

Flying Easy

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Summary: A late night return to the Planet by Lois after the evening of "Fly Hard" leads to an unexpected meeting on the roof.

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Time Frame: Season 1 - The end of the evening of the episode "Fly Hard."

Part 1: Lois

Even by the standards of Lois Lane, this evening had been crazy. What had started out as a quick stop at work on the way to the opera with Lex had turned into a hostage situation. She'd expected Superman to resolve the problem in short order, as he had most of her other crises in the past year; but this evening the hero was absent. She wasn't entirely convinced that it was the nuclear device that kept Superman away; but Lois didn't know what else it could have been. As it was, she and her fellow hostages survived mostly through their own efforts.

Before the evening had come to an end, Lex had been shot and Lois had fallen off the roof, only to have Superman finally show up just in time to catch her. The final part of the evening had a surreal feel to it, as she had climbed into the ambulance with Lex and left Clark standing in the street. For all the strangeness of the evening, that image stayed with her. The look on Clark's face was...

Then there was Clark's cryptic warning about Lex. Lois didn't know what to think. She should have been certain that her place was at Lex's side, but somehow she couldn't shake the feeling that she really belonged on that street with Clark.

Lois had been fighting that feeling more and more lately. The more time she spent in Lex's world, the more she felt she didn't fit in. She had to remind herself that it was every woman's dream to live Lex's lifestyle. She was sure that once she adjusted, she'd love it. She would... Why did that feel more like desperation than belief?

Once they arrived at the hospital, the emergency room team whisked Lex away. As it turned out, Lois didn't spend much time there. Lois was sitting in the waiting room when one of Lex's assistants came in and told her that Lex was gone. He'd left for his tower under the care of his personal physician without her even seeing him. At least the assistant provided a way for her to get home. In less than five minutes, a chauffeured limousine arrived. She initially asked to go to her apartment, but half way there, she asked the driver to head for the Planet instead. Despite the early hour, she just didn't want to be home alone. Lois found herself hoping that Clark would be there. It didn't seem very likely, but just the same, she didn't want to be at home. If nothing else, she could type up some notes from the evening.

When Lois got to the Planet, she wasn't surprised to find it deserted. Fortunately, in the course of the evening, the locker room hadn't been damaged and she was able to change out of the evening gown and into her backup work clothes. After changing,

she sat down to type up her notes, but the motivation just wasn't there. She felt restless and decided that she wanted to experience the remainder of the Metropolis night from the place the evening ended. She headed up to the roof with the expectation of silently enjoying the pre-dawn city.

When she reached the roof, she was surprised to find someone sitting on the edge of the building. Lois almost fled the rooftop but it took her only an instant to realize that it was Superman.

"Superman, what are you doing here?"

His head jerked around in surprise at the sound of her voice, but he recovered quickly. "Hi, Lois. I must have been deep in my own thoughts. I usually hear when someone approaches but I didn't know you were there until you spoke."

Lois went over and sat down carefully beside the hero.

He gave her a concerned look. "Lois, be careful. It's a long way down."

Given the events of earlier this evening, it was all she could do not to laugh. She turned to see him looking at her intently. "I'll be fine," she offered. "Besides, if I were to slip, wouldn't you catch me?" She paused and looked over the edge. Maybe it was the after effects of the evening but she was feeling slightly giddy. "After all, you did earlier," she offered with a smile.

"I'll always catch you when I can." His tone was much more personal than usual. Of course, he wasn't in the middle of a rescue. The way he said that tugged at her heart. He was special to her but so much of the time, he felt distant. He didn't feel distant now.

She looked at his feet dangling over the edge. "Do you sit up here often?" she asked.

He looked thoughtful for a moment. "I guess I'm on this building more than most. Usually when I'm on patrol, I try to keep moving. Sometimes I like to just stop, rest and listen. This is probably my favorite place to do that."

"That surprises me," Lois replied. "I'd have thought you would spend all your time on the tallest building looking down on people."

Lois heard a muttered reply. She was about to ask him to speak up when Superman replied in a louder voice. "I like being close to people, not looking down on them."

That was a fascinating response. Up until that moment, Lois thought Superman spent most of his time floating above, watching and waiting to help. His reply was even more interesting in light of what he'd first muttered. Lois had excellent hearing. His initial reply raised some very disturbing questions. It had taken a second or two to work out the words, but she was sure. He'd said, "I'm not Luthor."

What did that mean? Her mind flashed back to that first meeting when Lex had said that he liked that fact that from his penthouse all of Metropolis had to look up to see him. Lois hadn't thought of that moment since then, but now it took on new meaning. Lex must have said something very similar to Superman. Superman seemed to think it was significant that Lex enjoyed ... looking down on people.

The hero seemed to be open to talk tonight. This was a rare opportunity. What could she ask him? She'd learned two things so far tonight. Superman liked to be among people, and he didn't seem to think too much of Lex. Maybe this was her chance to find out even more.

"Could I ask you a few questions?"

Suddenly he looked nervous. "An interview?"

Of course he'd react that way. She shouldn't have been so direct. She tried to sound as friendly and casual as possible. "No, not at all. Just two friends talking. I promise that this is only for me. I'd like to ask some questions; but nothing you say will be reported."

He relaxed, but only a tiny bit. "Okay, go ahead Lois, but you

have to realize that there are some questions I just won't answer."

Based on what she knew, especially the parts that he didn't know she knew, that was a perfectly reasonable reply. "I promise that I'm not going to try to corner you. I've just been thinking that I don't know you as well as I'd like. If I get too pushy you can either tell me to back off or just fly away."

