

Superman's Laundry

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Rated: PG

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Summary: After almost being exposed by Diana Stride, Clark knows that he has to tell Lois his secret in person. But that is not so easy, particularly when people suddenly pay interest to the man who does Superman's laundry.

"A toast to modern art and its achievements," Dad says happily, raising his glass of champagne with a smile. "From now on, I will stop making any negative comments on Martha's art classes," he adds, blushing at that. Flashing my Mom an apologetic smile, he bends down to kiss her.

"Well, you better," she warns him, wagging her index finger with a soft giggle, but she gently returns the kiss.

Then she raises her glass to meet his with a soft clinking sound. It never ceases to amaze me how deeply they love each other. In moments like this Dad seems to drown in Mom's eyes and the world around them just fades, including me. Maybe that is why they don't even notice that I'm not joining them. Honestly, I don't feel much like celebrating.

"Thanks, Mom and Dad." My mumbled words sound pretty ungrateful to my own ears. It annoys me, because I am not ungrateful, quite the opposite. But my voice just won't work properly. Though the imminent danger is gone, the angst is still lingering with me. Without my parents, my private life as Clark Kent would have been over, finally consumed by Superman. "I really thought that Diana Stride had finally tracked me down," I add gravely, trying to convey how much I owe them. This time, I'm more successful.

"But we were able to stop her," Dad says in a rather clumsy attempt to soothe me. "That's the important thing." He gives me a vigorous pat on the back. Involuntarily, I flinch and rub my shoulder. As I see my father's worried face, I instantly regret my reaction. It didn't hurt that much. But even though this certainly wasn't my first encounter with kryptonite, I don't think I will ever get used to feeling pain.

"I'm sorry, Dad," I apologize. "I didn't mean to scare you. Seems like I'm still not quite back to normal," I explain and put the glass in my hand back on the table.

I haven't taken a sip. Like I said, I don't feel like celebrating. It's not just that I'm tired and achy, which I am, no kidding! What unsettles me most is that I had to lie to everyone. And to Lois. This whole thing was one big emotional roller-coaster ride. I have been stalked, almost killed and finally exposed. Still, I'm not quite sure what was the worst thing. Completely drained and with slumped shoulders I stroll towards my sofa. I sit down and lean against the backrest.

"What's eating at you, honey?" Mom asks sympathetically, following me to the sofa. "Are you still trying to come to terms with lying to everyone?" she goes on.

It isn't a question. After almost thirty years of knowing me, she is just short of being a mind reader. Truth be told, I think she always has been. I feel the sofa buckle slightly as she sits down next to me. She takes my hand in a firm, but comforting grip.

"You know that your father and I certainly didn't teach you to lie deliberately, Clark," she says softly. "But today, you needed to protect your secret. Not only to lead a normal life, but also to protect people," she reminds me and then takes a deep breath before she continues. "This isn't just about you, or your dad and

me, Clark. Our lives are not that important. But what do you think would happen if the world knew that Superman was just a normal man, that he gets parking tickets and that his mother tanned his hide when he was still a boy?"

"You didn't tan my hide, Mom," I disagree and chuckle. "And I don't even own a car."

"You know very well what I'm talking about, Clark," Mom replies, mildly annoyed. "There's no use fussing over spilt milk, anyway," she adds with a snort. "Would you like to go out and tell the world that you lied today?"

"Of course not," I say defensively. "I'm glad I got a second chance, I really am, Mom. But this whole thing scared the hell out of me. When I arrived at the Planet, everyone was looking at me in disbelief," I tell Mom, vividly recalling the moment. "Some thought that Diana's story was a fake. Lois was one of them, I think." I fall silent, lacking words to describe how this makes me feel.

An eternity seems to pass as I'm reliving the moment. I can still see the expression on Lois' face as she turned around to look at me. It is engraved in my memory. The first part of Top Copy had just been on the air and everybody was trying to come to terms with what they had just learned. I can still see this anger and confusion in her gaze. She looked so lost and so utterly hurt.

