

Since Clark Kent Came to Town

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Summary: Clark's closest friends muse on the last year since Clark arrived in Metropolis. Clark muses on both Clark and Superman's arrival.

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(Jimmy)

The news room is mostly dark now. A few desk lamps still burn, as do the lights in Perry's office. Does that man ever go home? Well, at least I can give him the mock up of tomorrow morning's front page. I knock softly and show it to him. There are no corrections. The paper can go to print.

As I come back into the bullpen, I can't help but notice the eerie silence. Don't get me wrong. I savor the silence. No one racing out the doors to grab a story. No yelling for me to grab someone's photos from the darkroom. But it still feels like the spirit has been sucked out of the place. As much as the hustle and bustle of the days can sometimes give me headaches, I thrive on the adrenaline.

I look across the floor. Of course. Lois and Clark are still here. Lois is at her computer, typing away. I wonder what she's working on. Probably the series leads trying to connect the mayor to Intergang. She looks frustrated. I look over at Clark. He's eyeball deep in books and papers, old news articles and faxes. As I look, he sighs and runs a hand through his hair. He looks more frustrated than Lois does. He reaches over and grabs a slice of cold pizza from the box by his desk. He grabs another slice, brings both to the small staff microwave, heats them, and brings them over to Lois' desk. I treated him to the pizza to celebrate his first anniversary at *The Daily Planet*.

Has it really been a year since CK came to Metropolis? Has he really been working here for a year? Has he really survived having Lois as a partner this whole time?

A lot has happened around here in the past year. And a lot of it has happened because of CK. I knew in the moment that I first met him that he was an okay guy. Naive maybe. Soft perhaps. And I wondered if Metropolis might chew him up and spit him out. But even so, I knew that, given half a chance, he'd be the kind of guy that you'd want to be around. His face was always quick to break into a smile. And I only ever heard him speak well of people, even Mad Dog Lane. Well, ok, maybe he had a few choice words about Lex Luthor, but honestly, I don't blame him. Luthor was a monster.

I guess the biggest change I've seen is in myself. Since CK came to town and befriended me, he's always prodded me to assert myself. I never really had much confidence in myself. I mean, I knew I could do a great job at *The Daily Planet*, but I never had the guts to stand up to Perry and demand my chance. But knowing that CK was backing me, I seemed to grow and find my courage. I went from being Perry's gofer, to getting a few articles written. I still don't believe that they were anything special, but CK always had a kind word about them. And he

always offered to help me by giving it a read-over before I handed it to Perry. When I realized that writing wasn't what really made me happy, CK was there with reassurances and pointed out to me how much I love photography. With his approval of some of my work, I approached the Chief and wouldn't you know it? CK was right. Perry loved the idea of sending me into the field with a camera.

Ever since CK first came to the paper, he's trusted me to be his right-hand man. I was the first person that he trusted to help him research things. I still remain his "go-to" guy. Rarely does he ever ask any of the other researchers for help, and that's only if he can't get a hold of me right away. He relies on me. The feeling is amazing. CK was the first one to really give me a chance to shine here. Up until then, Perry really only ever relied on me to fix things for him or to fetch his lunch. But once CK established a routine of using me as his researcher, Perry was forced to see me in a new light. I stopped being "kid" — most of the time anyway. Now Perry calls me "son" — just as he does with Clark. It makes my heart swell with pride every time the Chief calls me "son." It makes me feel like a cherished member of the *Planet* team. And I know that the Chief approves of me — and of my work. Since the moment I took the job at the paper, all I've ever wanted was the Chief's approval. CK helped me to finally earn it.

Lois and Clark are lightly conversing at her desk. The pizza is finished. Clark is perched on the edge of her desk, looking over her computer monitor. He pokes the eraser end of a pencil at her screen as he talks. Lois types for a few moments. Clark says something else to her, and her face crinkles up into a smile and a laugh. Does Clark even realize how much he's caused Lois to change in the last year?

