying when she needed him most.

He sighed defeatedly. “Okay,” he finally agreed. “But you cannot breathe a *word* to your sister.”

She quickly, and awkwardly, crossed her finger over her heart. “Promise.”

“Stay here,” he instructed her quietly. Then, before she could say anything else, he zipped around back and into his apartment. Within a few seconds, he was unlocking the door and pulling it open for her.

She ambled inside as Clark took her bag. Then, as soon as she was clear of the door, he closed it and locked it once again. The last thing he needed was for a neighbor or his landlord to see Superman letting a strange young woman into Clark’s apartment. The rumor mill would have an absolute field day with information like that, and both Clark *and* Superman would suffer irreparable damage to their reputations. He took Lucy’s bag into his bedroom and set it down on his bed.

“I’ll take the couch,” he told her before she could protest. “Did you want to use the shower or anything?”

“I’m good,” she said as she plopped down on the couch and rubbed her sore ankle. “I don’t want to be on my feet anymore tonight if I don’t have to.”

“Fair enough,” Clark responded with a small smile. Then, with a self-conscious rub at the back of his neck, he cleared his throat. “I’m... uh... going to go get cleaned up. There was a pretty bad accident I helped out with, and a fire before that.”

Lucy waved dismissively at him and picked up the previous day’s Daily Planet, which he’d left out on the coffee table. “Go

on,” she urged, her eyes already scanning the front page.

Clark gathered a fresh set of black sweat pants, a plain black t-shirt, socks, and boxers from his dresser, then padded softly down to the bathroom. In less than three minutes, he was scrubbed clean from head to foot and freshly shaved. Out of habit, he completed his outfit with a pair of his glasses, though he knew his cover was blown. Then, summoning his courage, he left the bathroom and went back out into the living room.

Lucy looked up as she heard him sit in the armchair nearby. For a long moment, she said nothing, but merely securitized him up and down. Feeling very exposed and uncomfortable, he clasped his hands in his lap and wished he had the power to shrink out of sight to escape.

“Why haven’t you told my sister yet?” she finally asked, startling him. He’d anticipated any one of a thousand other questions she might have – about his powers, about his origins, about his dual life.

Clark opened his mouth to respond, but nothing came out at first. Lucy arched an eyebrow at him, almost daring him to speak.

“It’s complicated,” he finally said, looking down at the floor so as not to meet the gaze she was boring into him.

“No, it’s not. You love her and you don’t want to lose her, but you *will* if she finds out on her own,” Lucy said in a matter-of-fact tone.

“Look, Lucy, it’s not that I don’t appreciate your warning... because I do. But it’s not as simple as you think,” Clark tried to explain.

“You don’t think I get it? Lois was smitten with Superman and ignored you for the first few months of your partnership, until she finally opened her stupid eyes and accepted your friendship. But she’s over that now. All she does is talk about *you*,” Lucy said, rolling her eyes.

“I know she cares about me. But I’ve spent such a long time deceiving her...”

“And it’ll be even longer if you don’t man up and tell her soon!”

Clark sighed deeply. “I know,” he admitted tiredly. “I’ve thought about it. A lot. But nothing’s ever seemed right or... the timing has been bad... or someone like Mayson has gotten in between us...” His voice trailed off as his face heated in an embarrassed blush.

“You’re making excuses,” Lucy said pointedly. “Look, I can’t tell you what to do or not to do. All I can tell you is that I won’t say a word to my sister. But you need just man up and tell her if you don’t want to lose her forever.” She winced as a jolt of pain seemed to rush up from her ankle. She rubbed it absently.

“Maybe you should get some rest,” Clark offered, trying his best to look like he wasn’t trying to change the subject. “You’ve had a rough night and it’s getting pretty late. Tomorrow I can take you wherever you need or want to go. Or you can stay here until whenever Lois is done with her stakeout.”

Lucy looked like she would rather press the issue at hand, but a violent yawn overtook her before she could say anything as the clock softly chimed 2:30. Instead, she nodded her agreement. “Okay. But don’t think you’re off the hook just yet!”

