

Burn

By HappyGirl <michelloyd@aol.com>

Rated: PG

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Summary: A summer 2012 ficathon story. (The title was the prompt.) Things are not going well for Lois after her disastrous almost-wedding to Lex, but don't worry; it's a ficathon story, and that means warm fuzzies.

Lois kicked off her sandals, dropped her sand-covered bag on top of them, closed and locked her front door, and let out a long sigh of relief. Normally she loved the beach, but being dragged there by her sister and mother in a transparent attempt to take her mind off her aborted wedding to Metropolis's biggest criminal wasn't her idea of a good time. Wearily, she headed for the bathroom to clean up for bed.

She felt the first warning twinge as she pulled her cover-up over her head and a second one when she peeled her swimsuit off. Tossing the damp, sandy garments into the bathtub, she peered at her reflection in the mirror. Yep, the makers of her "waterproof" sunscreen had obviously been guilty of false advertising. Other than the pale silhouette left by her bathing suit, her entire back was already rosy and well on its way to bright red.

A cool shower calmed the flames temporarily, but by the time she stood—clean and towel-wrapped—brushing her teeth, she knew that it was going to be an uncomfortable night. Padding into her bedroom, she rummaged through her lingerie drawer, searching for the least chafing nightclothes she could find. Reluctantly, she settled on the one gown she hadn't worn for weeks, ever since she'd thoroughly embarrassed herself with the tacky move of thinking that it was appropriate attire for a serious talk with Superman. Unfortunately, its thin spaghetti straps, low cut in both front and back, and silky material made it by far the most comfortable garment for her sensitive skin.

Telling herself firmly that it was only a piece of clothing and not a memento of the time she'd made three serious relationship mistakes in one day, she slipped the offending nightie over her head. She tried to settle down to sleep, but after a few minutes she realized that she needed some medicinal help. Turning the lights on again, she rummaged through her medicine cabinet for a couple of Tylenol and reached for the mentholated skin cream.

For the third time that evening, Clark told himself that this would be Superman's last slow flight over Metropolis before he turned in for the night. Not that he'd found anything worth stopping for on the last two rounds; he just dreaded another night of trying not to think about Lois and counting the days until the Daily Planet was finally up and running again. Perhaps subconsciously, he left Lois's neighborhood for last. She hadn't been home the last two times he'd passed over her apartment, and even in these relatively quiet days when there was no Daily Planet to send her on dangerous errands, he'd sleep better if he knew she was safely in her bed. When Lois's apartment came into view, he was relieved to see the light coming from her bedroom window. She was home, finally. He was mentally reciting all the reasons why it would be wrong to actually x-ray into her bedroom when he heard Lois cry out in pain. In no time, Superman had wrenched her living room window open and stood in her bedroom, gaping wide-mouthed through her open bathroom door.

Moments earlier

Lois twisted from the waist. She brought her arm around from one side and then from the other, but to no avail. She tried reaching over one shoulder, but that didn't work either. It was no use. She was never going to be able to get any of the cream onto the center of her back where her skin stung the worst. Maybe she could use some kind of tool. She looked around her bathroom for inspiration, but nothing jumped out at her. Where was that loofah back-scrubber that Lucy had given her? She bent over to look in the under-sink cabinet, and in the process she knocked the heavy jar of cream off the counter. It fell, hitting her bare foot right on the sensitive spot at the base of her big toenail. As she instinctively straightened up, she banged the top of her head on the corner of the still-open medicine cabinet. She let loose a scream from a combination of pain, surprise, and frustration.

She would have followed up the scream with a string of choice expletives, but

at that exact moment she heard a grating noise from somewhere in her apartment and, almost simultaneously, a deep, familiar voice from her bedroom.

"Are you all right?"

She hadn't seen Superman in weeks, and now here he was standing in her bedroom staring at her while she was dressed in nothing but a flimsy nightgown. Before she could answer, he seemed to realize that she wasn't in any actual danger and began pouring forth a stream of awkward apology.

"I'm so sorry, Lois. I had no right to just barge into your apartment. I heard you yell out and..."

She held up one hand to stop him, even though the movement made her mouth twist in a small grimace. "That's okay, Superman, it's not your fault. I guess with all the times I've yelled for you to rescue me, you must have sort of an automatic response to my screams."

He didn't look very reassured. "I was just finishing up my regular patrol when I heard you," he stammered. "I should have —"

"Knocked? On the window, maybe?" she asked, rubbing her bruised head in spite of herself. But her attempt to tease Superman out of his obvious embarrassment didn't work the way it always did on Clark. Well, used to work on Clark, anyway. The two of them hadn't exactly spent a lot of casual time together lately.