"How could I ever risk that Lois learns my secret this way?" I ask dejectedly and get up from the sofa. Restlessly, I pace through my living room, tearing my hair. "I kept finding excuses for not telling her, so many that I lost count. But the truth is that I would never want her to see it on TV or read it in a paper. I've always wanted to tell her in person, but I never even considered that one day it might be too late to do so," I say desperately.

"Well, it's not too late to tell her now," Mom states softly and approaches me, smiling at me warmly. I stop pacing around, suddenly feeling better because I have told my parents. "Why don't you ask her out on a date? It's Valentine's Day, tomorrow. Don't you think that's the perfect opportunity?" she suggests with a wink. "You invite her to come to your place, you cook for her and then you tell her."

"It's not that simple, Mom," I sigh and look at her, discouraged.

Close to me, Dad mutters something, nodding in agreement. I can even see him roll his eyes as if he wants to say that with women it is never easy. But as Mom turns around, folding her arms in front of her chest, Dad quickly smiles at her, innocently. Now Mom is rolling her eyes, but then she obviously decides to let Dad off the hook. She focuses back on me, the stern expression on her face demanding for a more detailed explanation.

"Lois and I haven't been discussing the date issue, lately," I admit uneasily. "She said it was her turn bringing up the topic again, and I'm afraid she won't take it well ... " I mumble, wishing I could make her understand just how difficult asking for a date is going to be, let alone telling her my secret.

"I really don't understand you guys," Mom admonishes me, shaking her head in disbelief. "The way I see it, either you tell her, or you don't."

"I guess you're right, Mom," I give in, though I'm not completely convinced that it will actually be as easy as she imagines. "As always," I add with a small, almost invisible smile. "I know that I want to tell Lois. But I'm afraid she will be angry with me, maybe too angry to forgive me. On the other hand, I'm sure that not telling her would even be worse. In the long shot, anyway."

Mom steps forward and embraces me. "I'm sure you'll do the right thing," she says confidently. I lean into her comforting hug and some of her optimism devolves to me. "Is there anything else you need, honey?" she asks gently and hardly manages to stifle a yawn. Suddenly, I realize that she is probably even more tired

than I.

"No, thanks, Mom," I reply softly. "All I need is a good night's sleep and I guess the same applies to you and Dad. You two take the bed; I'm going to sleep on the sofa."

As I let go of her, I can see Mom smile. "I'm so tired, I could sleep on the floor, if I had to," she admits with a grin and yawns once more.

"Me too, Mom, me too," I confess and feel that her yawning is contagious. "Since floating is not an option, that is," I add sheepishly.

As soon as I step out of the elevator, I know that I'm in for trouble. It's more a feeling than anything tangible. Lois doesn't seem to be fuming. She sits at her desk, studying some papers. I'm not late for work, although my powers are already kicking back in. It is hard to tell what it is exactly that warns me. Perhaps it is Lois' heart that beats slightly faster than usual. Or maybe it is the bouquet of flowers sitting on my desk.

Curious, I go down the ramp towards the newsroom. Some of my colleagues look up from their work as I pass by. From the corner of my eyes, I see Ralph, a newbie in Perry's team, raising his thumb, mouthing something that resembles 'Way to go, Kent.' I find him a little strange, anyway, and so I do my best to ignore him.

A closer look at my desk tells me that my powers are obviously still failing me. There isn't just one bouquet but a whole bunch of them. My desk and chair are covered with flowers. I know it's Valentine's Day, but isn't this a little exaggerated? Not even Superman has ever received such an amount of flowers. This has to be some strange kind of joke, but hard as I try I'm not getting the point.

"If I'd known that doing a hero's laundry is the direct way to a woman's heart, I would have offered him to use my washing machine," Jimmy says wistfully as he approaches my desk.

"I thought you were still going to that laundromat at the corner of your street," I tease him gently.

"Well, I would have bought one ..." Jimmy shrugs, grinning.

