

X-Ray Vision

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Summary: Clark Kent has a secret, and Lois Lane has just uncovered it.

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I should have seen it.

Should have known. Should have... I don't know. Opened my eyes. Not been so willfully blind. Should have been smarter.

How could I have missed it?

Every day, I work right along side him. Sometimes that work extends far past the normal hours we're scheduled for at the paper. Scratch that. Not "sometimes," but actually with surprising frequency. Hours spent together, talking to each other, looking at each other, interacting in a million little ways. Countless times I've studied his face, been comforted — or irritated — by the sound of his voice, been graced with his smile and the accompanying twinkle in his eyes, felt the gentle caress of his flesh on mine, taken refuge in his embrace when things have gotten too scary or too emotionally draining. Even on our days off, we are rarely apart, especially now that we're dating.

Or were.

Or... I'm not even sure *what* we are now. Or, rather, what *I* want us to be now.

Superman.

Maybe I don't get to spend as much time around the hero as I do with Clark. He's not available, the way Clark is. He doesn't exactly keep normal hours and an apartment where I can go visit him in my spare time, or a phone I can call him on to ask him a question or to see how his day went. Still, in the time we've known each other, I'd felt like I'd gotten to know the man much more than anyone else could reasonably expect to. It made me feel important in a way that I can't fully give voice to. I'd stared into his eyes numerous times, felt the reverence in the way that he cradled my body as we flew together, luxuriated in the silky texture of his voice, gotten private glimpses into his jovial sense of humor. He gave me validation like I've never gotten from even my own family. But as close as we got — okay, as close as I was allowed to get to him — he always remained just out of reach. And now I know why.

Superman is a farce.

He doesn't exist.

He's nothing more than Clark Kent dressed in a ridiculous costume.

And I know, without a doubt, this is the case. Clark is real — he has a history, parents, baby pictures, an employment and tax record, an apartment. Superman is the fraud — he was birthed only a short time ago, on the night when the space program's future dangled by a frayed thread over the pit of oblivion. At least, it's my assumption that that is the case. Had he been around before then, the world would have known about it.

Although, it does make me wonder, now that I think about it.

All those "miracles" that the tabloids are always reporting —

angels who've saved people from sinking cars that careened off the road, children who have appeared seemingly out of thin air, unscathed, from burning buildings, people who have come inches from certain death when vehicles have come barreling toward them, only to find themselves either whisked to one side or that the vehicle suddenly stopped short with no logical explanation. Were those truly acts of the divine? Or were they acts of the extraterrestrial? Did a pre-Superman Clark save lives without the guise of Superman there to hide his true identity?

But I digress...

For years now, I've gotten to know each man — and I still think of Superman as separate from Clark somehow, as though he literally sheds his humanity when he dons the costume of the alien hero during a rescue or other public appearance — or, at least, I thought I did. I used to compare the two in my mind, and not once did I ever see the similarities. Clark's "mud brown" eyes to Superman's "chocolate" ones. Clark's, admittedly well defined, "average" body — that I admit, most women would swoon for and most guys would burn in jealousy over — to the Adonis physique Superman's costume accentuates. Clark's perceived naiveté, as opposed to Superman's purity and innocence. Clark's sometimes overwhelming openness against Superman's honesty.

How many times did Clark tell me something important, only to repeat it as Superman, or vice versa? How many times did I only listen when the figure in the cape said it? How many times did I try to flirt with the alien only to have him deflect the attention off himself and onto Clark? How many times did Clark disappear, only seconds before Superman came streaking onto the scene, or return just after the hero flew off again?

Blind.

Stupid.

I can't decide which one I was. I can't decide which one is worse. Maybe... I guess it could have been a little — or a lot — of *both*.

Years of befriending both men. Years of falling in love with both men, albeit in very different ways. With Superman, the attraction was there immediately from the second I saw him. How could I *not* have fallen under his spell? He was tall, handsome, mysterious, while at the same moment he felt somehow comfortable and familiar, like a once greatly loved blanket from childhood unearthed from the attic, years into adulthood. Did I know, on some level, that I actually *did* know him? Did part of me stand in disbelief that he could be a stranger?