That's the other big change I've noticed. CK's presence has transformed Lois. Before his arrival, Lois wasn't much of a talker. I rarely ever saw her smile, let alone laugh. Unless, of course, she was nominated for another Kerth award. But ever since CK came to town, Lois has changed. She smiles so often and freely now. Her tone with everyone else in the bullpen has softened. Oh, don't get me wrong. You don't want to cross Lois if you can help it. She can still tear you to shreds. But she's more easy going now. She's still reserved at times, but at the same time, she's a lot more relaxed. Before CK, Lois hardly ever spared a word for anyone who wasn't a source or the Chief. And me? Forget it. She barely knew that I existed unless I was bringing a box of donuts past her desk. I mean, we had a working friendship, but that really only extended to the hours we spent in the bullpen together. But now that CK is around, she's opened up. He really has rubbed off on her. And thanks to CK, Lois really respects me now. That means a lot to me. I've admired her journalistic skills since the very beginning. Because of CK, Lois has honored me by becoming my friend outside of work as well.

And, I have to admit, it's been kind of fun watching CK get the better of Lois. It's been refreshing to see him knock Mad Dog Lane down a few notches. He really earned my respect when he pulled off a very inspired prank on her. He'd sent her tromping through the Metropolis Sewage Reclamation Plant in search of Superman. "Superman" had been a Godzilla doll dressed up like the superhero. That had definitely put a chink in Lois' armor. That's also the moment when I knew CK could hold his own, the moment when I first came to respect that he wasn't the backcountry boy from Nowheresville, as Lois so often put it.

Perry emerges from his office, shutting the lights as he leaves. He bids us goodnight and orders us to go home soon. We all wish him goodnight and soon he's disappeared into the elevator and on his way down to the lobby.

Perry's changed a lot since CK got here also. I've never seen a man be so proud of his employees before. I mean, the Chief has always been proud of his reporters, especially Lois. But ever since CK arrived and proved his worth — both with Lois and

without — there's been a new glint in Perry's eyes. He too, laughs more often now. And, although not always, he often seems to be less stressed now. He doesn't worry about Lois so much when he knows that CK is going with her on assignments. He worries about them both, don't get me wrong. But I know it makes him feel better knowing that the two are going to look out for each other. It also helps Perry's mood to know that he's got the strongest reporting team in Metropolis working for him, if not the country. Stories that he might have hesitated giving Lois before, he now gives her without another thought. He knows that CK grounds her and keeps her safe. Yes, the Chief is a happier man now.

I look at my watch. It's getting late. I need to send the mock up to print. After that, it's finally time to go home. I look at Lois and Clark again. Lois is shutting her computer off, resigned for the moment, to leave the story until she can sleep on it. I know she'll be back to it in the morning. Clark stands and helps her into her coat. Does Lois even know how much CK loves her? Does she not see it in the way he looks at her? It's obvious to everyone else in the newsroom. CK catches my eye.

"Night Jimmy," he says. "Thanks again for the pizza."

"Night," I say. "And happy anniversary again CK."

(Lois)

The night air is cool as we walk back to my apartment. Clark is silent beside me. It's a companionable silence. We've both got a lot on our minds. Trying to link the mayor to Intergang is proving to be brutal. We walk slowly, savoring the brisk air and the relative quiet of the streets. It feels so good to have him at my side, not as a bodyguard (though he has been that before), and not as a partner, but as a friend.

When did it happen? When did I, Lois Lane, independent career woman of the mid-nineties, grow so fond of the man at my side? When did I come to need him in my life?

Ever since Clark came to Metropolis, I've changed. Not that I mind, of course. But I just can't figure out when it happened. Or how, for that matter. A year ago, I was livid when Perry told me that I was being saddled with the hack from Nowheresville as my partner. I've never worked well with a partner before. I've always been too competitive. I've always been too focused on me — and only me — winning the Pulitzer for my writing. Having a partner always seemed to be more of a hassle than it was worth. And so, I despised Clark that first day, that first week, that first investigation. I despised him even as some small part of me acknowledged that he wasn't such a hack after all. He had damned good instincts, and he proved it over and over again as we worked to uncover just what was going on with The Messenger and Prometheus. Still, he took every abuse I could hurl at him. He maintained his dignity and grace even as he kept coming back for more of the same treatment. I'm ashamed to admit that I freely gave it back to him, liked it to some degree. But when did that turn into good natured banter between friends? When did I stop seeing him as a rival? When did I start seeing him as my professional other half?

