

Fade to Black: Individual Priorities

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Rated: PG-13

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Summary: After the events with red kryptonite in the episode “Individual Responsibility,” Clark gets Lois to agree to another chance — to take her out as long as he promises not to disappear on her, to be there at seven, and seven oh one, and seven oh two, and seven oh three... A look at how that fan-favorite moment might have ended... and how the date (that we never got to see) might have gone.

Story Size: 8,977 words (49Kb as text)

Author’s Note: So this here is a gfic version of a Fade to Black story, which are usually nfc only! But I loved the revelation so much on this one, and the way the story came out lends itself to an easy conversion to gfic...so here we are! While this might have started out as a strictly nfc plot bunny, the setup to get L&C to where I wanted them (i.e., for their decision to make love to be in character) was much longer than I expected it would be! Given that, I found that really the first 2/3 of the story was perfectly within a PG-13 rating. So, for those of you who can’t read or prefer not to read nfc, I did a little editing work to get you this gfic version of what turned out to be a really amazing revelation story! I hope you enjoy!

A super thank you, as always, to my partners in crime SuperBek and lovetvfan for cheering me on and BRing.

And an extra special thanks to SuperBek for straight up egging me on to steal a few sets of lines from her amazing *Destined* story. Hehehe!

Clark shook his head to try and clear his thoughts as he sat at his desk. He had been having trouble focusing all day, and not just because the effects of the red kryptonite still lingered in his system, making him feel...off. He had sort of wanted to fly down to Smallville to talk to his parents about everything, but he, Lois, and Perry had spent hours with the police detectives last night.

Well, technically, he’d been there as Superman for part of the time, and that hadn’t exactly worked in his favor getting back in Lois’s good graces after his behavior the past few days. In order to leave, he’d needed to insist that Superman should escort Church and his cronies to jail

himself. Then he had come back as Clark...as usual, after missing all the action, pretending he’d been lost in the labyrinthic Intergang headquarters. Lois had rolled her eyes, though she hadn’t been terse with him, at least.

They’d gotten the needed quotes and additional facts to supplement the first of many articles to be written about Bill Church Jr. and CostMart being tied to Intergang. After a few hours of sleep, the three of them had met back at the Planet and worked all day together. Jimmy had come in about an hour ago, just in time for Perry to bark at him to take the layout board down to printing so they could get going on the evening special edition.

Though Clark felt guilty for all his unexpected leisure time the last few days, he was grateful that he wasn’t hurting for sleep right now, as sometimes happened when there were too many Superman activities on top of a breaking story like this. So while Lois was taking a micro-nap in the conference room, he could sit at his desk and let his thoughts wander, try to figure out what he was supposed to do about his personal life.

While he was used to criminals shooting him, trying to outwit him, attempting all manner of ways to commit their crimes and get away with things without Superman’s intervention, this latest attack with red kryptonite was weighing more heavily on him. Maybe it was just all the ups and downs, the emotional whiplash affecting his nervous system, but there was no denying the fact that his heart was a little bruised too. It was disheartening, discouraging, and more than a little frustrating that his personal relationships — one personal relationship in particular — had been so easily put at risk.

Then again, if he looked for the silver lining, as his mom had always encouraged him to do, he almost wanted to thank Gene Newtrich for finding and exploiting the red kryptonite. Dr. Friskin had posited that the meteorite had unleashed some deep-seated feelings he’d been harboring for a while.

Those deeper feelings? Well, he was tired of playing second fiddle for Lois’s affections — she’d chosen Superman, she’d chosen Lex, and when she’d finally, finally chosen Clark, the very next week, she’d gone and chosen Dan too. And while Lois had only been on a few dates with Clark, they hadn’t even thought to approach any type of conversation about being exclusive. Honestly, though, Clark hadn’t thought they’d needed to. For him, there would only ever be one woman.

Maybe the strongest of those unleashed feelings was the resentment at the fact that Superman was still interfering with his chances at a relationship with Lois — except now instead of competing for her affection, he was competing for the right to his own free time.

Clark sighed heavily and stared at Jimmy, who'd just come running in and gone straight to Perry's office with the first copy, hot off the presses. He stood and went to go get Lois from the conference room, allowing himself to look wistfully at her sleeping for just a moment as he approached.

As he woke her gently and then as they made their way to Perry's office, Clark thought about how he'd only managed to alienate Lois more this week with his jealousy of Dan and his needling at the annoying agent's expense.

Clark let Lois enter Perry's office first, leading her in with a hand on the small of her back, and his heart ached with the realization that...if Lois ultimately chose Dan, Clark wouldn't be allowed this touch, this small show of intimacy that had become almost automatic for him and that she somehow never commented on.

Even as he half-celebrated with Lois and Perry and listened as their editor commended Jimmy for a job well done in his absence, Clark couldn't help his mind still wandering. Superman had told Dr. Friskin that now, being aware of his feelings like this, it was his responsibility to figure out how to deal with them. And as last night had shown when he'd captured Church Jr. and the others even with the red rock present, it was possible for him to acknowledge and more carefully choose his reactions to those emotions.

He didn't have to be petty about or jealous of Dan; he could make a different choice, and...maybe that choice would lead to making some different priorities in his life. He felt a renewed determination to make his feelings known, to just tell Lois that he wanted her and... He knew he needed to show her too. And that meant Metropolis would have to go without Superman for a night.