I don't know. All I know is that every instinct I should have had — fear of the powerful, non-human entity before me, suspicion of what had seemed impossible — was strangely absent. Instead of objectively getting the story while keeping myself a safe distance away from the man who'd swallowed a bomb and who *hadn't* exploded in the process, I wanted to get to know him for *myself*. For once, I hardly cared about the story I knew I would still write or the awards I would probably win for being the one to introduce this intriguing new life-form to the public. I wanted to learn as much as I could about my handsome knight in blue armor so that I might have a chance of one day becoming his girlfriend.

With Clark, my love was slower to develop. I resented him, at first. What was I supposed to do with an unseasoned fluff writer? I resented Perry too, for his sadistic humor in saddling me with the hack from Nowheresville. But over the course of that first, vital investigation, I came to grudgingly admit that my geeky new partner had finely honed journalistic skills, even if his fluff pieces didn't — or couldn't — showcase them. He had good instincts. And even I couldn't turn a blind eye to his well defined body, clad only in a thin white towel, when I went to pick him up for work that first day, from the decrepit Hotel Apollo. Still, I

refused to allow him to befriend me. I didn't want friends. I didn't need them — or so I thought.

But Clark is relentless, if nothing else. Though he never pushed, he slowly found his way through the cracks in my defenses and into my heart. He made me see him in a new light, and before I knew what happened, I counted him as my truest friend, though I had known him the shortest amount of time. He became the one person I could always count on. I know I should count Superman among that exclusive club, and I do, but differently. Superman could be counted on to show up at the exact moment I needed him — mostly to save my life. Clark I could always count on to be there for no matter what trivial reason I needed him, regardless of the time of day or night. He's always known exactly what to say to me, even when it might not have necessarily been what I *wanted* to hear. He's always known when I need a hug, a pat on the shoulder, an offering of coffee or chocolate. He's been the one to always listen to — and even try to make sense out of — my random tangents when I get worked up over something.

And then, somewhere along the line, I found that he was not just my best friend, but someone I loved, someone with whom I could imagine spending the rest of my life with. Nothing made that clearer to me than the night I thought he'd been murdered before my very eyes, by a lunatic band of regenerated gangsters. I'd felt like my own heart had been pierced by those bullets, ripped right out of my chest. As the night trudged on and the immediate shock wore off, I came to realize in a stark, painful way that Clark was gone, that I would never see him again. That knowledge forced me to examine my own heart in my grief. Suddenly, I knew that it was more than just his friendship that I would miss. I'd come to depend on him, to think of him as almost an extension of my own being, to love him, and not as a friend or a brother. His resurrection — or so I thought — made me promise myself that I would not waste the second chance that I was given. I would work out my feelings for Clark and, if I found them to be true and not just brought about by the immense loss I'd been experiencing that night, give the two of us a chance at being something more, even if the thought terrified me, because I feared losing Clark if things didn't work out.

Two different love stories. Only one man.

How stupid was I?

I loved the same man in two different suits, but was too blind to see it.

Then, tonight, like x-ray vision, I saw through the disguise.

Tonight, of all nights.

The night I asked him to kill me.

Well, not *kill me*, kill me. But to use his powers to cryogenically freeze me so that I would be, for all intents and purposes, dead. At least enough to pass the inspection of the thug who was holding Clark's parents hostage and demanding my death in exchange for their freedom. A freedom we both knew would never come to pass. More and more would have been demanded of Clark, and we both were painfully aware of that fact.

What tipped me off? What finally made me see through the blue suit to the man beyond?

It wasn't his voice, though the pain that was suffused in it should have given me pause. Superman and I are close friends. I chalked up the hurt in his voice as concern for a friend. But each word sounded like it took great effort to form and force out of his mouth, and that should have made me wonder. It wasn't his argument against what I'd pleaded with him to do. I'd *expected* him to be afraid and to tell me that what I was proposing was reckless at best, a crapshoot at worst. I missed the terror in his voice, for the most part, when he was describing the risks. I knew it would be risky, but hearing him list just some of the ways that it could go wrong chilled me to my very core, as though he'd

already begun the freezing process. So I missed the subtle clues that should have told me that his fear was that of a man who was terrified of losing the woman he loves.