I have to admit, it was like a glass of ice water poured over my ego every time Clark got the better of me. His constant teasing irked me at first only because I wanted — willed even — for everything about my new partner to get under my skin and rub me the wrong way. Looking back, I can't figure out why I bothered to put up a fight. Looking back, it's hard to even remember what it was like flying solo on every story. Looking back, it's hard to remember how absolutely lonely my life was before Clark showed up. Even after our investigation (and Superman) helped to save the Space Program, I still begrudged Clark our partnership. I felt threatened by him. He was every bit as good a reporter as I was. And then he forced my respect when he paid me back for stealing his story with that whole Godzilla

prank. He doesn't know it, but I've kept that little doll on my dresser. It reminds me of how determined Clark can be and of the truly twisted sense of humor hiding behind that mild-mannered exterior. It reminds me that that I can't push him around. It makes me smile.

Still, partners at work was all well and good, especially when Perry decided to make us a permanent team. Secretly, I was kind of glad that Clark was going to stick around. Me, Lois Lane, glad to have a partner. Who would have ever guessed it? But then, somehow, we became friends. Somehow, ever since Clark arrived, he managed to slip through every last defensive wall that I'd carefully constructed around myself over the years. Somehow, he found little chinks and cracks in those precious walls and pulled them apart, brick by brick, insecurity by insecurity. And somehow, he did this before I could tell what was happening. And he showed me, as each wall crumbled little by little, that there really was nothing to fear. That those walls existed for no reason. He made me feel safe even as he destroyed the walls I thought I needed. His unflinching optimism warmed my heart and made me feel like it was safe to finally let others into my life. Not just him either. I started to find myself making small talk by the coffee station with others in the newsroom. Had I ever spoken more than five non-work related words at a time to Jimmy before Clark came along?

Ever since Clark came along, he somehow managed to help me open up and leave the dark confines of a truly sad existence. Whether he's meant to or not, he's helped me to embrace life for what it is. Life isn't just about what the next big story will be. It isn't just about winning Kerths and Pulitzers. It's all the little moments in between. How many times now have Clark and I hung out after work, laughing over take out, playing board games, watching movies? How many nights have I tossed and turned in my bed before finally calling him, needing to say goodnight to him before my rampant mind would give me some rest?

I never really had a best friend until Clark was shoved into my life. Friends, sure. But a best friend? The bond between Clark and I makes me realize that my other "best friends" growing up really weren't best friends at all. When was the last time I saw any of the girls I went to high school with? College? Since graduation probably. And that usually doesn't even cross my mind. But a couple of days away from Clark and I am dying to see him again. Sometimes, when he walks me home at night, it's almost painful to leave him at the steps to my apartment and say goodnight, even knowing that I'll be seeing him bright and early the next day.

Ever since Clark came into my life, I've fantasized about him. Some nights, I think back to that first day I went to pick him up for work at his hotel room. He answered the door clad only in a too small white towel and his glasses. His body is to die for. Sometimes, I wish that little towel had slipped from his hips. I often think about the kisses we've shared. Sure, they've been shams to cover our true intentions, like the kiss I gave him on Trask's plane so that I could whisper instructions to him on taking out our guards. And like the kiss Clark gave me in the honeymoon suite of the Lexor when we were on a stakeout, and the maid came in. God how I remember that kiss. Sham or not, it was the most powerful, most sensual, most arousing kiss I've ever experienced. It still makes me weak in the knees to think about it. And I often wonder — if that kiss was just for cover, what would a real kiss with Clark be like? And yet, I'm afraid to cross that line.

Ever since I met Clark, I have felt loved. I've seen the gazes he gives me when he thinks I'm not looking. I've seen the depth of his longing. It terrified me in the beginning. Every relationship I've ever had has been a federal disaster. What if we moved forward and things didn't work out? We'd lose it all — our

partnership, our friendship. I'm not willing to let that happen. And yet, I want so much to give us a chance. I know he does. For some unfathomable reason, he loves me. I see that now. At first, I thought it was just some silly crush that a backcountry boy had on a world-wise, and yes, attractive woman. And I thought, after a few weeks together, and especially after my appalling treatment of him, that the crush would wear off. But it never did. Clark only grew somehow fonder of me with each passing day. He's tried to hide it from me, but Clark isn't a very convincing liar. And, I'll admit, I've come to secretly love that he loves me.