"So, you're telling me this is all about doing Superman's laundry?" I ask him incredulously and pick up one of the cards that must have come with the flowers. "I love doing laundry ..." I read, loud enough for Jimmy to hear. "There's a phone number, too," I raise my brows, surprised. "Does she want me to pass on the message to Superman or is this an invitation to enjoy the pleasures of washing together?" I wonder and shake my head.

I'm trying to sound seriously amused, which I'm not. Though it's pretty ridiculous, it pains me when people only see Clark Kent as Superman's messenger. But maybe I've got to get used to that, now that everyone knows that I'm closer to Superman than anyone else. Perhaps I should just be grateful that no one knows how close, exactly.

"I don't know, maybe both ..." Jimmy chuckles and picks another card. "Oh, this is a little more explicit," he says excitedly. "I adore men who enjoy doing chores," he reads out with laughter. "Oh boy, CK ..."

"Are you two finished?" Lois asks, annoyed, folding her arms in front of her chest.

"I'm sorry, Lois," I quickly apologize. "This ..." I gesture at my desk, "... was kind of unexpected."

"Don't flatter yourself, Clark," Lois returns almost angrily. "Most of them are for Superman. There are a few unambiguous invitations and the rest is female reporters pleading with you to give them an interview." Suddenly she harrumphs and blushes. "Okay, I must admit I was curious, too. After all, you're just doing Superman's laundry. So what's the big deal?"

There's a strange glow in her eyes that unsettles me. Lois looks hurt, but also confused. Seeing her vulnerable always makes me feel so small, so low. It's worse now that I know it's

my fault. Suddenly, I just want to drag her to the conference room and tell her everything. But with a whole newsroom listening in, I can't do that. Someone might guess the truth and I don't want to risk that. Instantly, I flinch at my ability to make up yet more excuses.

"Lois, can I talk to you?" I ask her nervously, my stomach somersaulting in response. She just nods, impatient and still obviously angry. "A bit more private ..." I beg and gesture towards the conference room. She raises her brows, but nods again. I can already feel the lump in my throat. My heart is beating fast; the rate even increases as I take the first step. Am I really going to tell her now? Here? Or do I rather invite her for dinner as Mom suggested?

"Lane, Kent, in my office!" Perry suddenly yells across the room. "Now!" he adds, making it clear that he is absolutely not willing to wait.

Neither am I. I'm anxious to get through with this. Telling Lois will only become even more difficult if I keep postponing it. Strangely, I also feel relieved, frustrated and relieved, all at the same time. Helplessly, I watch Lois as she turns on her heels and heads for Perry's office.

"I'm sorry I never told you ..." I hurry to say as I follow Lois. "It's just ..." I fall silent. What am I going to say? The truth about me being Superman? Or am I going to apologize for never telling her that I do Superman's laundry? None of these two options seem like a good idea to me.

"Well, that's just the problem with us, Clark, isn't it? There's so much you don't tell me, so much more than just washing Superman's suits, isn't there?" Lois replies flatly and briefly turns towards me. Her glance is contemptuous, furious really. Then, all of a sudden, she hurries on, leaving me with a huge lump in my throat. This is even worse than I expected.

Stifling a sigh, I give in to my fate and follow her to Perry's office. Our editor-in-chief is already waiting for me. Even the short delay seems to have worn his patience dangerously thin. With a grunt Perry closes the door behind us, eyeing his two best reporters suspiciously.

"You're not having a fight, are you?" he asks with daggers in his eyes, watching both of us so intensively that we cannot but shake our heads. "Very well," he says, pleased with our reaction. "As the two of you might have noticed, people are still pretty curious to learn more after yesterday's press conference," Perry goes on. With his eyes he seems to ask why we haven't already written a bunch of articles on this topic.

"But Perry, what ..." Lois wants to know, but Perry soon interrupts her.

"My phone hasn't stopped ringing ever since I came here this morning," Perry complains. "Every newspaper is asking for an interview with Clark. It almost seems like doing Superman's laundry is more newsworthy than his ..." he briefly stops, indicating quotation marks with his fingers. "... 'being Superman' was," Perry says, not completely able to hide his surprise. "And in case you didn't get my point: I don't want to read such an interview in any paper but 'The Daily Planet'," he emphasizes his last words almost threateningly.