What broke through my blindness and opened my eyes to the duality of the man standing before me was one gentle caress. Just a large, warm, familiar hand cupping my cheek in the gentlest, most reverent touch imaginable. Feeling it there, being intimately familiar with the touch, sent a jolt through my entire body as my mind lurched into overdrive and instant revelation set in. Still, even that wasn't quite enough to give me such clarity in that moment.

His eyes.

As he touched me and I looked at him, meeting his gaze, his eyes gave him away. I've never once seen such fear in Superman's eyes before. But I'd seen that look in Clark's eyes before. I'd seen those lines of suffering etched on Clark's face, I don't know how many times. Superman's face was no longer his own. I saw, for the first time, Clark Kent, sans glasses, wearing the unique and iconic uniform of Superman.

He didn't know it, but that look of worry and sheer love stripped away the mask of Superman more thoroughly than x-ray vision ever could.

It was all I could do not to blurt out my new-found knowledge. I know I gasped as the revelation hit, but the strange, familiar Clark-Superman person before me didn't appear to take any notice. I think he was too lost in his own thoughts, too busy studying me one last time, in case the worst should happen. I didn't have time to react much more than that one shocked gasp anyway. In the next moment, before I could form any kind of coherent thought beyond "Clark is Superman," he was already beginning the frightening process of freezing me solid.

But now that the ordeal is over, and the Kents are safe and I am still alive and not brain-dead from my experience, I can finally think about Clark and his secret. I think I'm glad that I didn't have time to fully process the revelation before now. Now I have the time to really mull over each fact, turn each question over in my mind, appreciate every detail as I look at them in a new light. Not that I appreciate being lied to, of course. And no matter what reasons he has, he *did* lie to me. Every day, he made excuses to leave my side, even when I needed him, even when we were in the middle of important decisions.

I'm also glad that I didn't have time to say anything to Clark, either accidentally or purposefully. It was better that he didn't know that his secret was out. If he had, he never would have gone through with freezing me. He would have wanted to talk things out, to make sure I wasn't upset with him — as if that could happen, that is. We didn't have time for that. As much as I'm currently furious with him for his deception, I still love him. I still love his parents. We could not afford any delays. Every second wasted brought those two sweet farmers closer to their own deaths. I couldn't let that happen, not when I had the power to save them.

I had a split second between when my brain screamed at me that Clark and Superman are one and the same and when he began the process of freezing my body. I had no time to think at all, except to almost see the words sear into my brain. And as that first blast of frigid air washed over me, fear drenched my brain. Fear that I would die. Fear that I would suffer mental injuries, from which I would never recover. Fear that I would suffer debilitating physical problems as a result of that last-ditch effort to save the Kents. Fear that our ruse wouldn't work and I'd be putting myself in such overwhelming danger for no reason. Fear that our ruse would be uncovered and the Kents killed *because* we'd dared to try and pull the wool over their eyes.

The weird part though, is that even as the fear washed over me, chilling me more than Clark's icy breath ever could, I felt a warmth and calming sensation suffuse my body. I wasn't in the

hands of some stranger. I hadn't even entrusted myself, my safety, my life to Superman. I'd given myself over to *Clark*. That thought, that moment of clarity, made the difference. I knew he'd be careful. I knew he'd do anything in his power to bring me out of my frozen "death" as gently, as safely as possible. Liar though he is, I could trust him, rely on him, perhaps even more than I ever could before. It wasn't even so much because I knew he'd do everything in his power to protect the woman he loves. With my new-found, specialized x-ray vision, I could see into his very heart. I could see the profound reverence he has for all life, not just mine.

So I gladly gave myself over to him, letting him do whatever he needed to do, knowing I would not remember a thing in those lost minutes or hours that it would take for him to convince his parents' kidnappers that I had well and truly gone home to God. I hoped my sacrifice, my willingness to put my own life on the line would give him some measure of comfort, no matter how small, because I hoped it would relay to him just how much I really do love him.

The next thing I knew, I heard his voice calling my name, but it was so distant, so faint, it felt like it was coming from a hundred miles away and through a dense wall of fog that physically attempted to thwart my efforts to move through it to reach him. When he finally pulled me to safety and I opened my eyes and knew I wasn't dead, my brain remained somewhat foggy. I knew only the most basic truths. I was alive and my brain functioned well enough to appreciate that fact. The Kents were alive, though I could see that something bad had probably happened, from the haunted look in their eyes. And, of course, that Clark is Superman. But it wasn't until Clark saw me comfortably back home in my own bed, snug and warm under extra blankets, that my mind cleared enough to allow me to examine the truth behind the Man of Steel.

