

The Final Piece of the Puzzle

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Summary: Clark commences Operation Puzzle Piece to restore Lois' confidence in her investigative abilities after her disastrous near-wedding to Luthor. But he also has a hidden agenda...

This story starts at the beginning of the second season and diverges from canon from thereafter.

Corrina (Female Hawk) was, as always, a terrific beta reader. Her comments not only improved this story but taught me more of the fiction writing craft in general. My general editor, Nancy (Classicala), went above and beyond the call of duty with her attention to detail and her educational explanations. Thanks to both of you!

I do not own anything related to Lois & Clark except the novel elements of this story. I am just borrowing the characters from Warner Brothers and D.C. Comics for a bit of not-for-profit fun.

As always, all feedback welcomed at lois_and_clark_fan_at_verizon.net. (Replace `_at_` with the appropriate symbol.)

Clark's heart went out to Lois every time he saw her. She had been so despondent ever since the day she was supposed to have married Luthor. Oh, she didn't seem to mind that the wedding had fallen through. She didn't even seem to be grieving for her would-have-been husband. What seemed to be bothering her was that she hadn't seen through Luthor's respectable veneer. She no longer had faith in herself as an investigative reporter or even as a judge of character. Clark had decided it was time to do something about that. He would begin Operation Puzzle Piece this morning.

He waited until she had hung up the phone to approach her.

"Good morning, Lois," he greeted her with a smile.

"Oh, hi, Clark," she said distractedly.

He reached into his pocket and then made a show of pulling out his clenched fist and holding it before her. "Open your hand. I have something for you."

She eyed him somewhat dubiously but couldn't resist the intrigue. She did as he had requested. With a flourish, he dropped a jigsaw puzzle piece into it.

"A puzzle piece?" she said, "Why in the world are you giving me one puzzle piece?"

"It's the first piece of a sixty piece puzzle. It's to remind you how well you solved the puzzle of the Chamber of Commerce scandal we looked into last week. You haven't lost your investigative edge, you know. And I've decided to remind you of that by giving you a puzzle piece for each story you break. You'll be able to see how quickly they come together."

"Clark, what do you think I am – a five-year-old that you reward with a sticker each time he picks up his toys?"

Although Lois' words dripped with sarcasm, Clark noted that she carefully put the puzzle piece in her purse to take home with her at the end of the day. He took that to be his cue to continue with Operation Puzzle Piece. He realized that although her words

might seem dismissive, she was secretly pleased with the idea. He would go easy on her, he decided. In the future, he would simply leave a puzzle piece on her desk whenever she had earned one.

As the months passed, Lois was able to assemble more and more of her puzzle. Each piece had been left on her desk and subsequently brought home without comment by either party. It didn't take her very long to realize that Clark was conveying a message to her through the picture on the puzzle – the image gradually being revealed was that of the great detective Sherlock Holmes examining a crime scene. Such an image was certainly not typical fodder for a sixty piece puzzle. As soon as she realized what the puzzle depicted, she suspected that Clark must have had it custom made. A little research on her part confirmed her suspicion.

By the start of December, she only needed three more pieces, and she rapidly earned two of them. Yet despite her having had three more front page stories, Clark did not relinquish the piece that would complete the puzzle – the one depicting the magnifying glass. The farm boy had racked up some brownie points by having the puzzle custom made, but he was rapidly losing them by withholding that final piece. Surely he knew how much it galled her to be so close to finishing the puzzle while being denied the satisfaction of its completion. Days went by without him giving her the missing piece, until finally she could stand it no longer.

"All right, Kent. What's the deal with the puzzle? You know I only need one more piece to complete it. You also know I have done some darned good work this month. That story I wrote last week on the governor's misappropriation of funds will probably earn me a Meriwether, maybe even a Kerth. If you don't think a story of that caliber merits the puzzle piece, I'd like to see you come up with a bigger scoop yourself."

Clark leaned back in his chair and rolled his pencil between the fingers of both hands. His eyes twinkled as he commented, "Gee, Lois, and all this time I thought you didn't like the idea of the puzzle."

Abashed, she said, "Yeah, well, it kind of grew on me." Then, with more determination, "So what about that last puzzle piece?"

"The last piece of a puzzle is special. I agree you've already earned it, but I want to give it to you when we're alone. Could I come over to your place tonight to give it to you and to watch you complete the puzzle? I'll even promise you something more – when you have the last piece of that puzzle, you'll also get the last piece of another puzzle that I know you've been working on for a very long time. That will be my Christmas gift to you."

Lois was intrigued. "Come by at 8:00 and I'll have a movie set up for us to watch."

Clark smiled, "Then it's a date."

Clark was literally walking up his apartment walls. He checked his watch yet again; the time was crawling by. He had planned this evening for months. On the day he had given Lois that first puzzle piece he had decided precisely how he would give her the last piece. But now, as the hour approached for him actually to do it, he was so nervous he wasn't sure how he would go through with it. He checked his watch again. 7:57 pm. It was finally time.

Lois looked at her watch. 7:58. When Clark actually did show up to an event, he was usually early. She wondered in disgust whether he was picking up his Cheese of the Month order or filling yet another prescription. She had only known him to be sick once since she met him – that time in Smallville. Why someone who seemed to be so healthy would need so many prescriptions was beyond her.

Her musings were interrupted by a knock on her window. She opened it and saw Superman hovering outside.

“Hello, Lois. May I come in?”

He actually sounded more nervous than when he had been about to fly to the Nightfall asteroid. Why would that be? She would have to ponder that later; in the meantime, she would do her best to make him feel at home.

“Of course, Superman! Clark’s supposed to be here any minute, but I’m sure he won’t mind. Come on in. Can I get you anything?”

He took a deep breath and let it out. “Thank you, Lois, but no. Actually, I came here to give you something and to keep a promise I made to you.”

What could Superman mean by that? Lois could think of no promise he had made to her. And if he were anyone else, she would have considered his facial expression to be sheepish. But what could Superman possibly have to be sheepish about?

He reached somewhere behind his back and brought his hand forward in a fist. He took her hand in his free one and turned it palm up. He put the unseen contents of his fist into her hand and then gently curled her fingers up to enclose his gift to her. She knew what it was at once by the feel of its irregular shape.

Superman’s gaze captured hers. “Lois,” he said tenderly.

She gasped when she heard the different timbre of his voice – the voice that she now recognized as belonging to her best friend and writing partner.

He continued. “You now have the final piece to both puzzles. Merry Christmas.”

Fin

THE END