Clark put up his hands in a gesture of surrender. “With a Lane? Perish the thought!” he mildly joked.

Lucy smirked at him. “You have *no* idea.”

*That’s what I’m afraid of,* Clark thought glumly to himself as he rose from his chair to help Lucy into the bedroom.

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Two days went by with barely any word from Lois. She’d checked in only once, but Clark hadn’t been home at the time. He’d taken Lucy to lunch, since her ankle had begun to hurt less. But then a series of Superman rescues and their accompanying stories – at least for the ones that had taken place in Metropolis – had kept him busy until late. It had been nearly midnight when

he’d finally gotten a chance to listen to the message that she’d left on his answering machine. When he’d called her back, her phone had gone straight to voice mail. He didn’t bother to leave one. Lois had said that the stakeout was ending and that she would see him the next day. His heart lightened by the fact that he knew she was okay, he had fallen asleep almost immediately.

He woke up the next morning feeling refreshed. His energy level seemed boundless now that he was going to see the woman he loved again. He tidied up his apartment while Lucy showered, then he hailed her a cab, as she had a mind to visit with some friends who also happened to be in town. Feeling a little relieved to know she would be gone until that evening, he channel-surfed for a while. Finding nothing worth watching, he changed clothing and made a quick patrol over Metropolis, but the city was mercifully quiet, save for the two muggings and single carjacking that he stopped.

As he neared his apartment again, his sensitive hearing picked up the sound of Lois’ voice inside. At first, he thought she might be on her cellphone, so he severed the connection to give her some privacy. Still, her presence meant that he couldn’t just fly to his terrace and enter his home that way. Instead, he found a secluded alleyway half a block from his building, changed back into his civilian clothing, and walked the rest of the way. He whistled a happy tune as he walked. Finally, after having his home life and his secret thrown into disarray for the last couple of days, things were settling back down again. Everything was returning to what passed for normal in his life.

In retrospect, he should have known better.

Lois stood with her back to the door, but whirled around with a look to kill as she heard him enter. Her cheeks were bright red, as if she’d been screaming. Her fists were balled up and planted on her hips. Her normally soft, inviting brown eyes were hard as steel, but bloodshot, as if she’d been crying. Her brow was furrowed so low that she almost didn’t even look like herself.

“Lois?” he questioned, quietly shutting the door behind him, aware in some back portion of his mind that whatever Lois was about to say, he did *not* want the neighbors to overhear it.

“Oh, *there* you are,” Lois snipped acidly. “Pressing matters keeping you busy?”

“Huh? I went out to kill some time before you arrived. I guess you got here faster than I figured you would,” he hedged, approaching her with baby steps, wary of the murderous look in her eyes. “How’d the stakeout go?”

“Oh, just fine. The guy wasn’t doing anything more insidious than selling a few illegal pets. Clearly I wasted my time on *him* when I *should* have been keeping my eye on *you*.”

“Me?” Clark asked, blindsided. “Did I do something wrong?”

“Don’t play innocent with me, Clark.”

Clark racked his brain, trying to figure out where Lois was coming from. After several awkward moments of silence, he resisted the urge to shrug as he answered. “I’m not sure what you’re talking about, Lois,” he admitted, completely befuddled.

Lois’ face, if possible, contorted even more, giving her a dragon-like appearance. “Clark, I’ve dealt with a *lot* of secrecy and lies from you. And quite frankly, I’m at my breaking point. It’s exhausting and you know what? I know I deserve better than that.”

Clark’s heart seized in his chest. Had Lucy gone back on her word and told Lois about his penchant for moonlighting in Spandex? He put his hands up defensively before him. “Lois, look. I don’t know what Lucy told you, but...”

He didn’t get the chance to finish as Lois’ eyes flashed heatedly. “These are *Lucy’s*? My *sister*, Lucy?” she roared as she flung a pair of ladies’ underwear at him. He hadn’t noticed them initially, as the way she’d held them, dangling from her balled fist, her arm and hip had blocked them from view. Tears welled up in her eyes as the garment soared through the air to land at Clark’s feet. “Of all the low-down, rotten...” She growled in frustration.