As I lay here, still nursing the now-tepid tea that he made me before I shooed him away so that he could be with his parents, I can finally process it all. And one thing keeps coming to mind — I'm so glad that Clark doesn't yet know that I've figured out the truth.

I'll admit it — it's kind of fun, in a way, that he doesn't know yet. It's empowering to have such a huge secret — to know about the secret he still believes is intact. Oh, I won't hold onto my little secret for too long. It's just a matter of finding some time to get to talk to him about it — with everything that's happened tonight, neither one of us wants to get into the subject of his lies. When I finally confront him with my knowledge, I want to ensure that we have enough time and clear enough heads. I'm going to demand answers, and I don't want to be rushed.

But there's another reason why I'm glad he doesn't know yet, that is actually not selfish. I'm glad he didn't have that weight of knowledge in his head when he was freezing my body. I didn't fear that he would make a disastrous mistake — I really did trust him. Rather, he had enough to worry about — making sure I didn't die for real, the worry that I might suffer from devastating, debilitating, permanent effects from my frozen state, the constant fear that our ruse would be uncovered, the gnawing terror that something might happen to the only parents he's ever known. I couldn't have, even now as I stew in anger over being lied to, added to the nearly unbearable strain he was under. I couldn't, in case the worst should have happened, let him live the rest of his life wondering just how angry I'd been when I realized the truth.

And don't get me wrong here. I *am* angry. Furious, actually. But not only at him. At myself too, for not seeing what should have been so obvious.

Still, I'm glad that he was able to do what he needed to do, without having something else to worry about. I'm even more glad that my plan worked. Clark's parents are safe and I am alive and, aside from a case of the sniffles, I'm no worse for my

experience. I'm relieved too. Relieved that I don't have to see that gut-wrenching fear in his eyes as he worked so fervently to save his parents. Relieved that, when I look at him, I see joy and love in his expressions. Relieved that he is once more relaxed and less rigid in his posture, as though the entire weight of the cosmos has been lifted from his shoulders. Relieved that, despite my anger over his deception, that I find myself still loving him.

Relieved that I still look at him and see Clark, not Superman.

It's interesting. I used to see only the hero. Clark might as well have been invisible to me. He was barely a blip on my radar, and then only because he used to annoy me more than anything. But as he forced me to take notice of the man, not the myth, Superman faded into the background, though he never disappeared. Now, as I look at the combined man, the two parts merged into one unique individual, all I can see is Clark, the simple farm kid who grew to be a great reporter, and my best friend.

It makes total sense that he would hide his alter ego from me. Before I learned to see him as a friend, I would have thrown him under the bus to get ahead. I would have splashed his image and dual identity across the front page of the Daily Planet faster than he can crush a bullet between his fingers. And, in doing so, I would have destroyed the one decent man I've ever allowed myself to come to know — I mean *really know* on a personal, intimate, soul-reaching level. I would have destroyed his parents as well, and anyone who's ever been close to him. I would have earned my Pulitzer, no doubt, but my life would have been poorer for it. Clark Kent would have been murdered, for all intents and purposes, and Superman would have had an even bigger target painted on him by the already-intent-on-killing-him criminal circuit.

Which, I now see, is exactly why he's hidden his identity from the entire world, not just me. It's not a selfish ploy to have a life outside of his superhero responsibilities. It's not to escape the pressures of being Superman. It's to protect his own life. It's to protect the people he loves — his parents, his friends, his coworkers, Jimmy, Perry, and even — or maybe especially — me. If word got out that Superman took off the cape to slip into his life as Clark Kent, everyone connected with him would suddenly sprout blinking red bullseye marks. They would be kidnapped, tortured, and killed in order to get to Superman. Just like the Kents were taken.

Huh.

Just like the Kents were taken.