But what about me? Do I love him? Can I love him? Has he forced me to change that much that I can finally trust my heart again? Or do I just love that he loves me and nothing more? It's empowering and frightening to know that I hold someone's heart. Am I just attracted to that Adonis body? No, it's more than that. Everything about Clark is attractive, regardless of that handsome face and gorgeous, sculptured body. His personality is what grabs me the most. His quickness to laugh, the ready smile, his sunny disposition, and the fact that he is the poster boy for chivalry and manners — most of the time. He's still like any other man — still makes the occasional innuendo if given half a chance. Like that remark he made when I met him about me being on top. And yet, he is still unlike any other man I have ever met.

He's tried to deny it to me, of course. I mean, he's tried to convince me that he doesn't feel anything towards me. I'll never forget the lies that he spun after my disastrous near wedding to Lex Luthor, just a few short months ago. At the time, I was so upset over everything that happened, that I blindly accepted his excuses. But now, looking back months later and with a clear head, I know in my heart that he was lying to me then, outside of the *Planet* building. His profession of his love to me in the park weeks before my wedding was the truth. And I think, somehow, that I knew even as I sat there on that bench that he was telling me the truth. I know my heart and stomach were doing back flips. I didn't want it to be the truth, back then. I didn't need or want the confusion. I was with Lex, I didn't need Clark coming out of left field like that. But maybe, deep down, I did want it to be true, I just didn't know it at the time. Clark has laid his heart bare from the beginning. The man is completely incapable of deceiving me. I know him too well.

I am thankful for Clark in so many ways. He's opened up a whole new world for me in the past year. Day by day, hour by hour, he's forced me to become a better person. I need to remember to thank Perry for taking a chance on Clark and me as a team.

We're at the steps of my apartment now. I've been so wrapped up in my own thoughts that I hadn't even noticed. Clark turns to me and smiles. I feel myself return the smile. And I wonder — just for the slightest moment, if I should invite him in to talk — about us. About where we are headed. About if we should pursue this mutual attraction. He scrunches up his brow in concern.

"Are you all right?" he asks.

"Fine," I reply. "Sorry, my mind was a million miles away."

He grins at me. "That's ok. Goodnight Lois." He starts to turn away.

"Clark," I call, and he swings back around. "I, uh." I want to invite him in. I want to have that talk. The one talk I fear above all others. But I chicken out. "Happy anniversary," I say instead, hating myself for being so afraid. "I'm glad you're my partner and friend." On an impulse, I cup his face with my hand and guide his head down so that I can kiss him on the cheek. It's a struggle not to bring my lips to his. But somehow, I fight the urge.

"Thank you," he whispers as I withdraw my lips from his impossibly smooth cheek. "This past year with you has been the greatest year of my life. And the most challenging. You've really

inspired me to become a better writer. And you've become the best friend I've ever known."

He kisses my cheek, and the flesh burns where his lips touch my skin. I try to will myself to say the things I want to say to him, but I somehow can't. All I can do is smile at him. Then, before I can react, he's turned away once more and is heading towards his own apartment. I vow to myself that some day, I will find the courage that I need, and I will tell him all that I feel for him. Some day.

(Perry)

The morning's edition of the paper is going to print now. I can finally relax for the rest of the night. It's about time I got myself home anyway. Alice hates when I work this late. I shrug into my coat and turn off the lamps in my office. Two desk lamps still burn in the bullpen. Even without looking I can tell you who they are. Lois Lane and Clark Kent. My two star reporters. The best damned team I've ever had. Lois is typing away, the harsh clicking of the keys evidence of how frustrated she is. Clark has his head down, buried deep in research. As I watch, he grabs some pizza, heats it, and brings it to Lois. I can't help but smile in pride and love at those two. The King only knows how much I love having those two in my newsroom.

Ever since Clark arrived here, just a year ago, I've been continually amazed at his doggedness, his sharp eye, and his keen writing style. I could kick myself for ever turning him down in that first interview. All I could see then was a naive, green reporter who didn't have the resume I wanted to see. I wasn't interested in his articles in the *Borneo Gazette* or the *Smallville Post*. This was *The Daily Planet* for Elvis' sake! A world class and respected newspaper! Thank heaven he went out and proved me wrong. I admired him from that very moment, when he came back to my office with the story of the demolition of that old theatre house. That's the spirit I like to see in my reporters. That "get up and go."