Superman laughed. "I'll keep that in mind. Go ahead and ask your questions."

She took a deep breath. Recently she'd had an epiphany that she'd wanted to talk to Superman about. This was the perfect opportunity. Superman might not know it, but she planned to drop a bomb on him tonight. Just maybe she'd be able to show him that she was worthy of his trust and friendship. "You have a reputation for extreme honesty. Do you always tell the truth? Even when you aren't in front of the public?"

He grew thoughtful at this. "Well, I try not to say anything untrue."

"I'm sure you know that the most effective way to lie is to be creative with the truth," she replied. "Everyone does it. We either leave out something critical to understanding, or we say things in a way that won't be believed. So, please, this is important to me. Do you always tell the truth?"

There was a long delay before he replied. "No. I prefer to tell the truth as much as I can, but for various reasons..."

Lois waited. She could tell that there was more to come and she was determined not to give him an easy out. Finally he looked over at her and in a very sad-sounding voice added, "I'm sorry that I've let you down."

That caught her off guard. Let her down? He worried that much about how she thought of him? "Why do you think you've let me down?" she asked. She reached over and put her hand on his arm in what she hoped would be a reassuring gesture. "Just because you don't tell the whole truth with every word? I would have been upset if you'd said that you always told the truth. That could have meant only two things and both of them would have been bad."

He seemed to stare at her hand for a second before looking up. Now he looked confused. "Two things?" He did sound relieved that she wasn't disappointed in him.

"Yes. If you really do tell nothing but the truth, it would mean you don't live in a world I understand. No one can tell the perfect truth all the time. At least no one I've met. Maybe there's a saint somewhere who does, but I'll bet that they don't have any friends."

He smiled at her reply. In a more cheerful voice he asked, "What would be the other option?"

Lois moved her hand back to her own lap and let her voice turn serious. "That you were lying right now."

"Oh..." Superman paused a moment as if to show that he understood the seriousness of her reaction. He turned slightly so that he was in a better position to look at her. "So, now that we've established that I'm not going to lie to you, are you going to ask a question that I can answer? I mean besides whether or not I occasionally hedge the truth."

Lois thought for a moment. If this was about truth then she should show her own hand immediately. If she revealed what she knew later on, he might think she was trying to play some kind of game with him. "Superman, I know you grew up on Earth. What was it like? Growing up as an alien?" It took all of her concentration to keep her voice casual through the whole question.

She'd been watching his face. He was stunned. "What makes you believe I grew up here?"

At least he didn't deny it. He probably wanted to make sure she had something real and wasn't just on a fishing expedition. "I was out with Lex last week and we were at a gala of some kind in Paris." Lois noticed that his expression darkened the tiniest bit at

the mention of Lex. Or could it be that it was her date with Lex that disturbed Superman? ...Another fact to chew on later.

"There were people from all over the world," she continued. "I think Lex and I might have been the only Americans there. I felt very out-of-place and spent most of the evening wondering why I wasn't home in my apartment. While I was waiting for the evening to end, I got to thinking about how easy it was to tell that people were from different countries and regions. Even the Europeans that looked as American as I do acted differently. The strangeness of all the people made me feel uncomfortable. When I'm here in Metropolis, even when I'm surrounded by strangers, I still feel at home. That was when it hit me. You didn't grow up on another planet. You didn't even grow up in another country. Everything about the way you speak and act tells me you were raised in America."

He looked like he was trying to find his way out of a trap. She needed to reassure him that she wasn't a threat to him.

"Please don't worry. I'm not going to ask you any details and I promise I won't share this with anyone. It's just that ever since I figured this out, I've wondered why we don't see any of the rest of your family, um... flying."

He looked like he was thinking about flying - away. Finally, he seemed to relax. He had the look of someone that had come to an important decision. He gathered himself and answered, "I'm an orphan. I arrived here in a tiny space ship when I was just a baby. My parents sent me away because our planet was doomed and it was my only chance for survival. A human couple found me and raised me as their own."

Wow. What kind of people would simply take in a baby in a spaceship? "They must be special people," she offered.

"The best," he replied in a wistful tone.

"Was it difficult? Being an alien and all?"

"Not so much at first. I didn't have any powers in my early years, so I was just like any other little boy. I never got sick, but my parents knew I was different and figured that was just part of the package. I was a teenager when my special abilities started to come in." He paused. She could tell he was thinking about a difficult period. "That was a hard time. My parents didn't tell me anything about my origins until they had to. One day I was a normal boy and the next I was breaking things because I was too strong. Then I was seeing through walls and starting fires with my eyes."

He sounded so sad when he described this. His tone reminded her of someone but right this second she couldn't place the person. "Was it lonely?"

"A little," he sighed.

Lois could tell that wasn't the complete truth. She gave him her most disbelieving look and waited.

After a second, he wilted under her stare and smiled sheepishly. "That's right. Only the truth tonight. Okay, yes, it was very lonely. But my parents were great."

"Can you tell me anything about your parents? They must be incredible people."

"I'm sorry Lois, but I can't answer that. They're special people but you'll need to ask about something else."

She hadn't really expected him to say anything about the amazing people that had raised him, but it had been worth a try. Maybe he'd trust her with that some day. "I understand. I meant it when I said that I just wanted this to be a talk between friends."

Lois thought for a minute. There were other things she could ask, but it would just be delaying the inevitable. From the instant she'd heard him mutter, there had been a question on the tip of her tongue. This wasn't going to be easy and she braced herself for what might come. "What do you know about Lex that I don't?"