"You want me to interview Clark?" Lois asks, shocked. "Perry, this ... we can't do this. I mean, we're working together and an interview ..." she takes a deep breath as she always does when she's preparing for a heated discussion.

I watch her in amazement. Is Lois really trying to defend me? Or am I just imagining things because I desperately hope that she would do this for me? But ultimately I know that any attempt at persuading Perry will be futile. If there has ever been a person more stubborn than Lois, it is Perry.

"I know what you're about to say, Lois," Perry harshly interrupts Lois. "And I don't want to hear any of it. I don't like this any better than you do. But Diana Stride started this whole

thing about exposing Superman and I'm afraid that the only way we can stop this now is by printing the truth," Perry explains, suddenly becoming his more fatherly self again. "If you don't do this interview, others will. Do you honestly want to read anything about Superman and Clark in papers like the 'Metropolis Mirror' and 'The Inquisitor'?" When Perry is finished, Lois opens her mouth.

"I'm not going to argue about this, Lois." Perry cuts her off. "You two better get started. There's a deadline to meet!" He opens the door again, ushering us out of his office. As the door falls shut behind us, we look at each other uncomfortably.

"So what were you going to tell me?" Lois asks hoarsely as we are back at her desk. I can still hear the anger in her voice, but I'm not quite sure if it's Perry or me she's angry with. Maybe both of us.

"I'd rather not tell you here, Lois," I confess and indecisively look towards the conference room. It doesn't seem like the perfect place either. Actually, there's only one place I could possibly feel comfortable with. "It might not be the best moment to ask you ..." I say, unable to keep from sighing heavily.

"I'm not going to like this, am I?" she immediately replies. "Clark, I don't want to do this interview, either. I mean, we're friends ... at least I hope we are ... and we were thinking about having a date and ... I don't know what this will do to us. I mean, it irks me that you never told me how close you and Superman really are. But you might have had your reasons, maybe he even asked you to keep this a secret, but ..." It pains me to see her confusion and to know that I'm responsible. "I'm scared that you're going to tell me something else that I didn't know about, Clark. I'm scared that I'm going to lose my best friend, I'm scared that I might have already lost him." The look in her eyes tears at my heart and I swallow hard. I can't go on like this, not anymore. She has to know, whatever will become of it.

With trembling fingers I reach for her hand. "Come with me," I plead with her. "We should better find a place where you can yell at me any way you like."

"Clark," she replies with a sense of outrage, as she realizes that I'm not going to soothe her. "So you did ..."

"Lois, please, not here ..." I beg and manage to silence her.

She still looks pretty angry, but she's obviously decided to grant me my request. Or perhaps she thinks that there are better ways to give me a hard time than making a scene. Fuming, she follows me through the newsroom. But she doesn't say anything, is just staring daggers at me. And honestly, I think this is really worse than being yelled at. With a huge lump in my throat I fetch my coat and for a brief moment I watch the flowers on my desk, thoughtfully. They look so very innocent. But I feel that they've destroyed my last chance to ask for Lois' forgiveness. As I look up, I see the expression on her face. The way she stares at the flowers, they're lucky she can't set them on fire.

As I come back to her, she turns on her heels and walks up the ramp to the elevators. Only seconds later a door opens next to her and I've got to hurry to join her before the door closes again. She doesn't speak to me as the elevator slowly approaches the entry hall. She doesn't even look at me and thus turns this brief ride into an agonizingly slow journey. I'm standing beside her, helpless despite all those extraordinary powers.

An eternity seems to pass until I hear the liberating sound of a bell, indicating that we've reached the first floor. We get out of the elevator and cross the hall. Moments later, we're on the street. Although we haven't discussed it, we're both instantly heading in the same direction. I'm not quite sure where we're going. But after walking down a few streets in silence, our destination is pretty obvious. Judging from the expression on Lois' face, she's just as surprised as I am as we find ourselves standing in front of a certain park bench. It's the bench we were sitting on when I told

her I loved her, the bench on which she rejected me. I should have told her then what I am going to tell her now. That would have spared us a lot of pain.