“It was bad enough when I assumed you’d hired a hooker, but this....this *betrayal*...”

A cold sweat broke out down Clark’s back. So, Lucy *hadn’t* divulged his secret. But she *had* left him in an even worse position than if she had.

“It’s not what you think,” he hastily cut her off, trying to explain, knowing that it only made him sound guilty. His arms failed before him, like an umpire trying to make a call in a ball game.

“And I’m Santa Claus,” Lois huffed, moving to storm past him to leave the apartment.

Clark expertly sidled into a position that blocked her progress. “Let me explain, please,” he said softly.

“You don’t have to explain. Clearly you and my sister have been laughing at my expense. *This is exactly why* I swore never to get involved with another coworker, or friend, for that matter. But, stupid me, I went and trusted you,” she raged, and if she could have spit fire, she would have been. “God, Clark! I never thought *you*, of all people, would hurt me like this. But one stakeout and I come back to find my sister’s underwear in your bathroom?” She was nearly hysterical now, but with a cold, hard edge that spoke of Mad Dog Lane. “So, how long have you been sleeping with her behind my back?”

Anger and hurt rose in Clark’s chest at the horrific accusation. “Lois, you *know* I would never cheat on you,” he said through gritted teeth, trying to keep his temper at bay.

“Obviously I *don’t*,” she flung back, gesturing violently at the pink polka-dotted panties on the floor. “How *could* you, Clark?”

“I have never had, nor will I ever have, an interest in your sister,” Clark told her firmly, slashing the air before him with one hand, as if that alone could banish the thought.

He had the passing thought that if he hadn’t been so terrified of losing Lois over a misunderstanding, the thought that he could ever choose Lucy over Lois would have been laughable.

“I thought I could *trust* you, Clark! But you’re just as bad...if not *worse*...than Paul or Claude or any of the others I told you about,” she continued, flinging her words at him so hard that they felt like physical slaps to his face. She shook her head. “You *knew* about all those betrayals...you were *right there* when I found out that Lex was...and you *still* went and hurt me like this? You are the lowest form of life on this planet. Get out of my way. I’m leaving.”

“Not until you let me explain,” Clark responded, working hard to remain calm as the panic rose in his bloodstream.

“Get out of my way or I’ll call the police,” Lois retorted, her eyes almost wild in her ire.

Clark didn’t budge. “After I explain, you can leave if you want to. I won’t stop you,” he assured her, using as calm a voice as he could muster.

If he’d hoped to see her expression soften a bit, he was sorely disappointed. She gave him a glare so deadly that it was a wonder it didn’t send a spike of poison directly into his heart. Her fisted hands returned to her hips and she tapped her foot impatiently on the floor.

“Why should I believe anything you have to say?” she questioned him icily.

“Because,” Clark said, carefully choosing his words, “you need to know the whole truth. And because Lucy will tell you the same thing.”

She rolled her eyes. “That proves nothing, other than that you collaborated your story, in case you got caught. Where *is* she, by the way? I never thought you’d be the ‘use her and toss her’ type.”

He sighed, knowing his answer would only serve to flare Lois’ suspicions further. “With some friends for the day. She’ll be back tonight.”

“Glad to know this is an ongoing affair, rather than a sordid one-night stand,” Lois hissed venomously.

He gestured to the couch in an invitation to sit. Lois didn’t move at first, but after a minute, she reluctantly made her way over. She sat, but she didn’t relax, the way she normally did. Instead, she sat bolt upright, perched on the edge of the cushion, as far from Clark as she could manage. Clark took the hint and followed her body language. Forgoing the couch, he sat in the armchair, giving her the space she so obviously sought. He sat slightly forward and clasped his hands in between his knees.

“I won’t lie,” he promised. “Lucy has been staying here for the last couple of nights.”

She opened her mouth to make a retort, then shut it again just as quickly, which made Clark even more uneasy. A silent Lois was a very, very bad sign.

He continued. “Her boyfriend...*ex*-boyfriend...assaulted her.”

Lois’ eyes narrowed and her mouth hardened into a thin line. “You took advantage of an *assault victim*?” she accused in disbelief.