Nervousness clouded his face again. "Lois, I'm not sure I should answer that."

“Why not?”

He was quiet for a long moment. “You’re dating him and ... you might not like what I have to say. You did insist that I tell the truth.”

Superman knew things about Lex that he didn’t think she’d believe? She was trying to deal with the potential magnitude of that when he continued: “There’s another problem. There’s what I know and then there’s what I believe but can’t prove.”

It just wasn’t going to get any better. “Please tell me—both what you know and what you believe.”

“Lois, are you sure? I promise that I’ll try to be fair, but I’m afraid that it won’t seem that way.”

“I’m positive.”

“Okay. But remember when you said that if I didn’t like your questions I could just leave?”

He waited until she nodded. “You can do the same thing,” he offered. “I don’t think you’re going to be happy with what I have to say.”

Now he was being patronizing. Who was he to protect her from the truth? “Just tell me,” she said, barely keeping the anger out of her voice.

“Ok, Lois. I’m sorry if I’ve offended you but I ... I don’t want to hurt you.” He paused once more, but this time she just waited. “I know Lex was behind the series of tests that happened when I first arrived in Metropolis. Some only involved his own people; but others hurt innocent bystanders. I remember how shook up I was when I realized that you’d been hurt when he bombed the Carlin building. Once I figured out what was going on and confronted him, he threatened to keep them going and keep hurting people unless I left Metropolis. I came close to leaving right then.”

Lois could hardly believe this. “Superman, I don’t know what to say. I know Lex and...”

Superman cut her off. “Lois, how well do you really know him? Weren’t you going to get the definitive interview with him? Did he ever give you enough information to write that piece? Or did he avoid the questions?”

That put her back. It had been so long since that first dinner that she’d forgotten all about the article. “We became friends,” she answered somewhat defensively. “Somehow it didn’t seem right to do an expose.”

Superman was nodding slowly. “Lois, he’s a master at misdirection. I’ve only seen what I have because of my special abilities.”

She still couldn’t quite believe what Superman was telling her. “Are you really sure of what you’re saying?” she pleaded.

He reached out and lightly held her shoulder as he nodded in affirmation. “I’m sure. But, Lois, there’s no proof. He never leaves proof.”

“Never? You say that like there’s more.”

Superman removed his hand and turned to stare out over the city for a second. When he faced her again his look was solemn. “I know he was involved in the Mentamide experiments.”

Her mouth dropped open. “He was experimenting on those children?”

“I don’t know exactly how much he knew. He was involved enough to know that the original version of Mentamide 6 was deadly. I was there when he let that slip. That tells me he was deeply involved. Let’s see... I think those are the main incidents where I have first-hand knowledge. As for what I believe but don’t know for sure.... I believe he was involved with the cyborg boxers that got your dad in trouble.”

“That’s impossible!” Her reply was almost a shout. “He helped out my dad.”

It was as if her angry outburst had thrown a dark blanket over his spirit. “Whatever you say, Lois. I guess I’ll be going.”

She could see that this was his way of telling her that she

really couldn’t handle hearing what he thought. She quickly reached out and grasped his arm. “No! Please stay. You warned me that I wouldn’t like it. Is that everything?”

He was looking at her hand. It wasn’t as if she could do anything to keep him here if he really wanted to go. She pulled her hand back, but repeated her plea. “Please. If there’s anything else.... I need to know.”

He paused for a minute. She could tell he was reluctant to go on. “No, I almost forgot one other thing. I believe he was behind the space program sabotage; and I think that Antoinette Baines was working for him. In fact, I believe, but can’t prove, that he was involved in her death.”

“You think Lex might have killed someone?” Her voice was barely a whisper.

Superman just stared back at her. She could see that, in some ways, this seemed to be as hard for him as it was for her. He looked down at the street below for several long seconds. “Lois, I don’t have proof.”

“Superman, please,” she begged. “I can tell that there’s more you haven’t told me yet.”

“I believe he’s responsible for many more deaths than just Dr. Baines.”

She was silent for a minute. How could Superman believe those things about Lex? And what should she do? She had been sitting for nearly a minute with her mind spinning in circles. Her whole world had been turned upside down. Could Superman be lying? She didn’t think so.

Lois could feel her spirit sag. If Superman was right, and she had to admit he probably was, Lois’s record was still perfect. She was zero for everything in her relationships. As she put her head down she muttered, “It figures.”

“Lois?” Superman asked, his voice filled with concern.

She couldn’t help but shake her head as she replied. “I’m barely in a new relationship and it turns into another disaster. You wouldn’t know this, but every relationship I’ve ever had has ended badly.”

She lifted her head and looked over at the hero. She could sense the compassion pouring from him. “You must have a great record in relationships,” Lois suggested. “Any woman that knew you were interested would feel like she was the luckiest girl in the world.”

He looked thoughtful for a second before replying. “Lois, you must understand that Superman can’t be close to anyone. Even with the limited contact that you and I have had, we’re associated closely enough that it puts you in danger.” Now he was staring at the street below shaking his head. “No, Superman can’t have a personal relationship with any woman. Something might happen and I’d never forgive myself.”

That phrasing felt odd. It was as if he were talking about Superman as somebody else. In a flash of insight, she realized he was. She’d just seen the other guy. The man that she didn’t know. The person who was so lonely growing up. The boy who grew up to be a hero.

“But what about you?” Lois asked.

“I just said...”