We sit down and I turn towards her, nervously running my hand through my hair. This feels awkward. I didn't think that anything was ever going to be more difficult than telling her that I love her. But this is even worse, because there's so much more to lose here. This time, I cannot cross my fingers behind my back and tell her that I didn't mean what I said. This time I am the villain and I might lose her for good.

"Actually, I wanted to invite you for dinner this evening," I say wistfully, not really knowing how to start. "I wanted to cook for you and spend a nice evening with you ..." my voice trails off and I look at her longingly.

"You wanted to cook for me?" she repeats curiously. Then she is rolling her eyes, as if this kind of slipped out despite herself.

"And I wanted to tell you everything. I'm so sorry, Lois," I apologize. "I shouldn't have kept this from you. But you need to understand that I was afraid. I thought that there was still enough time left to brace myself, to find the right words and the right moment," I try to explain. She furrows her brows, indicating that she doesn't know what I'm talking about.

"Would you please tell me now what it is that you've been keeping from me?" she demands, obviously annoyed with my inability to just tell her.

"Diana Stride was right, Lois," I say, needing all the courage I can muster to raise my voice to an audible level. "I am Superman."

For a moment it seems as if time has stopped. Lois just stares at me, unmoving. The world around us is reduced to this small bench where I am awaiting my sentence. I can hear nothing but our heartbeats, both a bit faster than usual, both slightly more irregular. The sounds of the city have died down, maybe for the first time since I've come to Metropolis. I see nothing but the pain in her eyes as my words slowly sink in, as she understands their meaning. And I feel fear and despair, love and shame all at the same time.

"But ..." she breathes in a weak attempt at protest.

"It was nothing but an illusion," I tell her, guessing what it is that is troubling her. "My Mom is working on this art project with laser sculptures. She and Dad helped me to ..." I don't finish my sentence. She knows what I'm talking about, anyway.

Lois simply nods her understanding. Then she reaches out to take off my glasses. Strangely, that sends another jolt of fear through me. She studies my face, then my glasses. A small wrinkle appears above her nose as she examines them. "There's nothing special about them," she states, sounding somewhat surprised. "They're pretty heavy, though."

"It's leaded glass," I reply and suddenly feel a weird rush of happiness course through me. "It kept me from accidentally using my vision powers when I was young. I've kind of gotten used to it. The glasses remind me to be careful using my strength." It's a strange feeling to tell someone else about my powers, strange but also kind of relieving.

Again, Lois nods. So far, she hasn't yelled at me, though I'm sure that is yet to come. She hands me my glasses and I put them back on. Her silence is more unsettling than any yelling could ever be. I try to read from her expression what she's thinking, how angry she is and if there's any chance that she will forgive me. Of course, I don't expect her to just accept my being Superman and go on as if this didn't mean a major change in our relationship.

"Why?" she suddenly asks and gets up. "Don't you trust me?" I cringe as I hear the hurt in her voice. A single tear is rolling down her cheek, though I can see she's fighting hard to keep from crying. "Do you really think that I would have exposed

you like Diana Stride has?" she wants to know. A second tear joins the first one. She balls her hands to fists and her voice is trembling with barely restrained anger. "Do you think so little of me?" she yells furiously and is about to turn around and walk out on me.

"Of course I trust you," I hurry to say, panic-stricken. "I trust you implicitly. It wasn't fair to keep this from you for so long. All I can do is ask for your forgiveness," I add gravely. "Please believe me that this has never been easy for me." This sounds so meaningless. I cringe as I hear myself talk in platitudes. Lois deserves so much more than this. She deserves a real explanation. But I'm beginning to fear that I don't have one. It's just become a habit to hide my powers. Pretending to be normal is so convenient, so much easier than facing the problems of being different.

I look at Lois and still see the hurt in her eyes. But she comes closer, sits down next to me and offers me a chance to explain myself. There's also a silent warning in the way she returns my look, telling me that I'd better not disappoint her.