Clark shut his eyes for a few moments and groaned. His hands clenched into fists as he mentally berated himself. He had to be careful with how he phrased things, even if the bigger part of his mind acknowledged the fact that Lois was being completely irrational and really reaching to make the conclusions she was making.

“He was trying to beat her,” he clarified, “because she’d dumped him. She sprained her ankle badly as she tried to run from him. I...Superman took her to the hospital after bringing Ronny to the police station. She needed a few stitches too, from where he’d caused some cuts, and her nose is broken. She’d been on her way to your place to get away from him, but didn’t know you weren’t home. She didn’t want to be alone in a hotel or to go back home... she was still afraid Ronny might somehow go after her. Apparently, he has friends that wouldn’t hesitate to exact his revenge for him. So, she asked to stay here.”

Lois’ eyebrow arched, though her expression was still stony. “Go on,” she prompted, almost daring him to continue with his tale. A tale that Clark could see she wasn’t entirely convinced of.

“So...it was almost 2:30 in the morning when she got here. I knew we’d never get ahold of you,” he said, his gaze on his entwined fingers. “We talked for a bit, I gave her my bed to sleep in, while I slept on the couch. Yesterday, I took her to lunch, then got sidetracked with a couple of stories for Perry, and by the time I got your message, it was late and your phone went straight to voice mail. I figured I would just explain what happened and why Lucy wants to stay at your place for a bit when I saw you today.”

His gaze traveled to the underwear, which lay untouched on the floor where they’d landed earlier. He shrugged. “She must have left those in the bathroom by accident when she took a shower this morning, before I grabbed her a cab so she could spend the day with her friends. I honestly hadn’t been in there since. Like I said, I went out for a bit to kill time waiting for you,” he explained, peering earnestly at her.

“How can I trust you?” she whispered in a choked sob. “How do I know you...and Lucy both...aren’t lying to me?”

Clark closed his eyes for a moment and sighed deeply. Then, his nerves steeled, he opened them up again and met her stare.

“Because, Lois, I have *never* once lied to you. I’ve always been honest...with my opinions, my likes and dislikes, my hopes and my fears, with my admiration of you, and with the way I fell head over heels for you from the moment I first saw you,” he said in a quiet, measured tone. “Except for one thing. And cheating on you is *not* it.”

For a moment, he wasn’t sure if Lois was going to get up and walk out. She seemed on the verge of springing off her seat. He waited, breath held, to see what she would do. The muscle in her jaw ticked and her eyes flashed.

“Well?” she asked, a few tense seconds later, as she gestured roughly into the space between them. “Spit it out! What have you

been lying to me about?”

“It’s...not easy for me to admit this,” Clark began, after clearing his throat. “I never meant for it to go on for as long as it has. I just...telling you this has scared me more than anything in the world...because I knew that telling you might make me lose you...not only as a girlfriend, but as a friend too.”

Concern zipped across her face as quickly as a crack of lightning. But a heartbeat later, she mastered her emotions into something more stoic and unrelenting. Heart thumping wildly in fright, Clark pressed on.

“I’ve wanted to tell you for a long time now, despite my fears. But the time never seemed right and I could never find the right words. And if, once I tell you this thing, you’re mad and feel like you can’t trust me, I’ll understand. But it’s well past the time when I should have been honest and told you about this. I know now that you really did choose me, Clark, over...well...anyone else.”

“Stop beating around the bush,” Lois interrupted.

He nodded in submission. “The thing I’ve lied to you about is my relationship to Superman. I’m not his friend,” he said softly.

“Oh God, are you sleeping with him too?” Lois asked in a strangled groan.

Clark’s eyes widened as he realized, too late, how his words had sounded. “What? No!” he spluttered. “Lois...I *am* Superman.”

He eased the glassed off his face and let her take a good long look at him. For several long moments, all Lois did was stare. Then, as his words apparently sunk in, her face went scarlet. She vaulted out of her chair, crossed to where he sat, and slapped him, hard, across his face.

“You lousy piece of...” she growled.

“I deserved that,” he said, his calm voice effectively silencing her midsentence.

“How *could* you?” she demanded.