“Not Superman,” she replied, cutting him off. “I mean you. The man I don’t know. The person we were talking about a few minutes ago.”

Superman, or whatever his real name was, just stared back at her, so she pressed on. “Do you have a girlfriend?” she pressed.

“I...” he stuttered.

That seemed to touch a nerve. “I’m sorry. Am I getting too personal?”

He smiled sheepishly. “Not really. There is a woman that I care about very much. But... Well, you’d be surprised how hard it can be to impress someone when they don’t know about this...” he offered, pointing at the ‘S’ on his chest. “When I’m not flying

around in the suit I'm just an ordinary Joe.”

She couldn't believe what she was hearing. Superman had trouble with relationships too. Lois knew what kind of qualities that man under the cape had to have. He had to be incredibly special to use his abilities to help so much and get nothing in return. She wished she were the woman that he wanted to impress.

It seemed that silence had shattered the mood. Superman seemed suddenly fidgety. Earlier, he'd almost left in frustration. Now he just seemed uncomfortable. Her time was almost up, and there was still the issue of all the things he'd told her about Lex.

“Superman, why haven't you ever said anything about Lex to me before?”

He was quiet for a long time. “Lois, I don't have any proof. No one does. I kept hoping that you would see through his deception. With no evidence, we're left with nothing but bare accusations. I know what I've seen, and I can guess at more, but... As I said, he never leaves evidence. Clark has tried to tell you to look more deeply.”

The caught her off guard. “You know what Clark has said about Lex?”

He took a longer time in replying that she thought he should. Finally, he replied with a simple “Yes.”

This opened an avenue of possibilities for Lois. “How well do you know Clark?” she asked.

He was quiet again. “I know Clark ... better than most people. Beyond that, well, that's one of those questions I can't answer.”

So he knew Clark very well. That made sense, and she'd suspected as much based on some of the things that had happened this year. Still, she couldn't let this go by unchallenged. “You told me what you think about Lex. Why won't you tell me anything about Clark?”

Now he looked really troubled. “How do I say this? I don't have anything bad to say about Clark, but I know things I can't talk about.”

“That's not fair,” she replied. “You didn't have any problem criticizing Lex but now you won't tell me what you know about Clark?”

He looked pained. “Lois, it's complicated. I'm sorry. I swear that Clark hasn't killed anyone and isn't involved in any criminal activities. Beyond that, I just can't answer any questions about him without... I just can't.”

Now Superman was obviously agitated. It was clear that by asking about Clark, Lois had crossed the line for what Superman would say this night. Sure enough, he stood and offered his hand. “I need to be going. I'd feel better if you weren't sitting on the edge after I leave.”

Lois let him help her stand. As she stood, she was able to look at his face intently. There was that same nervousness she'd started seeing a moment ago. Now there was something else... Regret? Frustration? He could be so hard to read. She wanted to ask why he couldn't talk about Clark, but she knew if she asked what he was thinking, Superman would simply fly away. In an instant, another question popped into her head. She was surprised she hadn't thought to ask it first.

“When I came up here tonight you seemed to be worried about something. You said so yourself when I arrived. Would you tell me what it was about?”

That question triggered an unexpected smile. “The reason that I was sitting here thinking tonight, was that I have been getting worried about how close you were getting to Luthor. I hope you'll consider what I've told you.”

“Of course, but you understand that I'll have to see what I can learn for myself.”

“I wouldn't expect anything less from you. Just remember that Luthor is exceptionally good at hiding what he is. For you in particular, he's made an extra effort to appear to be nothing more

than a businessman. He knows how capable you are.” Superman paused for a moment. “Lois, be careful. Based on what I've discovered, I believe that if he were to learn that you were investigating him and feel threatened, your life would be in danger.”

Lois started to reply that Lex wouldn't hurt her, but before she could speak Superman must have read her expression and cut her off. “Yes, I know he does have some affection for you. I even believe that at some level it's genuine. However, I'm convinced that wouldn't protect you if he felt threatened.”

Based on everything Superman had said tonight, she should have expected that. But even so, it caught her off guard. Superman thought that Lex was not only capable of murder, but he believed Lex might turn on her. While she was trying to digest that part, Superman lifted off the roof. “Superman...”

He paused and turned back to her without returning to the roof. “Yes, Lois?”

Now that he'd stopped, she didn't know what to say. As hard as it had been to hear the things he'd said, just talking to him without an emergency or a crime had been nice. Finally she simply said, “You be careful out there.”

He smiled. “Thanks. I always try to be. Now you should think about heading home. It still might be possible to get an hour of sleep before the sun comes up. You've had a long night.”

With that, he flew straight up and disappeared into the darkness. Yes, this had been a long and enlightening evening.

Part 2: Clark

Clark was sitting in his apartment staring at a blank television screen. When he'd gotten home, he'd realized that not only was he was too wound up to sleep, but there was no time. He didn't feel like music, so he'd sat down to look for an old movie on late night, or more correctly, early morning TV. That had been nearly twenty minutes ago. The television was still off.

After leaving the Daily Planet, Clark had done only a minimal patrol of the city. As usual, there wasn't much to see at this time of the day. He'd thought that after telling Lois about Luthor, he'd feel relieved and be able to relax. He did feel relieved, but relaxation was nowhere in sight. The earlier part of the evening had been difficult enough with the thieves or terrorists or whatever they were. As trying as dealing with the criminals had been, every glance at Lois and Luthor together had been worse. Each time he'd looked at them, and saw them treating each other as a couple, his stomach had twisted into a knot. He tried to convince himself that it was only because he knew that Luthor was a criminal and would undoubtedly hurt Lois. While he was certain that was true, he knew in his heart that there was something more. He wanted Lois to be with him, not anyone else. His own jealousy left Clark so confused he couldn't figure out the right thing to do. He hated being so unsure of his motives.