Hearing Perry's gentle ribbing of Jimmy for using a psychic for editorial advice, he figured it was time for Lois and him to make their escape and wrap things up for the day. As he followed Lois out of the office and back toward their desks, he had the urge to just come right out and say things to her now, but he hesitated. Lois had a date with Dan tonight.

His mind was fumbling for something he could say to her when Richie from Sports handed Lois a message on his way through the newsroom. Clark saw her shoulders slump as she read it, and he wondered...

"Bad news?" he asked her, tucking a hand in his pocket as they continued walking.

"Uh...Dan called. He won't be back in town until Monday."

The tingle of anticipation ran through him. This was it, right?

Wanting to seize the moment before he lost his nerve, he didn't even wait for her to turn around. "Which means

that...you're free tonight, so you could go out with me," he said, hoping he didn't sound too overeager, hoping she'd agree. But as she turned to face him, he knew it wouldn't be that easy. He hadn't really thought it would be.

Her expression was soft, but he could read the disappointment clearly enough. She was frustrated with him. "These two situations are mutually exclusive. Dan's availability, or lack thereof, has nothing to do with our relationship...and your continual disappearing act."

Here it was, the moment of truth. "Lois, I'm not gonna try and stop you from going out with Dan; that's your choice." She looked up, exhaling sharply, clearly upset, but he continued quickly before she could say anything. "But I've given this a lot of thought...and I realize that instead of dancing around my feelings for you, I have to meet them head on and verbalize my emotions...and your going out with Dan...it does upset me."

For a moment, she just looked at him, her expression unreadable. Then, in a soft voice, she said, "I don't know what to say."

"Say you'll go out with me tonight," he pleaded, "and I promise you I will not disappear."

Clark held his breath as she held his gaze, her eyes searching his, perhaps looking for the sincerity of his promise. And she must have found it because she smiled at him, a smile that was shy but hopeful.

"All right," she said, her voice taking on that softer, slightly flirtier tone that made his heart race.

He let out the breath he'd been holding and smiled while his heart did somersaults in his chest.

Her smile widened, and her eyes seemed to sparkle. "Pick me up at seven."

"Okay," he said softly, his smile growing.

For a moment, she looked down, and her brow furrowed just a little. "But you gotta promise you won't disappear."

Instantly, he shook his head. He would move heaven and earth to keep his promise tonight.

"And you'll be there at seven?" she asked, drifting closer to him.

He nodded this time, assuring her with a silent promise, his grin spreading widely across his face.

"And seven oh one?"

All he could do was nod again, her flirty smile and her increasing nearness setting his heart racing faster. He couldn't stop smiling; neither could she.

"And seven oh two?" She was edging closer still, her eyes not leaving his, and she put her hands on his chest.

Joy and excitement coursed through him, and he couldn't stop his eyes from flitting down to her lips as he nodded again, letting his hands find and rest lightly at her

waist.

“And seven oh three.” Her hands slid up his shoulders and came to rest at the back of his neck, his skin tingling with fire where her fingers touched bare skin.

He wasn’t even sure that he nodded this time because it was impossible to concentrate on anything but the look in her eyes, the feel of her touch, and just how close her body was to his own.

“And seven oh four...” Her voice was almost a whisper. “And seven oh five...and seven oh six.” With every minute she named, she inched ever closer until he could feel the soft warmth of her breath against his skin as she spoke.

God, how he wanted to kiss her.

But not here, not in the middle of the newsroom. He touched his forehead to hers, and he smiled as he closed his eyes, thankful that he hadn’t messed this up, that she’d given him another chance. He wanted to tell her he’d be there at seven oh seven and seven oh eight and seven oh nine and the rest of their lives if she’d let him.

They stood there for moments longer, her fingers playing at the nape of his neck and driving him to distraction.

Finally, she murmured, “I need to go get ready.”

“Okay,” he said, his voice a husky whisper.

“You’re not moving...”

“Neither are you...”

“Lois! Clark!” Perry’s loud bark startled them apart. “I thought you two hightailed it outta here already!”

His heart racing, Clark took a step back, as did Lois, and they both laughed a little breathlessly. He couldn’t take his eyes off her — the flush of her cheeks and the way she was tucking a lock of hair behind her ear making her look sexy and adorable at the same time.

“Well, I...” She smiled at him again and ducked her head for a brief moment. “I should go...get ready,” she said, still holding his gaze while she had her arm out behind her, searching blindly for her bag.

He reached past her to grab it off the back of her chair, then straightened again. “Here...” Slowly, because he was still having trouble not getting lost in her eyes, he put the strap over her shoulder, but then his hand lingered there, his fingers pressing into her lightly before letting his hand fall back to his side.

“Thanks... See you at seven?” This time, there was only a hint of an actual question in her voice.

“Promise.”

Clark was grateful. He was grateful he’d been able to pick her up at seven, on the dot, as promised. Grateful he’d been able to find a last-minute reservation at a decent restaurant. Grateful that he hadn’t heard so much as a

fender bender from Metropolis tonight. But mostly, he was grateful to be on another date with the woman he loved.