I have to give myself one giant pat on the back though. Pairing Lane and Kent was the most brilliant move I've ever made. I knew it was a risk going into it. Lois was never one to play well with others. But something about Clark made me realize that the kid was up to the challenge. And boy was I right. Those two are a dream team for any paper. And because they relied so heavily on Jimmy, I've come to really respect that kid. Oh, Jimmy needs a little work sometimes, but ever since Clark befriended him, well, that kid is becoming a real newspaper man.

Ever since I paired Clark with Lois, she's changed. Clark has somehow managed to break her defenses down. She's more personable than ever before. She laughs more often. And by Elvis, she smiles and makes jokes now! I don't know how Clark did it, but I'm glad he did. Boy, I'll tell you, I think that boy could charm a rattlesnake right out of its' own skin. Oh Lois still has a temper and a short fuse sometimes. But ever since I forced her to work with Clark, I've seen a lot less of that. It's helped to make the bullpen a more unified place. Maybe Lois doesn't get along with everyone. She certainly didn't get along with Cat. But, you know, these things take time. She just needed that little push to start changing. And I really do believe that Clark was the one to push her.

You know, I'm ashamed to admit that I'm not much of a husband or father. For over thirty years, I've given the best of myself to the paper. Looking back, it's not something that I'm proud of. I may run the world's greatest paper, but I'll be damned if my personal life isn't in shambles. I'm constantly on thin ice with Alice. My boys don't have much of a relationship with me, especially Jerry. Sometimes, I wonder if Jerry is such a wildcard because I wasn't around much when he was little. Maybe his incarceration is partly my fault.

But you know, my staff has become a surrogate family to me

— especially Lois, Clark, and Jimmy. I love those three like they were my own flesh and blood. Lois has been my “daughter” for a long time now. Even before Clark got here and broke her out of her shell, I always had a special place in my heart for that girl. And then Clark came along. From the moment he found his way back in my newsroom for a second interview, he commanded my respect. And after that first story he and Lois covered — the Space Program debacle — I grew to love that boy. Even in the worst of times, he’s always so quick to give you a smile, a kind word, a listening ear. From that moment on, I had found a “son” in him. And then there was Jimmy. I knew that Clark and Jimmy had become close right from the start. What I never counted on was how much Clark’s friendship would embolden Jimmy and how much differently that would make me see the kid. I’d been waiting for the moment when Jimmy would assert himself. You have to earn my respect, you see. It isn’t freely given. When Clark helped Jimmy to gain my respect, he gave me another “son” in the process.

Clark is perched on Lois’ desk as I survey the bullpen. Sometimes, I could swear that boy spends more time there than at his own desk. He’s made Lois laugh about something. I can’t help but to smile. I know the way that Clark looks at her. Does Lois notice? Do I dare to hope that my darling “children” finally get on the same page? Part of me fears it, if they ever move beyond friends. And I know that they are indeed more friends than partners now. It’s happened before in my newsroom, partners and friends stepping into the merciless waters of the dating pool. And it’s never really turned out all that well. Most have been utter disasters. Are these two different? Can they handle it? I don’t doubt their professionalism. But I do wonder about their friendship. Can it handle the strain of becoming something more? The greater part of me wants to believe that it can. Ah, well, I guess, in a way, it’s none of my business. I’m just a grizzled old news hound.

“Don’t you two have homes?” I ask as I start towards the elevator.

“I could say the same to you,” Lois teases me back.

“How’s the story coming?”

“Not good Chief,” Clark says. “We’ve hit a brick wall.”

“Well, go on home then. Start fresh in the morning.”

Clark nods. “I think we’re about to go anyway. ‘Night Chief.”

“‘Night you two,” I say.

I reach the elevator and press the button. As I look back, Clark is helping Lois into her coat, and I know that he’s going to walk her home. I chuckle to myself. That boy does the male population proud. Whoever said that chivalry is dead? Does Lois see what I see? The elevator softly dings and the doors slide open. I step inside and shut out the sight of my newsroom and my “kids,” at least for the night. And I wonder, as I think back to Lois and Clark, what this next year of their partnership will bring.