He dropped his gaze to the floor. “In the beginning, I was terrified you’d be too tempted by the Pulitzer to keep my secret. I had nightmares that you’d splashed my identity all over the front page. Anyone else would have. But only just in the very beginning. It was clear that you took your role as Superman’s friend seriously. I saw how you would do anything to protect him. But I also saw how much you wanted to date him. And that scared me too. Because I didn’t want you to choose me based on my powers. Superman’s never been real, Lois. He’s just a symbol of the things that I can do. But Clark? Clark *is* real, but he’s also the average guy that gets excited when the ice cream truck drives by or when the sunset is particularly colorful or when there’s a cloudless sky to stargaze under. He’s...boring.”

Slowly, Lois nodded, but her wounded expression did not leave her face. “When did you plan on telling me this? When the kids started to fly? On your deathbed? Because it’s pretty clear the *only* reason you’re telling me this now is because I found my sister’s underwear in your bathroom.” She was shaking in her rage.

Clark stood to be eye to eye with her. Every part of him screamed that he should reach out to her and cup her cheek like he always did, but some unknown reserve of willpower kept his hand motionless at his side.

“I...don’t know,” he admitted, shame-faced. “Soon. Lois, I *hated* not being able to tell you. It was like torture for me. But knowing I could lose you because of it...that hurt worse.”

“Well, I guess you’re finding out just how much it’s cost you,” she threw back at him.

Clark flinched, feeling his heart shatter into a billion jagged pieces at the same moment. He’d really messed up. He’d lost her. He fought back the feeling of nausea that rolled over him and bit back the shriek of agony that rose in his chest.

“I know I have no excuse. And I’m sorry, Lois,” he offered, feeling numb from head to foot. He felt dazed, as though he was watching someone else’s life fall apart. “I don’t blame you for

being disgusted with me...or angry...or however it is that you feel. All I can say is that I’m not proud of myself for continuously lying to you. I can’t go back and change the past. But I *can* promise you that the Superman thing is the one and *only* thing I’ve *ever* lied about. And yeah, okay, because of that, there’s a few details about my life that I’ve had to alter, to help keep my identity safe. Things that I’ve had to be less than truthful about my entire life. Like the fact that my parents found me in a spaceship in a field and not on their doorstep. That kind of thing.”

Lois blinked in surprise at how casually he’d mentioned the spaceship. Then, to Clark’s everlasting wonderment, she laughed. That sound brought a single ember of hope to his broken heart.

“You know how ridiculous that sounds, right?” she asked.

Clark chanced a tiny smile and a chuckle. “A baby in a spaceship? Yeah, I know. It took me a while to accept that too, when my parents told me. It kind of turned my world upside-down for a couple of months. Not to mention that I was dealing with the first of my powers manifesting.”

“I’m still really mad at you.”

“I know,” he murmured. “I think I’d be more worried if you weren’t, to be honest.”

Lois crossed her arms. “And you *really* didn’t mess around with my sister?”

“Lois, *why* would I want to, when I’m already with the perfect woman?” he asked sincerely.

“Flattery will get you nowhere,” she warned, wagging a finger at him.

“It’s *not* flattery,” he replied earnestly.

“You know I’m going to verify your story with Lucy, right?” she asked after a couple of seconds of silence.

Clark nodded. “I’d expect nothing less.” He cleared his throat uncomfortably. “Uh, I’m not sure if I’m digging myself a bigger hole here but...in the interest of never keeping secrets from you again, you should also probably know that I slipped up and called her by name when I was in the suit. And, well...”

“Oh my God! She knew before *me*?” Lois practically yelled.

Clark winced at the outburst and almost regretted being honest with her. But no. Even if it made Lois even madder at him, he was done lying and hiding from her.

“It was an accident and I tried to bluff my way out of it, to throw her off the trail but...Lane women are too smart for me. She called my bluff and I...” He shrugged helplessly. “I’m sorry.”

“She...figured it out? Before me?” she asked again, incredulous. “I’ve worked alongside you for how long? We’ve been dating for a couple of months...and...God, I’m so *stupid*,” she finished, her anger losing some steam to become more like self-loathing. She pressed the palms of her hands to her eyes.