Now, Clark sat across the booth from Lois at Bella Luna and smiled at her as she took another sip of her white wine. The thin straps and the v-neck of her dress — so similar to the one she’d worn on their first date — allowed for his gaze to wander freely over the graceful slope of her neck to her shoulders and then lower to the gentle swell of her breasts. But the burgundy color against her skin and the way it matched the shade of her lipstick set his heart racing with an intoxicating level of excitement and anticipation he hadn’t felt before. They had just finished an amazing bruschetta and were enjoying a peaceful lull in their conversation while they waited for their entrées.

Apparently, his gaze had lingered a little long, though, because she blushed and ducked her head, setting her wine glass down on the white linen tablecloth. “What?” she asked, that soft and flirty lilt in her voice.

“Nothing...just admiring how beautiful you are.”

“Thank you.” Her shy smile turned into a broad grin as she tucked her hair behind her ear. “There was something else on your mind, though.”

“I was...feeling grateful, being here with you tonight...” It could have too easily been Dan sitting across from her tonight, and he wasn’t sure how that had even become a reality.

She nodded, and he could tell she knew the words he’d left unspoken.

“Clark — ”

“Lois — ”

They both stopped and laughed nervously.

“You go first,” she said, beating him to it.

“I...it’s not really my business to ask. It’s okay. You go ahead.”

“But that’s just it, Clark!” she said, clearly frustrated, and she grimaced as she lowered her voice again. “It was your business, should have never stopped being your business, but...” She trailed off in a whisper.

“I kept disappearing,” he said, trying not to sound as deflated as he felt. “I’m sorry, Lois, I — ”

“It wasn’t just that. I...wasn’t sure if you really wanted... I thought maybe you might have changed your mind about wanting to date me,” she finished in a small voice.

“Never,” he breathed, shaking his head emphatically.

“Then why?”

Beneath the confusion, there was sadness, pain in her eyes, and it tore at him. His heart clenched, and for a moment, he couldn’t think of a single thing to say, certainly nothing that would make her any less upset. But he’d had enough — he couldn’t keep hurting her like this anymore.

“What is it, Clark? You make it seem like telling me would make me not...”

“I’ll tell you... I — I just...” God, he just wanted tonight. Just wanted this one night without any interruptions, just like the first night. And then he’d tell her.

She put her hand on his arm and waited until he looked at her — he hadn’t even realized he’d closed his eyes. “It’s okay, Clark. You’ll tell me later. It’s okay.” Her words were soft, gentle, and he didn’t quite feel he deserved this understanding, this tenderness she’d managed to find for him. “Just know that... Well, I don’t think there’s anything you could tell me that would make me not want to be with — date you, make me not want to date you.”

A lump caught in his throat, and he couldn’t find the words to reply. Oh, how he wanted to trust that, trust she could forgive him this, but she didn’t know the extent of it. She didn’t know he’d chosen to lie to her, day in and day out, for almost two years.

“Okay, Clark?” she said, giving his arm a squeeze.

He nodded. “Thank you, Lois,” he rasped.

A gentle smile graced her lips, and her gaze was soft with caring and compassion and, if he was lucky, love too. But there was a hesitancy there as well — something he couldn’t fault her for.

Clark was about to say something, anything to reassure her, to amend his promise for tonight to include never lying to her again, but the server came then with their food. They pulled their arms back to their own sides of the booth, Clark feeling a little self-conscious at the seriousness of the moment.

True to her word, everything did seem okay, although the weight of his secret still felt heavy on his chest. But as the evening wore on, Clark found himself feeling more and more grateful. Well, that and driven to the most wonderful distraction by the little hmms and moans of appreciation as Lois ate her linguini. And by how she’d “stolen” one of his raviolis with a mischievous grin. And by how she’d urged him to try her pasta dish, but insisted he’d have to come sit next to her to do so.

That was how he’d found himself on her side of the booth, her hand on his thigh, trying desperately to focus on the forkful of delicate pasta coming his way. As he took the bite into his mouth and chewed, her eyes sparkled with some sort of eager anticipation. The noodles were perfectly cooked, and the flavors seemed to dance in his mouth — the richness of the butter sauce balanced by the slight saltiness of the clams.

“See?” she declared triumphantly. “Isn’t it wonderful?”

“It’s...probably the best pasta I’ve ever had,” he managed to say, his heart racing wildly.

“Told ya so.” She patted his thigh and brought her hand

back up to the table, grabbing her wine glass to take a sip.

His leg still tingled where her hand had been, and he wondered as he smiled broadly whether she knew exactly the effect she was having on him. Not for the first time tonight, he found he needed to take a few breaths to calm himself.

Lois held up her glass between them and tipped her head in the direction of his glass, so he reached across the table for it and brought it next to hers.

“To new priorities,” she said, smiling at him.

“To new priorities,” he echoed, then clinked his glass with hers.

After they’d both had a sip and set their glasses down, Lois picked her fork back up and — after moving his plate from the other side of the table — he followed suit. Another quiet pause in conversation accompanied them as they continued to enjoy their meals.

“So how are your parents doing?” Lois asked long moments later, setting her fork down and shifting a bit to face him slightly, her knee bumping against his thigh.

“Good, they’re good. My mom said she’s taking another art class at the adult education center — sculpture this time, I think.”