I wonder. Why them? Did Mazik do it just because Clark and I are perceived to be so close to the hero, that he gambled on Clark being able to get Superman to do his bidding? If so, why Jonathan and Martha? Why not my own parents, or my sister? I shudder at the thought, but I think I may be more strongly linked to Superman in the public's eye than Clark is. Did Mazik guess or suspect that Clark himself might be Superman? After all, he wouldn't be the first to try to link the hero and the reporter. Diana Stride tried to prove to the world that Clark and Superman were one and the same, but somehow, Clark managed to fool the world into believing that she was wrong. Even *I* clearly saw Clark at the podium for the press conference and Superman floating in the air not far above him. I wonder how he did it. A power he's never let on about? Or some other, more mundane explanation, perhaps a trick with mirrors or a clone, like the one who showed up so briefly a while back?

I guess it doesn't really matter *how* he did it. He managed to fool the entire world, managed to perpetuate the lie, managed to keep himself firmly under the radar.

But not any longer. Not with me.

When and how I'll let him know that I've seen through his flimsy disguise of unneeded glasses and a garish suit of Spandex, I'm not sure. How I'll react to his excuses, his apologies, his

rationalizations, I honestly wish I knew. I'm too upset with myself, too hurt by the fact that, after all this time, he still chose not to trust me. It might soften the blow to my ego, to hear what he has to say for himself. It may further inflame my ire. I don't know. The information is still too new to me, still too overwhelming, and my brush with death still too close, for me to really even accurately process my current anger, let alone take any guesses on what I might feel in another day or two, even another week.

How will *he* feel, once he knows that he can no longer pretend to be Superman before me? How will he feel, knowing that his secret is out? Not that I would ever tell anyone. As mad as I am with him, I could never live with myself if I destroyed his life. Will he be afraid anyway? Will he know that I can be trusted? Will it be a bigger burden for him to carry? Will it be a relief to be able to talk to someone else about his dual life?

And suddenly, I'm nervous to broach the subject with him. Not enough to prevent me from giving him a piece of my mind, but enough to spoil the complete and utter joy I was hoping to get from confronting him with the truth.

I know he'll trust me. I'm sure of it. He's trusted me with everything else in his life so far. He's given me deep glimpses into the man that he is, even if he's hidden such a sizable portion of his life from me, from everyone. He's shared his very family with me. If that doesn't imply the greatest amount of trust, I don't know what does. Even when he was acting the part of Superman, he allowed me to get close to him, closer than anyone else on this planet.

No, he won't be afraid of what I might do with the information I now possess. He'll be more afraid of how mad I'll be, if I know him at all, and I know that I do. He's always been almost hyper-aware of me, of my feelings, even when I wasn't in the mood to share or even fully aware of them myself. And he's always seemed to be sensitive to how I perceive him — not that he necessarily seeks my approval, but he's always quick to apologize when he's done something to make me a little upset with him.

That's another reason why he didn't tell me the truth, isn't it? He didn't want me to love Superman. He wanted me to love Clark.

How often did he speak derisively of the caped hero, whenever I was overly star-struck by the flying, handsome man with the giant S on his chest? I often thought he was jealous of the hero, the man who was supposed to be a friend of his. Now I realize that he was jealous of *himself*, competing with someone who didn't exist, for the affections of one very blind, willfully ignorant woman. And maybe, in a way, he was trying to spare my feelings as well. Superman could never love me — he's not allowed to have a personal, private life or any of the things associated with that, like a girlfriend. But Clark *could*, because he's just an average man. Both Superman and Clark could hurt me, but only Clark had the opportunity to *not* hurt me, and, instead, to heal all the wounds the rest of the world had inflicted on me.

Ugh, when did life become so complicated?

I love him, I really do. And despite all the reasons why I know he kept his secrets, I'm mad at him. I don't know how I can trust him not to lie to me again. Especially about something huge. My trust in him has been shaken to the core. He *knows* my disastrous history with men lying to me! And *I know* he did it for good reasons, but still! He was the one man on this planet who I thought would never, ever, *ever* hurt me in any way, no matter what suit he was wearing.

Well, at least I know it can't get any worse. He can't lie to me anymore. He can't hide. He can't escape telling me the truth — *all* of it. He can't pull any more surprises. I'm on to him. Nothing else can blindsides *this* newly acquired x-ray vision.

THE END