Whatever else he had been feeling, Clark was relieved now. Lois had believed him as Superman in a way that she'd never been willing to believe ... just Clark. Maybe he should have gone to her that way sooner. Then again, was he supposed to go up to her and say, “Your boyfriend is a criminal. I don't have any proof, but I thought you should know?” Even with Lois being the instigator of the conversation, it hadn't felt right this evening to say all those things about Luthor without hard evidence. Clark hoped he'd made the right decision in telling her what he did. He just wasn't sure. He'd concluded long ago that he could never quite think straight around her. At least, not when personal matters were involved.

Personal matters.... There had been too many of those discussed tonight. He'd been off-balance from the moment that Lois revealed that she knew he'd grown up on Earth. Her reasoning was sound, and he hated lying to her. Her flawless logic made it easy to admit to that part of the truth. He hoped that

all the revelations about Luthor would keep her from thinking too much about what he'd said about Superman. Clark didn't believe he had given away his secret, but Lois was a very capable woman. If she really did get herself untangled from Luthor, Clark knew that he needed to think about sharing his identity - his whole identity - with her. He felt certain that, armed with the knowledge that Superman grew up on Earth and had a "normal Joe" identity, Lois would solve the puzzle herself before too long.

When she'd asked about his relationships, he'd almost fallen off the roof. He should have flown away right then. However, he couldn't pass up the chance to tell Lois that Superman would not be able to have any kind of relationship with her. That part had been useful. It'd also been hard. Superman had just dumped cold water all over one relationship. A moment later he turned around and dumped more on what she thought was her other best option. Finally, when she asked if the man that didn't wear the suit was involved with anyone, he thought he'd cry. If only she knew. The idea of telling Lois how he felt, even under the guise of talking about another woman she didn't know, was too tempting.

Clark was startled out of his muse by a knock on his door. He pulled his glasses down and peeked. Lois was standing on his front step looking impatient.

For just an instant, he wondered if he'd given away too much tonight after all. As he stood and walked toward the door, Clark went over the evening again in his mind. He felt certain that even if he had been too forthcoming, it was more likely that Lois was here to talk about Luthor. He had to remember that he wasn't supposed to know about Lois's talk with Superman. With that thought firmly in place, he opened the door.

"Lois, what are you doing here at this hour?" He tried his best to sound surprised.

"Hi, Clark. May I come in?" She sounded ... distracted.

"Of course," he offered, motioning her in with his arm. "Can I get you anything?"

"Just some water, please." Lois went over to Clark's sofa and sat down in the spot he'd occupied only seconds before.

Clark felt emotional distress coming from his partner. He couldn't tell if it was simple stress, fatigue, or something else. He glanced at the clock. It was after 5:00 a.m. He brought two glasses of water from his kitchen, set her glass in front of her and eased down onto the other end of his sofa. Lois reached for the water and took a sip. After she swallowed, Lois closed her eyes for a second in a way that convinced Clark that he should have brought coffee, not water. When she finally opened her eyes and looked at him, he made another try at his initial question. "Lois, why are you out and about this time of the morning? Did you get any sleep at all?"

Instead of an answer, he got an accusatory glare. "Why didn't you tell me about Lex?"

"Lex? Lois, I..."

She seemed to see the excuse coming and cut him off. "Don't play dumb with me!" Now she sounded angry. "I just came from the Planet where I had an amazing talk with Superman. Among the things I learned was that you know all kinds of bad things about Lex but haven't told me. Would you care to explain yourself?"

Clark was simultaneously flustered and relieved. As he'd hoped, Lois had focused on the talk with Luthor. Perhaps his secret was safe.

Before he could reply, Lois noticed the delay in his answer and jumped in. "Don't even think about offering some kind of flimsy excuse. I want to know why you've stood by and let me get close to someone that you knew was a criminal."

She finally left him enough of an opening to respond. "I've tried to tell you," he pleaded. "If you talked with Superman, then you know that there isn't any hard evidence to implicate Luthor. Even with Superman using his powers to investigate, nothing has

turned up. I didn't feel that I could make those kinds of accusations without proof. I tried my best to do the right thing. I knew I wasn't doing enough, but whenever I tried to say anything negative about Lu... Lex, you... you wouldn't listen to me."

"But you never told me anything," Lois offered in a less angry voice. "All you ever did was to say that you didn't trust him. Even tonight outside the Planet tonight, all you said was to be careful. You could have least said something about having information from a secret, unimpeachable source that Lex was connected to criminal activities. That would have gotten my attention."

"But, Lois..."

She didn't pay any attention to his attempt to speak. "You could have shared those details you had based on Superman's first-hand knowledge, and we could have investigated Lex together." She paused and just stared at him for a minute, but Clark was at a loss for words. Finally, she gave up waiting.

Taking advantage of his proximity, Lois reached out, and touched his arm. "Clark, it would have been so easy." Her plea reeked of frustration. And she sounded hurt.

She was right. That approach probably would have worked. He could have told her everything and attributed it to a source. Heck, he probably could have attributed at least some of it to Superman. "I'm sorry, Lois. I've tried to do the right thing in all this. The whole idea of you dating Luthor has been... I've only wanted what's best for you."

"Is that really the only thing you wanted?" she asked.