“Oh, wow. I don’t think I could do that. I’ll bet your dad...” <<*How many minutes out is air rescue? I don’t think the winch will hold much longer!*>>

Clark tensed, steeling himself and focusing in with his hearing on the location of the urgent voice on the police scanner — and in the next instant, he looked back at Lois, his heart plummeting as he saw the look in her eyes. He shook his head. “It’s not — ” Squeezing his eyes shut for half a second, he dug deep for his resolve. He stared into her beautiful brown eyes and did the only thing he could do, short of keeping his promise. He kept his voice low, a strained whisper. “I’m Superman, and I have to go. I’m sorry.”

And without looking back, he took off out of the booth and walked as quickly as he dared across the dining room full of people before he was out the door and airborne, changing as he went. He focused his hearing back on the scene to get the status as he sped towards the 43rd Street Bridge, leaving a sonic boom in his wake.

When he approached the scene a few seconds later, he saw the large SUV barely still on the bridge, its rear tires slowly lurching closer and closer to the edge as the winch holding it seemed to fail. With a final jerk, the rope snapped, and the SUV began to plummet down toward the river below. In an instant, he was there, his hands gripping the front of the vehicle before it could fall.

The terrified screams of a mother and her three children slowly calmed to whimpers as they realized what was happening. He set the SUV down on the bridge, a safe

distance from the edge, and he ripped off both damaged passenger side doors.

Scanning each person in the vehicle, he was relieved to see there were no broken bones or serious injuries. He said in his deep voice, “I think you’ll all be fine, but please let the EMTs check you out to be sure.”

“Oh God, thank you, Superman! Oh God, my babies. Oh, thank you so much.”

“You’re welcome.” He nodded and gave them a reassuring smile, then stepped back and indicated to the emergency personnel it was their turn now, briefing them quickly before he turned away.

Clark stayed long enough to talk to the fire chief and ensure there was no structural damage to the bridge. Then, after a quick wave and nod to everyone on scene, he shot up in the air and into the stratosphere and just hung there, letting out a shuddering breath.

He was sure the look on Lois’s face would haunt him for the rest of his life, especially if this had just spelled the end of their all-too-brief relationship. He was far less sure that Lois would ever forgive him. Doubt crept in to help reassure him that her forgiveness would be hard won, if even possible.

Every look from every time he’d ever left her, lying so casually and so clumsily, flashed through his mind. Partners, best friends...those words meant something, and the foundation of those relationships was trust. Despair clenched at him; the idea that he’d slowly eroded that trust was painful.

There was nothing to do now but go back to the restaurant and make sure the bill was paid, and...well, if Lois wasn’t there — and he suspected she wouldn’t be — he supposed he ought to patrol the city and let her have some space and get some sleep.

Landing in a nearby alley, he quickly spun back into his suit and made his way into the restaurant. As he approached the table, her side of the booth coming into view, his breath caught at the sight of her.

“You’re...still here...” he said, his voice soft and his heart holding fast in his chest. “I — I’m sorry.”

Lois was quiet, her eyes almost dancing, searching, as if she was looking for him instead of at him. After a moment, her gaze met his, and she hesitated — studying him — before her eyebrows knit in concern, or confusion, maybe both. “You’re sorry?”

“I promised I wouldn’t leave.” His heart ached. Even knowing she was Superman’s biggest supporter, even knowing she’d understand... He’d still broken his promise, he’d still left her. Again.

“Clark...sit,” she said softly.

He started to move to the opposite side of the table, but she reached out her hand, clasping his and pulling him

gently to sit next to her, the same spot he’d left from. Unable to look her in the eyes just yet, he surveyed the table — their plates had been cleared, as had her wine glass, and there was a still-warm cup of coffee in front of her.

He almost jumped when her hand touched his thigh just above his knee. Finally, he looked at her, and her eyes still held that tenderness from earlier, but now with something more, something deeper he couldn’t quite name.

“Clark...that’s not a promise you can make.” She squeezed his thigh as she lowered her voice to barely a whisper. “And you never — never — have to apologize for saving someone’s life.”

Knowing she supported Superman and hearing her say it to him as Clark — especially now, when she knew everything — were wholly different things, and he felt a shift in his heart — not quite joyous but uplifting, the profound and comforting embrace of acceptance.

Still, he couldn’t escape the fact that he’d deceived her all this time, that he would always need to leave her — again and again — when lives were at risk. “Are you mad?”

“Because you left? Of course n — ”

“Because I lied.” His eyes dropped to her coffee cup, but he forced himself to look back up at her.

The hand on his thigh remained, her other hand coming up to cup his cheek. And he leaned into her touch, his heart twisting with some kind of hope.

“Can we...go somewhere and talk?” Lois asked softly. As she let her hand fall back down to the table, she looked around, reminding him that this wasn’t a place they could speak openly.

“Uh, yeah. Yeah, of course.” He started reaching for his wallet in his back pocket. “Just let me...”

“I already paid,” she told him gently.

He opened his mouth and closed it again, his protest dying on his lips because he wasn’t sure he even had a right to argue.

Lois squeezed his thigh again. “If it really matters to you, you can pay me back, but I don’t... I wasn’t sure how long you’d be gone, so I paid. I waited, but I paid, because I figured you might need...or... I just...” She trailed off, then moved to grab the small purse she’d brought. “Can we go talk?”