"I'm sorry, Lois. You deserve better than this," I apologize and swallow hard. "I grew up in a small town where everyone knows everything about everyone else," I try again. "When I started developing these strange powers, I was awfully afraid that someone would find out how different I am. My parents feared that I would be dissected like a frog if anyone knew about my powers." I still feel a shudder coursing through me when I think about those days. "I was so scared, then," I admit quietly. "But mostly I was scared of myself. I set things on fire. I didn't just break vases. I accidentally unhinged doors, to name just one of the rather harmless mishaps. Whenever I thought that I'd learned to control my powers, a new one kicked in and there was no way of knowing what was going to happen next."

I realize that her expression has softened a bit. It's still obvious that she's angry with me, and she has any right to be.

"This must have been pretty hard for you," she says sympathetically. Even so, I can't help the impression that it's only my younger self she has pity on.

"Hiding became second nature for me," I go on and try not to think too much about what will become of our relationship now that I've told her. "No one could see me doing anything remotely strange. It turned out that I was a rather quick learner. I became so good at hiding what I could do that I was short of being invisible. When I came to Metropolis I had a pretty hard time making you see me," I manage not to let it sound reproachful. "You didn't recognize me when I was wearing the suit and I was glad you didn't," I say with a heavy sigh. "I didn't know you, then, and I was afraid that you might expose me. After all you are a reporter and your partner being an alien from outer space is news."

She is watching me for a while, her expression softening even more. "Well, I do understand that you couldn't tell me, then. You were just a stranger, some hack I'd been partnered with." I can see a small, rueful smile play around her lips as she says that. "I guess I would have seen the chance to get a Pulitzer and little else," she admits softly. "But why didn't you tell me later? Why didn't you tell me the last time we were sitting on this bench? I made a fool of myself and you just stood there and watched me!" Her voice is getting louder, her anger clearly welling up again.

"I was jealous," I reply helplessly.

"Of Luthor?" she asks quietly.

"Partly. But mostly I was jealous of Superman," I admit and feel my cheeks burn up with embarrassment. "This must sound so ridiculous, but it is true. I realize that even more now that I've said it. You were so infatuated with Superman and at the same time you were completely ignoring me, when I was with you as Clark. It confused me and pained me so much," I tell her and do my best not to let it sound like I'm accusing her. After all, it

wasn't her fault. "To you Superman was a real person; to me he was just a disguise, a cardboard cut-out I needed to use my powers. I don't know what would have happened if I had told you the last time we sat on this bench. Perhaps I wouldn't have been able to believe that you could ever love me for who I really am." Still embarrassed, I look down at my knees.

From the corner of my eyes I see Lois nod. She's nodded a lot during our conversation and it's so very tempting to interpret this as a sign of forgiveness. But I know better than to fool myself like this. Lois might have accepted my explanation, but that doesn't mean she is actually going to forgive me.

"I'm sorry, Lois," I tell her once more, hoping that another apology might better my chances. "I never meant to hurt you. The truth is, I just didn't know how to tell you or when. But after Diana Stride almost managed to reveal my secret ... I realized that you could not learn my secret this way. I've always wanted to tell you in person, but I didn't even consider that one day it might be too late."

I look up at her and try to read her face. Her lips are small and I can see that my lack of trust hurt her. The tears on her cheeks have dried, but the trail they left is still visible, at least for me. I want to reach out and wipe it away, but I know that she wouldn't let me.

"What do you expect me to do, Clark?" she asks after a while. "You've been lying to me for over a year now. Do you think I will just forgive you and then we get back to work, writing that article you promised Perry?" She's still angry with me, and I can't exactly blame her. As she mentions the article, I realize that I have completely forgotten about it. "What did you think, anyway? You already knew that this interview would be impossible to write. You ..." She breathes heavily and once again gets up. "You ..."

"I don't expect you to just forgive me," I say slowly and try to remain calm. It's anything but easy with my heart beating madly. Panic threatens to overtake me, as I realize just how close I am to losing her. "But I'm asking you to give me a chance to regain your trust," I plead with her.