"What?" he stammered

Lois stood suddenly and walked to the other side of the room. After a second, she turned to face him. "Clark..." She paused as if gathering her thoughts. "Sometimes I'm not as quick as I should be, but when I pay attention I can figure out what is being said based on what a person leaves out. For example, I noticed the sentence you didn't finish a moment ago. Also, I've always noticed the touch of jealousy when I talk about Lex around you. I know you try to hide it, but you haven't always succeeded."

Now his mind was spinning. He'd have sworn that Lois never noticed any jealousy when they talked about Luthor.

He was still struggling for what to say when Lois picked it up again. "After my talk with Superman at the Planet just now, I couldn't help putting some pieces together. What was I supposed to think when Superman will tell me about Lex but not about you?"

How to answer this? She had him pinned and the only way out seemed to be more lies that were almost certain to make things worse. With his mind spinning frantically, all Clark could manage was a weak, "Um..."

"Don't even bother," she snapped. "My point is that there were parts of my conversation with Superman that got me thinking. I've talked to Superman before, but tonight was different. He was talkative. Very talkative. It wasn't just about Lex. We talked about his personal life and stuff that he'd never shared before. However, no matter how I asked, he wouldn't say anything about you."

"Lois, he's probably just trying to be a loyal friend," Clark offered weakly.

Lois leaned back against the far wall and just stared back at him with a look of skepticism. Clark figured that it was a good thing she didn't have heat vision or he would literally be toast by now. She held that stare for almost a minute while Clark began to squirm in his seat.

Finally, he couldn't take it anymore. "Lois, I'm more sorry than you know. I wanted..." There were so many reasons he couldn't finish that statement. After a moment of silence, he tried to put the ball back in her court. "Please say something."

"Who is she?" Lois asked in a softer tone. Her voice was very different than before. This was personal.

“She? Lois, who are you talking about?”

“The woman you care about but don’t seem to be able to impress.”

As the full meaning of that question hit him, Clark slumped back into the sofa. She knows! Well, if this was to be a showdown, he needed to face her. He owed her that. Clark stood and moved to a position not too far from Lois. As he leaned against the wall, he was surprised how calm he felt. In the past when it felt like Lois or anyone else was getting close to his secret, he’d felt nothing but panic. Now that Lois knew, he felt strangely calm. As for that last question, secret or no secret, that particular question was too dangerous to answer. He straightened up and asked, “What gave me away?” He was amazed at how relaxed the question sounded.

Lois genuinely smiled for the first time tonight. “When you talked about your parents. After you left, I went over what you’d said and I realized how lucky the world is that Superman grew up to be the kind and helping person that he is. I thought about different sets of parents I’ve known that might raise a child to be like that and immediately thought of Martha and Jonathan. If anyone could have raised Superman, it would be them. Then the light came on. It was them.”

Clark noticed that the smile that had appeared on her face when she talked about his parents had lingered. “You aren’t nearly as upset as I thought you’d be,” he observed.

She looked a little surprised. “You mean you’ve thought about this before? Me finding out about your identity?”

Clark could feel the smile spreading across his face. Clark reached slowly for Lois. She didn’t pull away as he cupped her cheek as gently as he knew how. “I’ve wanted to tell you for a long time. I’ve been over this moment in my mind a thousand times. About the only question was whether I’d tell you before you figured it out on your own.” She felt so nice. But he was honestly surprised she’d allowed the gesture. Not wanting to push his luck, he brought back his hand and forced a more relaxed smile onto his face. “I’m still surprised you aren’t yelling at me.”

“I did yell at you. It’s just that tonight you gave me something else that seemed more yell-worthy. I guess I’m more upset about you not sharing your information about Lex than I am about you keeping your ... other job ... a secret.”

There was a longish silence before Clark’s curiosity got the better of him. “So where do we go from here?”

Lois’s face took on a look of determination. “First you have to give me *everything* you know about Lex. Then I need to put the brakes on that relationship.”

Clark suspected he didn’t hide the elation he felt at that moment. “Really?” he asked. “I’d have thought you might try to work an inside angle.”

Lois nodded slightly. “It crossed my mind,” she replied. “However, two things are clear. First, he’s very good at manipulating me. He’s managed to keep me in the dark as to his... less savory activities for the better part of a year. Second, based on what you said earlier tonight, he’s both dangerous and ruthless.”

Clark was glad he got that message across. “I would have said more earlier, but I didn’t want to upset you too much. I think he may be the most dangerous person Superman has ever dealt with. Do you remember the way he shot Max Menken?”

Lois nodded her head.

“I have even less proof for this issue than for some of the others, but I’ve come to believe that was a double cross. I think he set Max up to take the fall and then personally made sure that Menken wouldn’t be around to reveal who really pulled the strings. Think about how much money it would have taken to bankroll your dad’s cyborg experiments. Menken didn’t have access to that kind of money, but the trail ended with him. I think Luthor kills without hesitation when it serves his purposes.”

Lois was shaking her head. “Clark... I can’t believe you didn’t speak up sooner.”

“I wanted to. It was just...” Clark trailed off. This was still so confusing.

She was quiet for several seconds. Clark could practically hear the wheels turning as she factored in what he’d said. “You never answered my question,” Lois reminded him.

“Question?”

“Who is she?”

Clark could feel himself turning red. After a few seconds examining the tops of his shoes, he lifted his gaze to find Lois waiting on him. “I think you know,” he offered.

Her non-reaction confirmed that she knew exactly who the mysterious woman was. Now she started examining her footwear. After a moment, still facing the floor, she started speaking. “You scared me.”