“Please don’t say that,” Clark said softly, gently removing her hands from her face. “You are the *smartest* person I know. And the person I respect the most. I worked overtime at distancing Superman from his more mundane counterpart of Clark. And when you looked at Superman and didn’t see that he was the partner at work that you hated...I...I felt...secure. Because I knew that if I could fool you with a quick change of clothing and a different, more aloof demeanor the rest of the world didn’t stand a chance of making the connection.”

“That doesn’t exactly make me feel any better,” Lois grumbled, but at least the knife’s edge had vanished from her voice.

“Maybe not,” Clark allowed with a shrug. “But...it’s the truth. And I always knew that I had to walk on eggshells around you as Superman, because I knew that all it would take would be something like a small gesture or a turn of phrase or even the way I looked at you that would tip you off about my secret. It was inevitable. It was just a matter of time before you would see right through me. You’re too smart not to have figured it out in the long run, especially now that we’re dating. So, for a while now, I’ve

been trying to figure out how to tell you.”

“I’ll bet *this* situation wasn’t on the list,” Lois shot back, though almost sounding like she was slipping back into their old banter. “With me thinking you were sleeping with my...” Her eyes widened as a thought struck her, then they narrowed as her temper dully ignited again. “Wait a second! Are you only telling me this now because *Lucy found out?*”

Clark gulped hard. “What? No!” He raked a hand through his hair and rubbed the back of his neck as he spoke. “Okay, yes, Lucy *did* encourage me to tell you...but I was going to anyway, like I said, just...maybe not today. This isn’t the way I had hoped it would come out. But seeing you there, ready to walk out of my apartment...I knew it couldn’t wait. I trust you with *everything*, Lois. You already have my heart and my loyalty. Now you have my secret too. You have everything you need to destroy me if you want to. I want you to be able to trust me, completely, like I trust you.”

A hint of a sarcastic smirk crinkled the corner of Lois’ mouth. “So, you don’t think I’ll run off to Perry with the story and win my Pulitzer?”

“No, I don’t,” he replied in a matching tone. “And if you did, I’d trust that you made the right call for yourself.”

“Even at the risk of potentially ruining your life?” she asked, only half teasing.

He grew serious again and looked her straight in the eyes. “Without you, it wouldn’t be much of a life,” he told her sincerely.

Lois stood quiet for several seconds, appearing to be absorbing what he’d said. Then she nodded, as if to some inner monologue.

“You’d better grab us some Chinese food. Nothing from the city. The good stuff, from China. I’m guessing that was where you got that dinner for us on our first assignment together. Go there. It’s going to be a long night. I have a lot of questions and you have a lot of explaining to do about how you cracked some of the cases we’ve worked together,” she said, ticking off points on her fingers. “I’ll call Lucy and see if she can stay with one of her friends for the night, so she doesn’t interrupt us. And don’t you *dare* pull the ‘Superman emergency’ excuse to get out of this.”

Clark felt a smile ghost over his lips. “I wouldn’t dream of it. And I *don’t want* to get out of this discussion. This is a talk I’ve been wanting to have for a long time. Lois, you are the *only* person, outside of my parents, that I’ve *ever* been able to talk freely to. And no, your sister doesn’t count because all she did was lecture me about how I should...what were her words? Man up and tell you.” His smile burst into a full-fledged grin.

She nodded again. “Good. Now, all I’ve had for the last two days was god-awful deli sandwiches and I’m starving. Go on. I promise you won’t come back to find me gone, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

He shook his head. “I’m not worried...about anything anymore. Having you know...it’s like a weight’s been lifted off my heart. I swear, I’ll be back before you know it. Just...can I ask a favor?” he ventured, knowing he was probably pressing his luck.

One eyebrow raised. “Depends on what it is.”

“It’s not much,” he rushed to clarify. “Just...it’ll probably come off better if you ask, rather than if I were to do it. When you call your sister, can you *please* ask Lucy to be a...uh...less messy houseguest in the future?” he asked, throwing a fleeting glance over to the undergarments on the floor.

THE END