A concerned frown creased Superman's brow and he said, "You're hurt. What happened to your head?"

She rolled her eyes. "Nothing serious; just clumsiness." Moving carefully, she closed the cabinet and picked up the jar of cream from where it had rolled next to the toilet. "I dropped this on my toe and then I bumped my head on the corner of the cabinet. It's been one of those nights." He made a little gesture of sympathetic inquiry, so she explained, "I went to the beach today, but my sunscreen didn't work very well." She held up the squat, round jar of skin cream by way of illustration. "This stuff works pretty well on sunburns, but I can't reach the middle of my back."

Superman blinked once or twice, but then he seemed to recover. "Please, allow me," he said smoothly, stepping calmly into the bathroom and reaching for the jar.

Oh, no. That was not what Lois had meant at all, but it would only make things even more awkward if she refused his offer. As he took the jar from her unresisting hand, she realized in a sickening flash how the whole scene might easily be misconstrued. After all, she'd known more than one girl in college who regularly made use of the 'Could you please rub this on my back?' ploy to attract a guy's attention. What if Superman thought she'd screamed on purpose so she could try the same thing on him?

She was frantically searching her brain for a graceful way out when Superman's fingers touched a cool dab of cream to her very

sore back and she made an involuntary flinch.

“Sorry,” his rich voice rumbled in her ear.

“It’s okay,” she reassured him, wondering whether he remembered the last time he’d seen her in this outfit. Who was she kidding? There was no way that either of them would ever forget that night.

“Wait a minute,” he said, setting the cream down on the edge of her tub. “I have another idea.” Catching her eyes in the mirror, he motioned for her to stay still. Then he took a couple of steps back and said, “Tell me if this is too cold.”

Lois felt a stream of soothing air across her sore skin. “Wow! That’s amazing!” Turning to face him, she rolled her shoulders experimentally. “It feels completely better.”

“I’m glad.” He actually smiled for a brief moment, but then he glanced toward the door to the living area. “I should be going,” he said. “Sorry again about...well, breaking in. I’ll stop by Clark’s place and ask him to come fix the window for you.”

Lois had been so focused on Superman that she had completely forgotten about the damage he’d done on his way in. “Don’t bother,” she told him. “I’ll just call the building manager in the morning.” At the sudden widening of his eyes, she assured him, “I won’t tell him how it happened.”

“Well, I should be going.” He turned to make his way through her bedroom. She grabbed her robe from the foot of her bed and followed him into her living room. Luckily, he stopped to examine the damage to the window frame, so she caught up to him before he took off.

“Superman,” she started, wrapping the robe around herself and tying its belt in a half-bow. He turned, and when her eyes met his, she almost said, “Never mind,” but somehow she found the courage to go on. “I want you to know that I didn’t do this on purpose.”

“Didn’t do what?” he asked, one eyebrow rising in confusion. She wished she had stuck with the ‘never mind’ option.

“I didn’t wear this—” she motioned to indicate the silky gown that peeked out from the bottom of the robe “—or cry out like that to try to...you know...lure you here under false pretenses or anything. I mean, I know we parted really badly the last time I saw you, and...well...I just want you to know that you don’t have to worry. I don’t really feel...that way...about you anyway.”

“Lois, I know you wouldn’t—” he began, but then he stopped. “You don’t?” He sounded genuinely surprised. Not necessarily disappointed or relieved, just surprised.

Lois picked at an imaginary bit of lint on the back of her loveseat. “No, I don’t.” Then another possible misunderstanding occurred to her and, still not meeting his eyes, she hastened to add, “I never loved Luthor, either. I never really thought I did. But I really did think I felt that way about you; I wasn’t lying that night.” She glanced up just long enough to see him looking at her intently, obviously trying to puzzle out where she was going with all this. “I thought so then, but I was wrong.” Her eyes returned to the safety of the loveseat as she shuffled her bare feet a little and wrapped her arms around herself. Her voice was almost a whisper, but she forced herself to finish. “I found out too late who I really love, but he doesn’t feel the same any more.”

The sound of Superman’s gasp made her look up. He took two steps toward her, his cape swaying slightly as he walked. “Any more? Who doesn’t love you any more?” His brown eyes bored into her as if he were trying to use his x-ray vision to search her brain for the answer.