“Lois?”

“When you first arrived, this guy from Smallville seemed too good to be true. Then I got to know you, and it turned out that you were even better than I’d thought. You felt right in so many ways. Then we started getting close and...” She looked up at him. “How much do you remember from when you lost your memory during the Nightfall crises?”

Clark didn’t know where she was going with this. “I remember everything.”

“Do you remember when I called to ask if I could come over that last night before Nightfall was to hit?”

“Yes. My parents were at my place and you said you didn’t want to intrude.”

“That was the last time I let myself think of you ... like that.” Her face took on an almost mischievous smile. “I think that if your parents hadn’t been there...” Lois started to blush. “Well, I suspect I wouldn’t have ended up dating Lex. By the next morning, my defenses were back in place and I’d tagged you as dangerous. That’s why I lied later.”

“Now you’ve completely lost me. When did you lie and what about?” Clark asked.

“Right at the end of Nightfall. I slipped for just a second and then lied to cover it.”

Clark thought he might know what she was referring to, but wanted to be sure. This was Lois’s show so this time he just waited.

“Do you remember when I said I loved you like a brother?”

Clark’s heart skipped a beat. “Of course I remember. I’d been thinking we were getting close. Right after that, it was like a chasm opened up between us. You started getting closer to Luthor and whatever we’d had seemed to be gone.”

“Clark, I’m sorry. I was scared.”

Clark didn’t seem to know what to say. Again, he simply waited for her to go on.

She reached out and took his hand in hers. She was looking at it like it was something precious. “During Nightfall I came to realize that how special you had become to me. Think back to how I spoke. When I said I love you... I didn’t mean like a brother. I added the ‘like a brother’ after I realized what I’d told you. That was the fear talking. Later, the fear caused me to pretend that my feelings were... not real. I told myself that it was all about being afraid because of Nightfall. I ended up convincing myself that I didn’t feel that way about you. Up until tonight, I had myself convinced that I only saw you as a work companion. I’d bet that if you would told me how you felt, I’d have replied that I just didn’t feel that way about you.”

While Lois had been talking, Clark had realized that the timing of Lois’s change in attitude was very convenient. Clark suddenly felt an icy fist gripping his heart. He wanted to believe in what Lois was telling him but now he couldn’t shake the doubt he felt.

He was suddenly angry and pulled his hand free. “Now that you know I’m Superman things are different.” Clark tried to keep the accusation out of his voice. He knew he failed.

Lois’s face fell. “I guess I deserve that. I know that it probably looks like this is all about discovering ... who you are. All I can do is ask you to believe me when I say that it’s more complicated than that.” She leaned more heavily against the wall. She suddenly seemed to need the extra support. “Clark, I’ve figured out that you don’t think of yourself as Superman. That was pretty obvious on the rooftop, and once I realized who Superman was, it made perfect sense. If anyone would be uncomfortable with being Superman, it would be Clark Kent.”

Clark struggled to get his emotions back to some semblance of order. He wanted Lois to really love him but her sudden increased interest in Clark Kent seemed awfully convenient for a woman who had been obsessed with Superman. He hated how he was reacting but didn’t seem to be able to help himself. He could feel the frown on his face, and it was with a great deal of confusion that he listened while Lois went on.

Lois seemed to take in his expression, and her attitude changed. She straightened up and addressed him, her voice now strident. “Listen, Mister, I’m not about to come crawling to you asking you to like me. If that’s what you’re expecting then I’ll just be going home now.” She broke off her tirade, turned and took a step toward the door. Then she stopped, took a second to compose herself, and turned to face him once more. “Clark, I think that there might be a chance for something special between us, but you have to start trusting and believing in me. Are you willing to listen with an open mind or not?”

She was right. Lois was both his friend and his partner. He owed her the benefit of the doubt. Her anger had been just the slap he needed to flush away the sudden anger he’d been feeling. He took half a step toward her then stopped. “I’m sorry Lois,” he said. “I didn’t... I... I don’t know what I mean or what I’m thinking. I want... I want you to like me for me. The real me. It... What you’re saying tonight... it just seems too good to be true.”

Her face softened a tiny bit. “Listen to me. First off, what’s wrong with my liking Superman?”

“He’s not real,” Clark pleaded.

“But he is.” She stepped closer and took both his hands in hers. Now she was smiling up at him. Lois had a really nice smile. “He’s the happy result of Martha and Jonathan Kent raising an extraordinary individual. We’ve spent a lot of time this evening talking about Lex. Assuming that he is the criminal that you say, do you think I’d be more likely to be attracted to him if he had your abilities?”

“No,” Clark answered simply.

“Exactly,” Lois replied. “It’s not about the super powers. It’s about what you do with them. That’s the person that I’ve found so intriguing. I’ll admit that at first it was about how you looked and the powers, but that hasn’t been the point for a long time. You know that. You’ve been there most of the times I’ve talked about why Superman was special. Weren’t you listening?”

Clark thought back to those times when it was her support that kept him going. First, when he’d almost given up during Luthor’s trials. Then it happened again later during the heat wave when he had really planned to leave Metropolis. Lois’s support wasn’t about the powers. She supported Superman as a person. “You’re right,” he admitted. “Now that I think about it, I don’t see how I missed it. You have no idea how much you’ve helped Superman - me - keep going during some of the more difficult times. Somehow I never thought of that when I was wrestling with our relationship.”