"I don't know if I can do that," she says and looks at me desperately. "I want to trust you, Clark. I really want to go back to the Planet, write this darn article, go out on a date and see if it works," she adds hoarsely and I know that for Lois this is quite some admission. "But I'm not sure I can. There's so much to take in, so many things I need to think about. I'm just not sure I can." She sobs and suddenly turns around, running away from me as fast as she can.

I want to follow her, but my legs refuse to obey. So I just remain sitting on the bench, watching her thunderstruck as she leaves me alone. I want to call her name, but I can't. The word is stuck in my throat, slowly suffocating me. Time is standing still and again, the world around me is fading, until there's nothing left but my fear.

It's late as I unlock the door to my apartment. My place is dark and seems so empty without my parents. I offered to fly them back to Smallville, but this morning my powers were still unreliable. So they booked a flight back home and obviously they got one today. I turn on the lights and take the few steps down into my living room. Sad as I am, even my sofa looks uninviting.

I don't know how long I have been sitting on that bench in the park, maybe hours. Eventually, I returned to the Planet. Lois wasn't there when I came and I haven't seen her since. While I was waiting for her to return I wrote some minor articles, some of the touchy-feely stuff Lois doesn't care too much about. But it wasn't exactly easy to concentrate on them, because I was and still am deeply confused. It's killing me that I don't know what the jury, namely Lois, will decide. And it's scary to realize just how much my happiness is depending on her. Of course I already

sort of knew that, but to see how much this affects me is scary nonetheless.

As long as I was able to keep myself busy with rescuing people and writing articles, I did. But when even Perry and Jimmy were ready to call it a day, there wasn't much left I could do, so I went home as well. Strangely, being alone in my apartment has never bothered me. But now I can hardly stand it, maybe because I've planned on inviting Lois for dinner. I've thought about it, I even had a menu. Now it's too late and I can be grateful if Lois will ever talk to me again.

I don't know if she wrote the interview. Perry didn't ask me about it, so maybe she did. I can't say that I really care. If she cannot forgive me, she could just as well expose me. It doesn't matter to me, not anymore. With slumped shoulders I go through my apartment, searching for anything to keep me occupied. But I'm not hungry, I've already done my patrols and I don't want to watch TV. I want to slip into my bed and hide under the covers to see if a Kryptonian can die of heartache. I'm just pathetic!

Suddenly I hear a heavy thud and then another. It takes me a moment to realize that someone's knocking on my door. Then my doorbell rings, followed by another couple of urgent knocks.

"Clark, I know you're there," this someone says impatiently. The woman standing in front of my door does sound a lot like Lois. And as I open the door I realize that it is really her. A rush of happiness is filling me, mixed with fear. Obviously, she is willing to talk to me ... but what is she going to say? I step aside and let her into my apartment. "What took you so long?" she almost snaps and quickly walks down the stairs.

Then Lois shrugs her coat off and turns towards me. Any reply that might have been on the tip of my tongue suddenly vanishes into nothingness. The sight of Lois is just breath-taking. She's wearing a gorgeous satin dress in burgundy red that fits her just perfectly. The plunging neckline emphasized her curves. A thin layer of lace hides most of her cleavage, but reveals enough to make me dizzy. But then, the sight of her always makes me a little dizzy. I stare at her, bedazzled, and cannot help but smile.

"I thought you wanted to cook for me," Lois pouts and looks at me with a provocative glow in her eyes. "I don't smell anything," she complains.

"You came," I stammer, still with this foolish smile on my face. "Does that mean ... " I don't finish my sentence because I don't dare to hope that Lois has really already forgiven me.

"It means that you're getting a second chance, Clark," Lois says warningly. "So you better not mess up." She folds her hands in front of her chest, hiding most of the fascinating view. But she's gorgeous and no folded arms could ever change that.

"What made you change your mind?" I ask her quietly.