He nodded and gave her a hesitant smile, moving to get up from the booth. Lois followed, holding the simple black shawl she’d worn over her dress. Silently, he held his hands out, offering to help her put it on. The touch of her hand as she passed the shawl to him, the catching of her breath when his hands lightly brushed her shoulders through the thin material, and the soft thank you she murmured as he finished...all of it made him hope, a

desperate yearning, that this could work out after all.

As they made their way down the sidewalk away from the restaurant, Clark couldn't help but notice an almost-nervous energy coming off Lois. He tried his best not to worry about it, nor about her silence as they walked. They hadn't set off with a destination in mind, but as they came to the nearest intersection, she grabbed his hand and tugged him in the direction of Centennial Park.

There was almost an urgency to her pace, as though she might burst if she didn't have the chance to talk soon. He wondered if he should offer to fly them back to her apartment, but instead, he let her lead, deciding that he loved holding her hand, no matter the circumstance.

Just inside the park gates, she brought them to a bench, where she sat and encouraged him to sit next to her. Few people were around, likely because it was a weeknight and the late-spring evening had a slight chill to the air, a light breeze making it just a bit colder.

"Are you okay?" she asked, shifting a bit to face him, still holding his hand. "I mean, you seem okay...or at least...you were back relatively quickly, so I assume everything is okay? Everything went okay?"

"The...rescue?" he asked, slightly perplexed and dizzy by her train of thought but also by the fact that...no one had ever asked him that before. His heart squeezed, and he was a bit overwhelmed by the feeling. At her nod, he smiled softly and answered, "Yeah. Yeah...I made it just in time. Everyone was okay."

"Good, I'm glad," she said, giving him a gentle smile before her gaze fell to their clasped hands.

Neither of them spoke for the next few moments. Behind them, the occasional car drove past, and if he listened closer, he could hear the breeze rustling through the trees and the general din of the city at night. Metropolis was quiet again.

He hadn't at all been expecting this to be the thing she had so anxiously wanted to ask him. There had to be more on her mind, of course, but honestly, he wasn't sure what to say, how to reply.

Her thumb was running absently over his knuckles, and the sensation was somehow both comforting and a pleasant distraction. As the moments stretched on, though, his doubt and apprehension crept back in.

"Why...why aren't you mad?" he said before he could even think about what it was he was asking.

A half-amused laugh escaped her as she looked back up at him. "Do you want me to be?" Her tone was lightly teasing, but he still winced inwardly. "I'm...relieved," she said.

"Relieved?"

"Clark, don't you realize..." She trailed off, her gaze

drifting to the trees and the winding running path in front of them. Her voice was quiet, almost pensive. "Every time you disappeared, I wondered what I must have said to scare you off. I didn't know if you were afraid of commitment or if you'd decided I wasn't worth the trouble."

"Lois, I — "

"I know, Clark — I know now," she said, finally looking back at him, her eyes filled with unshed tears that made his heart hurt all the more. "But...you told me you loved me before, and then you took it back. I just...I needed to know...I — " She inhaled sharply and closed her eyes, her tears slipping out and rolling down her cheeks.

He fought the urge to reach up and wipe them away.

When she opened her eyes again, he saw a different kind of pain there. "I was afraid to love you... I loved Superman, but I was afraid to love you — Clark."

His heart hung on the precipice, hopeful but far too afraid to fall...as if he could fool himself that he hadn't fallen for her a million times over already. "You...you love me?"

"Of course I love you," she whispered. "I just, I — "

Overwhelmed by a surge of love, he rushed in to capture her lips, his hands coming up to frame her face, and he kissed her with all the longing and desire he'd harbored for her since the moment they'd met. She melted into him with a little moan, and then somehow, her hands were at the nape of his neck, trailing fire with her fingers and pulling him closer. He felt lost in the dream of forever and the warmth of her lips and her tongue as they moved in concert with his own, edging the dream closer and closer to reality.

And it seemed like forever, yet no time at all, when they finally pulled back, needing to catch their breath. He rested his forehead against hers, sparks of desire still running through him as her fingers stroked gently at his neck.

"All I needed to know was that you wanted me," she murmured.

"Me too," he rasped. "Me too."

Clark pulled back a little further, suddenly desperate to see her face, look in her eyes, and his heart skipped a beat at the love he saw there. His hands were still cupping her cheeks, and he let one of them slide down to the gentle curve of her neck, where he could feel her pulse racing. With his other hand, he threaded his fingers through her hair and smoothed the pad of his thumb across the angle of her cheekbone.

She smiled tenderly at him, though her expression held a hint of mischief. "So...you do love me, then?"

He laughed a breathy laugh, his heart so light he thought he might float them straight up into the clouds. “Yeah,” he said, his voice husky. “I love you. I love you so much, Lois.”

“And I love you, Clark. All of you. I always have. I just... It was far too scary to admit it, even to myself.” She ducked her head and blushed a bit before looking back up at him. “I guess...we both had a bit more trusting we needed to — ” She yawned suddenly, bringing her hand up to cover her mouth.

“Oh, sorry, I wasn’t thinking! You’ve hardly gotten any sleep the last day and a half, Lois. I should really take you home.” He stood quickly and reached for her hand. “I — I can...fly you — it would be faster?”