Her expression turned a little more serious. “There’s more,” she said. “Tonight after I left the hospital, I kept thinking that I was on the wrong life path. I was figuring out that I didn’t belong in Lex’s world. When I went back to the Planet tonight, I wasn’t

thinking about Superman. I was thinking about the partner that I left standing in front of the building.”

Clark was struggling for words. He had trouble enough figuring out their relationship. Here, now, with his hands in hers and her opening her heart, he was ready to believe that Lois felt... After everything she’d said tonight, he realized that he didn’t know for sure how she felt. “So, what do we do now?” he asked simply.

Now she looked as nervous as he felt. “Well, we need a plan to get some real information on Lex. I’m sure that if we work together and you use your ... extra talents to help with the investigation, it shouldn’t be too long before we find that hard evidence you’ve been looking for.”

“You know I’ll help any way I can,” he offered. He looked at their clasped hands. “Lois, what about ... us?”

Now Lois faltered as she looked at their hands as well. After a second she pulled her hands free and took a half-step back. “With all that’s happened...” She stopped. Obviously she hadn’t thought this far ahead either. “Well, whatever happens, you don’t need to worry about your secret. I’m not about to write some kind of story on your secret life. I wouldn’t do that to either you or your parents. But... Clark, do you want there to be an us?”

Clark hoped he read Lois’s expression correctly. It looked so much like she wanted to give the personal side of their relationship a chance. He took a deep breath. “Yes. I’d like to give it a try and see what happens,” Clark said with all the sincerity he could muster. “I’d like that a lot.”

She smiled the biggest smile he’d seen all evening. “Me too,” she said, blushing slightly.

Clark didn’t think he’d ever felt so good. He was basking in the feeling when Lois’s eyes widened. “Clark, you’re floating!”

Clark looked down and realized he was a few inches off the floor. He willed himself down and then looked back at Lois. “You’ve always had that effect on me. Do you remember the night at Luthor’s ball? The night I cut in when you were dancing with ... him?”

Lois nodded slowly.

“When you first came in... You were so beautiful. I was six inches off the ground before I knew what hit me.”

Lois looked surprised for only a second. “I can’t see how you managed to keep your abilities secret all this time if you start floating every time you see an attractive woman.”

“That’s easy. I don’t. No one else has ever caused me to lose control the way you do. Every time...” He had to stop. This was getting too embarrassing.

Lois stepped over and took his hand. “What?” she asked. When she used that voice, he didn’t think he could refuse her anything.

He felt like he’d said too much already. Then again, at this point... “Every time I think of you and... well, imagine what might be, I have trouble staying on the ground. That’s never happened with anyone else.”

Lois just looked up at him for a long moment. Then she stepped into him and before he knew it he was in a very pleasant hug. “Clark, you know better than anyone that I haven’t had much luck in this sort of thing.” Even now, she still sounded so scared. “I keep picking the wrong men.”

He did know that. How someone as perceptive as Lois kept making those kinds of mistakes had always confused him. Tonight she’d provided a clue. She didn’t let men that could hurt her get too close. That’s why she pulled away from him as Clark and gravitated to Luthor and Superman. In her mind they were safer.

Lois felt so good in his arms. Her heart was drowning out the rest of the world. Clark took advantage of the nearness to risk a light kiss on the top of her head. “I don’t know if we’ll work,” he offered. “But I promise that I’ll never deliberately do anything to

hurt you.”

He felt a small shiver run through her. “If this doesn’t work, I’ll have lost my work partner ... and my best friend.”

He could hear it in her voice. She really was afraid. But then, so was he. “I’m scared too. I’ve always been scared of what it would mean if you didn’t like me for who I am. Then I was afraid that you might want to be with someone else. I finally decided that my worst fear was that I would be too scared to tell you how I felt. I believe in us. I believe we can be great together.”

She wasn’t looking up at him. She had her head turned and her right cheek was pressed against his chest. After a second he felt her arms squeeze a little harder. “I want to believe. For now, can you believe enough for both of us?”

“I can,” he replied, trying to pour all his feelings into those two simple words. Clark closed his eyes and held her. The warmth of her embrace filled him. He would have sworn they were both glowing. Clark just relaxed and basked in the wonder that was this moment.

After a minute or so he heard Lois’s voice. “Clark?” Her tone suggested that he was no longer just her work partner.

“Hmm?” He was afraid words might spoil the moment.

“Open your eyes,” she said softly. He definitely liked that tone.

As he opened his eyes to look down at her, he found that looking down was also looking up. They were floating near the center of his living room with their feet ever so softly brushing the ceiling. Since Lois didn’t seem to mind, he just relaxed and gazed at the most beautiful woman in the world. After a second, he realized she was probably waiting for an answer. “See? This is what you’ve always done to me.”

Lois’s lips were tantalizingly close. Before he knew what happened he felt her lips gently brushing his. A minute ago, when Lois hugged him, Clark thought that was as good as he could feel. Now he knew better. In that instant, there was only Lois. Her taste... Her body pressed against him... The feel of her lips... The sound of her moving against his body... Her heartbeat... Even the way she smelled. Clark had never known anything like this. It was... perfection. The kiss seemed to go on forever, but by some shared signal that he didn’t understand, they both pulled back. As he looked at her face he knew she’d felt what he did. There were no words for what he was feeling. She was truly perfect.

After a few seconds looking at that perfect face, instead of words he heard a contented sigh as Lois settled against him once more. He couldn’t be certain of what the future would hold, but for now they’d found their place. Right here, right now, neither time, nor space, nor gravity had any hold on two people at the cusp of love.

THE END