"I didn't change my mind, Clark," she corrects me and unfolds her arms again, relaxing a bit. "I am still pretty angry with you," she says, making me flinch as I hear the anger in her voice. "But I realized that I wouldn't be so angry, if you didn't mean anything to me," she adds a lot softer. "You hurt me, badly so, and I'm planning on giving you a hard time. But the truth is that I love you. And I want you to show me that you deserve this love."

She looks at me, conveying all the pain, love and confusion that she feels with her gaze. I open my mouth, but she silences me with the tip of her index finger. Her gentle touch tingles on my lips and my heart rate increases with every second that her finger remains there.

"Don't promise me anything you cannot keep, Clark," she says pleadingly. "Just show me that I can trust you."

"Do you still want to join me for dinner?" I'm barely able to breathe as I nervously wait for her answer. "It's Valentine's Day and I wanted to invite this amazing woman. But I messed up. I thought that she wouldn't come, so I didn't prepare anything. But with a little super help, I guess dinner could be ready in about

two minutes," I say somewhat shyly.

"There are some issues left, Clark," she replies evasively. "We never finished this interview Perry assigned me on. And you know me — I like to do things properly," she says, changing back into reporter mode.

I study her carefully, trying to find out if she's making fun of me. "You didn't write this interview?" I ask her nervously and wonder if giving me a hard time includes interviewing me.

"Oh, I did," she says with a mysterious gleam in her eyes. The she pauses, dramatically. For a while, she is quite obviously enjoying the effect her words are having on me. "Perry said that this will probably be the most boring article anyone ever printed on page two," she adds with an impish smile and starts laughing.

I love the sound of her laughter. It gives me such a warm and fuzzy feeling that I almost forget how nervous she made me. For a while I just watch her. She looks so happy, almost as if she has already forgiven me. But eventually her laughter fades and she turns serious again.

"But I want to know the truth, Clark. The whole truth. No more secrets, promise?" she demands and again folds her arms in front of her chest.

"Promise," I agree with a small sigh. "As long as you're not going to publish any of it," I can't help but add. As I see her roll her eyes, I instantly regret my stupid plea. After all, she's Lois, my best friend. And hopefully, someday, she's going to be even more than that. "I'm sorry," I apologize with a rueful smile. "I know I can trust you."

She simply nods. "Did you really grow up in Smallville?" she asks curiously. "I mean I know Clark did ..." she stammers and looks at me confused. "But Superman ... he seems so out of this world that I can barely imagine he grew up on a farm." Lois blushes adorably and seems a bit embarrassed.

"Well, that was the whole point of inventing Superman, I guess," I reply with a chuckle. "Nobody was supposed to see the connection. And it still amazes me how well that works. Because of Superman I'm finally able to stay somewhere. Because of him I am as close to leading a normal life as I can possibly get." I can feel my lips twitching in a smile. Living with two identities is difficult, confusing and sometimes even painful. But all things considered, I wouldn't want to go back to just being Clark. "Superman has set me free." A bit surprised, I realize that I've actually said this.

For a while Lois just looks back at me, sympathetically. It may just be my imagination, but I feel that there's some sort of understanding in her glance. It's as if she is just realizing what Superman means to me, how he is a chance and a burden, all at the same time.

"Tell me one thing, Clark," she then says and I can see a smile play around her lips. "Do you really do Superman's laundry?"

I stare at her, flabbergasted. "Of course I do," I mutter, irritated. "Mom would probably kill me if I brought all my dirty suits to her."

"I thought you were invulnerable," Lois replies teasingly. "So how could a girl stand a chance?"

"Oh, Mom would find a way and I'm pretty sure you would, too," I tell her with a grin. "Would you like to have dinner now?" I ask her gently and look at her with puppy-dog eyes.

"Well that depends," she muses, as if considering her options. "Are you sure you can prepare it without Superman's help?" Lois asks with a wink. Then she steps closer, obviously preparing to give me a pretty hard time. I can feel her warmth as she lays her hand on my chest and I inhale the soft scent of her perfume. No doubt that kryptonite has nothing on Lois Lane. "Because I'd rather spend this evening with Clark. He's the guy I fell in love with. Superman was just some fantasy."

THE END