He didn’t miss the quiet gasp at his offer — which sent a small thrill through him — but he felt almost too guilty for even asking her out at all tonight when he’d known how little she’d slept.

“I...actually, I’d rather walk with you a bit more...if that’s okay?” She looked up at him, an almost-shy smile on her face, and his heart skipped a beat.

“That’s...more than okay. I’d love to walk with you.”

Clark reveled in the feeling of her hand in his — grateful again, this time for the fact that he didn’t have to try and tamp down his emotions or hide them. As they headed down the winding path, somehow having both silently agreed that a walk through the park would be far more enjoyable, Lois interlaced her fingers with his and gave a little squeeze.

He wasn’t sure he could be any happier than he was right now, walking hand in hand with the love of his life, knowing she loved him and knew his secret. It wasn’t until they were passing near the bridge that led over the narrowest part of the lake, the lights of the city reflecting and sparkling on the surface of the water, that he realized he hadn’t been to the park since that day last summer. He used to come here all the time and just...be. Something about being in such a peaceful place in the center of the big, bustling city he loved had been calming in a way, yet he’d let the agony of that day keep him away lately.

“Oh, wow,” Lois said softly, bringing Clark out of his thoughts. “Look how magical it is, Clark, the way the lights dance off the water.”

He smiled, and his heart did too. “Yeah, it’s pretty magical.” They paused, turning to face the lake and watch the lights and reflections for a moment.

And suddenly, the surface of the lake and its reflections started to skitter and jump, heavy raindrops falling and making the water ripple wildly. Lois squealed and tucked herself in close to him, and he put his arm around her and hurried them off in the direction of a thick grove of trees.

“Ready?” he asked.

“Ready for what?”

“I’m going to fly us — super quick — to your apartment. It’ll...be a little different from other times you’ve flown with me — faster. Okay?”

She nodded, though she looked a little uncertain, and he wrapped his arms around her, holding her close, and then he zipped off under cover of the rain and darkness, arriving at her window a few seconds later.

“Whoa, that was — ”

But when he reached to open it, it wouldn’t budge. “It’s...locked.”

He stood there, midair, confused for a moment about what to do.

“Clark! We’re getting soaked! Go around!”

“Right, right. Sorry.”

Zipping again, he had them at her door in no time, and as she dug her keys out of her purse and then unlocked the door, he noticed her slight shivering, and he was frustrated with himself again for having her out on a night when she’d have been better off sleeping. Still, given how the night had unfolded, he was having trouble regretting it.

All five locks disengaged, Lois turned the doorknob and entered the apartment first. “I was mad at you,” she said quietly.

“You...what?” He wasn’t sure what topic they were on. The sound of drips from their wet clothing hitting the floor filled the silence as it hung there briefly.

“The window,” she said, closing the door behind them and turning to face him. “I was mad at you — Superman — for letting Perry get kidnapped while you flirted with some bim — oh my God! That’s why you were acting so strangely — both of you!”

“I’m sorry,” he said, almost reflexively, searching her eyes for any hint that she was still mad.

“It’s — it wasn’t your fault...” she tried to reassure him, her hands coming up to clutch at her upper arms as another shiver ran through her. “I — I should go...c-change.”

“I could...dry you...” he offered, his hand moving up to his glasses hesitantly.

Her brow furrowed in confusion for a moment, but then she must have realized what he meant. “Oh, um...it’s probably better...I’m not sure how that would affect the dress, but...thank you.” She looked back up and gave him a tentative smile. “I’ll just change into something warmer, more comfortable anyway.”

“Sure, of course.” He nodded, trying not to let his mind wander or his eyes drift back to the neckline of her dress and the way her shawl stuck damply to the swell of her breasts. “Could I...uh, use your bathroom to...dry myself and my clothes?”

“Ah, y-yes. Yeah, that’s fine... I’ll just, uh, be in the bedroom,” she said as she edged slowly in that direction, still keeping her eyes on him.

And then she must have slipped or something because the next thing he knew, he was racing to catch her, and she was in his arms, his hands on her waist.

“Th-thanks,” she said breathlessly, her hands splayed against his chest and her fingers starting to wander under the edges of his damp suit coat. “Wet floor...”

He nodded, his breaths shortening and his heart racing at her touch, at the sight of her damp skin and slightly parted lips. “I, um... If you give me about thirty seconds, I can go dry myself off and grab a towel to get the floor.”

She nodded but didn’t otherwise move. He could hear her heart fluttering wildly as she murmured, “I need to go change.”

“Okay,” he said, his voice a husky whisper.

“You’re not moving...”

“Neither are you...”

Lois pressed her fingers against his chest briefly, leaning into him just slightly, before she pushed back slowly from him. “I’ll...uh, wait here while you...”

It took him a moment to process what she was saying, so distracting was her nearness, her touch, and the way her eyes had darkened just a little. “Right, uh...okay...” He let his hands fall from her waist and hesitated for a second, suddenly feeling self-conscious about using his powers so casually around her.

He walked the short distance to the bathroom and shut the door behind him. Then, in a whirlwind, he took off his clothes and his suit, dried them with a few bursts of heat vision, put them back on, and exited the bathroom, towel in hand.