She turned her head away and waved him off. “It doesn’t matter, Superman. He just wants to be friends, and that’s all I have a right to expect after the way I treated him.” One hand snuck up to wipe an errant tear. Taking a deep breath, she faced her hero with her chin up and a watery smile on her face. “Anyway, I didn’t mean to burden you with my troubles. I just

wanted you to know that I won’t be bothering you with any more unwanted attentions.”

She expected him to say goodnight and fly away. That’s what he’d always done before. But not this time. Instead, he walked toward her and started to reach for her, but held his hand back at the last instant.

Bending his head to look into her eyes, he asked in a tight, very unheroic voice, “Is it Clark?”

When she didn’t answer, he pressed her. “Lois, please tell me it’s Clark.”

Finding her throat too tight for talking, Lois just nodded. “I broke his heart,” she choked out, her eyes fixed on the toes of Superman’s shiny red boots. She could feel her face crumple into despair, but she stumbled on with her confession. “He handed it to me like a gift, and I threw it back at him. It’s a wonder he’s still speaking to me at all.”

Suddenly Lois found herself enveloped in a cocoon of blue Spandex, a strong chin resting on the top of her head. “Lois...oh, Lois! You’re wrong about Clark. It’s not too late; he never stopped loving you.”

She shook her head sadly against Superman’s solid chest. “You don’t know how I treated him.” She pushed away just enough to look up into his face. “I was cruel. Did you know that...that day, the day when I asked Clark to have you meet me here...I’d just rejected him? Then I asked to see you in the next breath. What was he supposed to think? How heartless could a woman be?”

Superman swallowed hard. “I’m sure he was hurt. But I’m just as sure that he loves you and forgives you. And I’m sure he needs forgiveness from you as well.” He released her from his embrace and gave her an encouraging little smile. “Talk to him, Lois. Tell him what you told me. Trust me, you two will be pretty even on the forgiveness front.”

Lois just shook her head. “I appreciate what you’re trying to do, Superman, but Clark already told me that he just wants to be friends. It would be completely unfair of me to press him for anything more. He told me that he lied when he said he was in love with me—that he was just saying it to stop me from marrying Luthor.”

“And you believe him?” Superman asked. “Because I don’t.”

She shook her head. “No. He loved me. It was written all over his face that day. But afterwards...the way I rejected him and then ran to you and then to Luthor...the way I refused to hear anything Clark had to say about Luthor...he fell out of love with me. Any man would.” She looked at him with a determined glint in her eye. “I’m not going to hurt Clark by bringing it up again, and you have to promise me that you will never tell him anything about my feelings for him.”

Surprising her again, Superman shook his head. “I can’t promise that, Lois.”

“What do you mean you can’t promise that?” Of their own accord, her hands began waving in time with her words. “It’s not your secret to tell! I thought Clark was your friend. If you went to him and told him that I’m in love with him, you’d just be ripping open old wounds and making it impossible for us to be friends the way he wants us to. Why would you do that to him?”

“Because I know that you’re wrong, Lois,” Superman pleaded. “Clark loves you. He never stopped loving you. He will always love you.” She opened her mouth to argue, but he closed the distance between them and lifted his hands tenderly to her face, forcing her to look into his. “Lois, I will always love you.”

Looking up at Superman, Lois was shocked by what she saw. With that one, life-changing declaration, every vestige of the aloof hero melted away. All that was left was naked, unashamed adoration. She’d seen that look once before, and there was no mistaking it. Hardly daring to breathe, she reached up and traced the fingers of one hand slowly across his forehead, using the

other hand to gently caress his cheek.

“Clark?” she breathed. He just nodded. Running both hands almost frantically over his face, neck, and hair, she said, “Oh my God, it’s really you! I can’t believe it.”

She reached up to plant a hard kiss on his lips. She pulled back to discover Superman—no, Clark—grinning at her—a true Clark Kent grin like she hadn’t seen in a long time. Then she slapped him right in the middle of Superman’s S. “And you…all this time…”

“I know,” he said softly, catching both her hands in his. “Forgive me? Please?” His earnest eyes held hers, full of hope and pleading in equal measure.

“Only if you’ll forgive me,” she replied, suddenly shy.

“Done,” he answered without a second thought.

“And done,” she agreed.

He bent his head to seal their bargain with a second kiss, slower and more tender than the first. She reached her arms up around his neck, he wrapped his around her back, and she didn’t feel even a twinge of pain—just the perfect warmth and comfort that she’d been sure she’d never know again.

THE END