(Clark)

I love walking you home at night. I love the quiet that settles over the city. I love how empty the streets become. I love having you close to me as we unwind after the stresses of the day, just two friends, freed from being just partners at work. Do you enjoy our walks as much as I do? I want to believe so. I have to believe that you do — or else why haven’t you told me to take a hike and that you can walk yourself home? So I never pass up a chance to see you to your door, not if I can help it.

It’s been a whole year now Lois. A whole year since Clark came stumbling into your life. A whole year since you got saddled with a partner that you didn’t want and certainly didn’t need. A year since I started to claw my way into your respect with nothing more than a kind word and some good natured teasing. You didn’t make it easy for me. Luckily, I’ve always enjoyed a challenge. It’s been the best year of my life and the worst. It’s

been the best year because I’ve made a home here in Metropolis. I’ve landed a dream job and become a respected journalist. But mostly, it’s been the best year because I’ve known you. You’re the reason why I stay here, Lois. Even in the times when I’ve wanted to run, the times I’ve come so close to leaving, you’ve always held me tied to this place with bonds that not even I am strong enough to break. You’re the reason why this place feels like home. You are the reason why I finally feel like I belong. I wish I could tell you this. But I can’t without giving up too many of my secrets. I can’t tell you that I’ve fled from country to country all across the globe in the years since I graduated college. I can’t tell you why.

It’s also been a year — close enough — since Superman came rocketing into your life. And his interference has made this the worst year of my life. I’ve never really lived as two people before, you see. I’ve always been just Clark, a mild-mannered country boy who just so happens to fly and be able to bench press train cars to unwind. But now, I’ve become two separate people. There’s the real me, the man behind the glasses who hides his abilities from the world in pursuit of a normal life. And then there’s him — the avatar of my abilities, the summation of all that I can do, the means I use to in order to help. The flashy hero in tights and a cape who flies in to save the day, always in the public eye when he’s around, never sticking around long enough to form relationships. And in the past year, Lois, you’ve chosen him over me. I guess I can’t really blame you. Who wouldn’t fantasize about the invulnerable super being who can fly you off to Paris at a moment’s notice? But he isn’t real, Lois. I wish you could see that. I wish you could look past the suit and see that he and I are one and the same. I wish I could tell you this.

Sometimes, I wish you’d figure it out on your own. It burns me inside to have to hide, to lie to you. But I can’t. I know you won’t betray me and run off to Perry with the story of how Clark is Superman. I’ve known that for a while now. But I want you to see me for who I am, not what I can do. And I am Clark, not Superman.

Ever since I arrived here, I’ve been in love with you. I want so badly for you to see that. I want so badly for you to feel the same about me. And maybe I would have had a chance, had I not allowed Superman to get between us. It’s far too late to reverse the path of self-destruction that I’ve unleashed. Bringing Superman to life has been so self-destructive. He’s stolen the one thing that I want above all else — your affection. Do you know, Lois, how often I have cursed myself for allowing Superman to be born? Do you know how many times I have paced my apartment and tried to let Superman die? Oh, he can’t literally die of course, not without taking Clark with him. But there have been times when I’ve tried to ignore the calls for help. But I can’t do it. I can only stand it for so long before I have to fly out and help. It’s not in my nature to let people suffer and die if I can do something about it. Still, I would kill Superman in a heartbeat if I could, with only the hope that it would make you see me, the Clark me.

Superman is a facade, a farce, a mask, a disguise. I wish you could understand that. I’ve never been comfortable being in a position of authority. I’ve always hated being the center of attention. But Superman is expected to be in control of every situation. Superman commands every eye and ear. I’ve never been a very stern person. But Superman is a hero — he’s expected to have a commanding voice and a stern expression. Do you know why Superman folds his arms over his chest so often Lois? It’s because I’m self-conscious in that suit. It’s nothing more than a way for me to feel protected. But everyone else looks at that stance and sees it as proof that I am in a position of authority. Surely you must notice that Superman is sometimes nervous in your presence? Nothing on this earth can hurt him Lois, Kryptonite aside. Except you. You are the one thing that can

hurt me, hurt him. When you reject me in favor of him, it hurts, so much more than Kryptonite ever does.