“Wow...” she said, her eyes looking him up and down. “That was...fast.”

Clark chuckled nervously. “I’m...going to...dry the floor now.” He motioned with the towel toward the trail of wet drips and small puddled areas.

She stepped back, and he dried the entire floor, entryway included, and dried the towel with his heat vision before folding it neatly and putting it at her feet, indicating she should put her damp shoes on it.

“I’ll just...” He hooked a thumb in the direction of her living room.

Lois nodded again — it seemed they both had lost the ability to speak full sentences, or any words at all. He found he couldn’t take his eyes off her for some reason, even as she edged a bit sideways, taking a step or two toward her bedroom, and then finally closed the door behind her. And as he headed back to the living room, he wondered why on earth he hadn’t kissed her just now.

Clark sat on one of her couches to wait but then, feeling antsy, immediately got up again and went to the kitchen to set about making some tea. Tea would be good. It would warm Lois up after the wet and cold, and making it would — he swallowed hard — making it would help distract him from the sound of her damp clothing peeling away from her skin and the image forming in his head of — nope. Nope, he wouldn’t think about that. Because that would...be an invasion of privacy.

After removing his suit coat and hanging it on one of the chairs at Lois’s kitchen table, he found her kettle and filled it most of the way, deciding to boil it slowly with his heat vision to give him something to concentrate on. Once it was the perfect temperature, he poured the water into two mugs and put a chamomile tea bag in each one to steep.

By the time he brought the mugs to the coffee table and sat down, Lois had emerged from her bedroom wearing black leggings and an oversized long-sleeved shirt with a wide neck that showed hints of her collarbone, her hair slightly damp but curling softly and framing her face as it had last Christmas Eve. God, she looked amazing.

“Hey,” she said in that soft voice that was somehow shy and flirty at the same time.

“Hey.”

“Ah, you made some tea,” she said, gesturing to the mugs on the coffee table and sitting down next to him on the couch. “Thank you.”

He tipped his head in acknowledgement and then started to reach for the mugs for both of them.

“Clark, wait,” she blurted out, causing him to freeze mid-reach. “I don’t want tea.”

Straightening, he turned to look at her, and the way her eyes searched his face somewhat hungrily and the way her heart was racing in his ears made his throat go dry. “What do you want?” he rasped.

“I want to kiss you. I don’t want tea; I want to kiss you.”

Clark wasn’t even sure who moved first — all he knew was the pure bliss and desire that coursed through him when their lips met. One hand moved to cup her cheek, needing to touch her skin and somehow draw her even closer. Apparently needing the same, Lois’s fingertips trailed fire everywhere she touched — his jaw, his cheek, the nape of his neck. It was heaven — this must be what heaven felt like, Lois in his arms kissing him as though she couldn’t get enough of him. And, God, he felt the same.

Feeling emboldened and desperate to taste more of her, Clark started trailing kisses across her jawline, below her ear, and down her neck. Her breathy moans and the sound of her whispering his name only fueled him further as she tilted her head to allow him greater access to the expanse

of her neck. When his tongue found a particularly sensitive spot, she whimpered his name, sending a strong jolt of heat and need all the way from his head down to his toes.

This was... He needed a moment. He fluttered a few small kisses along her neck before he paused, resting his forehead against her collarbone and letting out a shuddering breath.

Lois's hands ran over the muscles in his back and shoulders, making him wish he hadn't bothered to put the super suit on again so he'd be able to feel her touch more fully. Her hands wandered more, up and over his shoulders to frame his face and tug him back to her waiting lips, and he gladly followed, leaning into her and kissing her with abandon as she seemed to be moving away from him — but she wasn't moving away; she was pulling him down on top of her as she lay back against the arm of the couch. She let out a whimper of protest, though, and he released her mouth and found her eyes, worried he'd done something wrong.

"God, I wish we were at your place..." she complained. "The couches are way more comfortable there."

Clark laughed breathily and then kissed her again and again, his words sounding husky as he spoke between kisses against her lips. "I can...get us there...in two seconds if —"

"Yeah...yeah...please...do that..."

Even though he'd made the offer, it took him half a second to register what she was asking for, his brain so foggy with desire, but as soon as he had, he gathered her up in his arms, standing and pulling her flush against his body. Then he was off like a shot — leaving via her window and arriving through his own and setting them down on their feet in front of the couch.

"Oh, God, wow."

He smiled, feeling more than just a little flush of pride as he reclaimed her lips and pressed his fingers gently into the small of her back. She moaned softly into his mouth as his tongue explored and danced with hers.

Clark felt her hands roam across his back as their increasingly insistent kisses continued, and when her fingers found the waistband of his slacks and began tugging at his shirt, he almost startled from the jolt of desire and nerves that assaulted him. She tugged more, the hem of his shirt now untucked, and he could feel her fingers flexing at his waist...over spandex. They broke off the kiss, both groaning in frustration.

"Lois, I —"

"Take the suit off, Clark," Lois cut in. "I need to touch you."

The need, the desperate urgency in her voice and the pleading demand of her words nearly undid him, and he

had to rest his forehead against hers for a moment to gather himself. But then he nodded, took a step back, and sped to the bedroom and back in half a second, stopping again in front of her, the two sides of his now-unbuttoned shirt fluttering from his movements.