And still, I like to think that, in some ways, the Clark me is more fortunate than Superman is. I get to see the real you. I get to see you at your best and at your worst. Clark is the one who's expected to be there every morning with a smile and a cup of coffee for you. Clark gets to tease you. Clark is the one who gets to share take out with you over a movie. Clark is the one you that you call at night when you've had a bad dream and need comforting. You called Clark a lot in those first few weeks after you almost married Lex Luthor.

But it's not enough Lois. It's not enough for me to just be your friend and professional partner. I want to be loved by you — for all of me. Not just the Superman me. You told Superman that you would love him if he was just an ordinary man living an ordinary life. I know you didn't mean to, but that remark hurt me more than any insult you've hurled at Clark. Because you don't love the ordinary man that Superman really is. You're blind to me. Maybe you always will be.

Sometimes, I think of letting Superman fade out of your life. No more visits to your window in the night. Nothing more than a hello and a good quote for you when I see you at rescues. But I can't. For all of his strength, Superman is weak. For all of his bravado, Superman is a coward. For all of his confidence, Superman is terrified. I'm terrified of losing any moments with you. So I still allow Superman to check on you. I still allow him to be your friend. And I know you need him, Lois. I know that you need Superman's friendship, just as you need Clark's. I know that it makes you feel safe knowing that the superhero is watching over you.

Since I've known you, you've forced me to be the best that I can. At work you constantly challenge me, constantly keep me on my toes. It's no easy task to keep up with Mad Dog Lane when she's got the scent of a story in her nose. As a friend, you've forced me to be far more intimate, far more trusting, than I ever have before. I've never allowed anyone to get so close to me. I've never been so confident in a friendship as I've been with your friendship. And I'll admit, I've never been so physically attracted to anyone as I am to you. As Superman, you've inspired me to be the best that I can possibly be. You don't know how often you've said just the right words to him, when all he's wanted to do was give up the fight and hang up the cape and boots for good. And, I have to say, you really made him feel welcome in Metropolis. Part of me had worried that Superman would be feared and hated. He's not human, and I thought for sure that the world would loathe that an alien could have such incredible powers. But you never looked at him with fear. You looked at him like he was a hero. I saw admiration in your eyes and acceptance. And so, you've given me the strength to pull on the suit every day. That's why I chose you to be the one to tell Superman's story.

You've hardly said a word as we've walked. I wonder what's on your mind. Knowing you, it's our story and all of the dead leads that we have. I can't help but wonder what you would say if I were to ask you out sometime. Do I dare risk it? Would you laugh in my face? Would you give it a chance? Sometimes, I see little glimmers in your eyes. And I wonder what they mean. Do you ever think the way I do? I don't have much hope that you do. Me, the eternal optimist has such a pessimistic view on the whole thing. Several times now as we've walked, I've nearly asked you to a movie this weekend. But I can't. I'm afraid. I need time to find my courage.

We're at your apartment now. I hate this part of our walks. It means I have to say goodnight and that I won't see you for at least another eight hours. Will we ever get to a time when our walks home lead us both to the same apartment? Will those eight hours ever be spent in each other's arms?

"Are you all right?" I ask when it doesn't seem that you

realize that you are home.

"Fine," you say, and I can hear the distraction in your voice. "Sorry, my mind was a million miles away."

I grin. "That's ok. Goodnight Lois." I begin to turn away. Superman will give a quick patrol over the city, and then I'll go home.

"Clark," you say, and I swing back around to look at you. "I, uh, happy anniversary." Something tells me there was more to that, but I can't for the life of me decide what it is. "I'm glad you're my partner and friend." You reach out and cup my face with a soft hand. Gently, so gently, you guide my head down and kiss me on the cheek. It's a struggle for me to not take control and bring your lips to mine. But somehow, I fight the urge.

"Thank you," I whisper as you withdraw your silken lips from my flesh. "This past year with you has been the greatest year of my life. And the most challenging. You've really inspired me to become a better writer. And you've become the best friend I've ever known." God, I want to say so much more than that. I want to sit you down on the steps and profess my love for you all over again, as I did before you almost married Luthor. And this time, I swear, I wouldn't take it back. I settle for kissing you on the cheek instead.

You smile at me, and I turn away. If I stay, I'll say something that I might regret. If I stay, I'll bear my soul to you. And I'm not sure that I'm ready for that. Someday, I promise I will be ready. And I pray that you will be too.

THE END