"God, you're gorgeous," she said, staring unabashedly but almost hesitating before reaching out and pressing her fingers against his chest.

Clark inhaled sharply at the feel of her fingertips on his bare skin and found himself unable to go a second longer without kissing her, so he dipped down to capture her mouth, running his tongue along her lips, requesting entrance, which she eagerly granted. She leaned into him, moving her body closer and closer, her hands snaking around his sides and to his back, leaving fire in their wake.

Fueled by desire and an undefinable boldness, he sat down on the couch and pulled her onto his lap, her legs automatically straddling his even as she gasped in surprise. He started trailing kisses down her jaw and along her neck, tasting, memorizing the heady feeling even as he wondered if this was all too much and too soon.

Certainly there was no harm in enjoying this just a little longer, he thought as he found her mouth once more. Every emotion, every sensation he'd only ever felt in private — scraps of moments and the thrill and hope of someday, maybe...stolen from his days and fantasized about at night — everything was amplified, more intense.

When he paused again, overwhelmed by all the intense sensations, Lois pulled away slightly to look at him. "Is... is there something wrong, Clark?"

He let out a strangled laugh, wondering how in the world he'd gotten to this exact moment in time. "Wrong? Gosh, no... It's just..." He took a deep, shuddering breath. "This is a lot. Amazing and... God, Lois, it's... everything... It's just a lot."

Clark watched as she schooled her expression, knowing by the way her breath had hitched that she'd just barely caught it from falling, and she nodded. He reached up to cup her cheek, and she leaned into his touch, smiling and turning just slightly to kiss his palm.

"Is it...too much?"

Oh, how he wanted the answer to be no. Maybe the answer was no? But he was intoxicatingly overwhelmed, and she had to be tired. Didn't she? "It's late," he rasped.

"That wasn't the question." She kissed his palm again, this time more suggestively than sweet. "Is it too much?"

He shook his head even as he answered, "I should let you get some sleep..."

Lois leaned in to kiss him on the lips, slow and deep, before pulling back again. "I don't want to sleep right now, Clark." Her voice was soft and a little breathy.

Oh, God, sleep was the absolute last thing on his mind. “Me either,” he managed to choke out.

She kept her gaze steady on him, smiling so seductively his heart skipped several beats. For a moment, though, a breathtaking tenderness shone through in her eyes. “I love you, Clark,” she said, wrapping her arms around his neck and then pulling him close for a slow and passionate kiss. “And I want you to make love to me.”

“Oh, Lois...” His hands framed her face as he pulled back slightly to get lost in her eyes. “I love you too. So much.” Drawing her back to his lips, he couldn’t help but be grateful again. This is what he’d only dreamed dating Lois would be like — overwhelming passion and belonging and a deeper need than he’d ever known before.

Much later, Clark lay on his back in his bed, Lois snuggled up next to him in the crook of his shoulder and her arm wrapped around his midsection. He marveled at how beautiful she looked in the aftermath of their lovemaking — because that had to be what it was, every time tonight. He hadn’t realized making love could mean so many different acts, but now, here, with Lois, it couldn’t be anything else.

“God, I love you, Lois...so much,” he said, brushing his fingers along the side of her cheek and staring into her eyes. “I can...I can hardly believe you’re here with me... like this...knowing everything...”

“I love you too.” Her beautiful brown eyes shone with love and affection, darkened by her arousal, and she reached up to frame his face in her hands. “This is... It’s everything I ever wanted... I didn’t think...” She paused, clearly swallowing back some sort of emotion. “I didn’t think it was possible...this kind of love.”

Clark’s heart squeezed in his chest and then again as he watched a tear roll down her cheek. “I... Lois, I...” He trailed off, struggling to find the right words, his voice hoarse with emotion. “Is this... Are we sure this is real?”

She nodded her head against his chest. “Very real,” she murmured, reaching up a bit to press her lips to his. “It’s the realest thing I’ve ever experienced, being with you, being in love with you.”

He grinned, his heart so full he thought it might burst. “You mean ‘most real thing?’” he teased, absolutely overjoyed that he somehow felt comfortable doing so right now, like this.

Lois gave him a mock grumble and swatted his chest playfully. “Nope. I meant ‘the realest thing.’” She raised a challenging eyebrow at him.

Instead of replying, he lowered his lips and kissed her — partly in hopes of distracting her but mostly because he hadn’t kissed her in at least three minutes and he missed the feel of it already.

“So, is editing my copy in bed a new priority of yours?” Lois winked at him.

Clark’s head fell back, and he laughed heartily. “Maybe...” he teased again. “But you know what my biggest priority is?”

Her face softened, her eyes reading his face as he smiled at her. “What’s that?”

“You,” he whispered.

Her breath hitched, and he could see the shine of tears in her eyes as she reached up to plant a gentle kiss on his lips, her fingers tracing along his jawline. “I told you... that’s not a promise you can make.”

“You’re right.” His hand came up to cup her face, his thumb caressing her cheek. “But I can promise never to lie to you again.”

“All right,” she said, her voice taking on that softer, slightly flirtier tone that made his heart race, those words and that tone that had mere hours ago granted him his chance to make things right.

“I love you, Lois.”

“I love you too, Clark. All of you.”

THE END