

Deserving to Love

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Rated: PG

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Summary: After Griffin's phone call, Lois seeks shelter at Clark's place. A nightmare leads to confessions.

My damp sweater offers little protection against the chilly air. Shivering, I try to balance a pizza box and a stock of videos with one hand, while I raise the other to knock. But I hesitate. What will Clark think seeing me like this in the middle of the night? Oh God, it's not that late, is it? My watch is out of reach, lying on my nightstand. What if Clark is already asleep? What if he isn't at home?

<Silly, Lois, silly>, I admonish myself. Why didn't I call him? I could be walking right into Griffin's arms out here, for all I know.

Clark will give me a lecture about reckless behavior, if he doesn't run away, screaming in terror at the sight of me. I'm a complete mess. After rushing to Clark's place in the drizzle, my hair curls in awkward places. I'm probably going to look like a mop once I take off the baseball cap. My washed-out sweater and my worn pants only add to the picture of misery. A gust of wind sends another shiver down my spine. I really should have brought a jacket.

And how am I going to explain to Clark what brought me here if he opens the door, all bleary-eyed? Suddenly, I feel childish. Was I actually afraid of a fridge? Did I pick up my phone using a wooden spoon, only to realize that it was Perry calling? I'm just overreacting, aren't I? The truth is — I probably am. I mean, what could Griffin possibly do? Kill me? Spelled out like that it sounds laughable. Only, he already did kill someone. Involuntarily, my fist inches forward. To know that Clark will be behind that door is strangely comforting. But isn't really fair to run to him whenever I feel bad. I shouldn't be taking advantage of his kindness like that.

But Kyle Griffin is scaring the hell out of me. I can't believe that just a few hours ago, I declined Clark's offer to walk me home. Embarrassing as it is, I can't find the courage to walk back to my empty apartment and spend the night there alone. If Griffin is going to leave me alone, that is. A surge of panic rushes through me, fuelling my resolve to seek shelter at Clark's place. Vigorously, I knock at the door. Slightly surprised by my own sudden movement, I almost drop the pizza box and just in time manage to catch a video before it clatters to the floor.

Cursing silently, I juggle the pizza and adjust the pile of videos. When I look up, Clark greets me with a smile on his lips. Startled, I almost drop the box all over again, but Clark catches the pizza and the videos effortlessly. Even wearing a torn shirt and shorts, he looks breathtakingly gorgeous. Both emphasize his taut muscles, unlike his usual suit jackets. His stature is reassuringly impressive. I feel relief wash over me and hurry to get past him right into the safe harbor of his apartment. Inside, I collapse on the sofa.

"Hi. I had this sudden urge for pizza and a Woody Allen movie and I know how much you like pizza and Woody Allen too, well, at least his early work, so here I am." I go into babbling mode before I have even consciously decided what to say.

"Great. Come in," Clark says casually and closes the door behind me.

As he turns around, I see a slightly worried expression on

Clark's face. He refrains from asking any questions, though, pretending to buy my flimsy excuse. Instead, his smile lights up the room and he follows me down the short flight of stairs. It's almost as if he expected my visit, as if my behavior was perfectly normal. The tension that fills me slowly starts to dissipate, leaving me seriously drained. Still smiling, Clark sets the pizza and the videos down on his coffee table and joins me on the sofa.

"So. What do you want to start with? 'Bananas'? 'Sleeper'? 'Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About...' nah... how about 'Annie Hall'? It's one of my favorites," I continue, desperate to keep up appearances. Of course, I know that Clark will, sooner or later, call my bluff. Maybe I should suck it up and tell him. But the semblance of normalcy is so comforting. I'm not ready to face how scared I really am.

The worried expression is creeping back into Clark's features. "Lois, is something wrong?" he asks eventually.

"Does something have to be wrong for me to want to spend some time with a friend?" I retort, immediately feeling sorry for being so curt.

He does not even flinch at the rebuff, but gives in to my silent plea and drops the topic. "Sorry, 'Annie Hall' would be fine."

I smile weakly. It is a rather awkward attempt at apologizing for being so difficult. The truth is that I don't want to talk. I just want to forget about this whole incident and watching a movie is going to help. Just sitting next to Clark is already doing wonders for my frayed nerves. I get up and stick the video into Clark's VCR. When I sit down again, Clark's gaze is still fixed on me. His eyes convey that he is willing to listen.

<Just tell him>, a tiny voice whispers inside my mind.

<Forget about it>, a much larger choir screams.

"This is great! We should do this more often. What are you doing tomorrow night?" The words are out, before I'm able to do something about it. Nervous babbling is all I seem to be capable of.

"Lois..." Before Clark has a chance to continue, a ringing phone interrupts him.

Immediately, I jump at the sound. My heart misses a couple of beats and then starts to race with a vengeance. How did Griffin find me here? Or is it Clark he is after? Images of the poor guy Griffin has killed via telephone involuntarily flood my mind. And a particularly cruel part of my imagination adds Clark lying motionlessly on the floor, his unseeing eyes widened in terror. The scream remains stuck in my throat, threatening to choke me. Before I'm even able to utter a sound, Clark picks up the receiver.

"Clark, don't..." I breathe, but it's too late. I close my eyes.

"Hello?" Clark says and listens. I hold my breath. For an agonizingly long moment it's awfully quiet. Unable to bear the tension any longer, I pry one eye open and see Clark shrug before he hangs up. "No one there. Must have been a wrong number."

"Wrong number," I gasp for air. My pulse hammers in my ear, drowning out all other sounds. It takes a moment to fight the surge of panic that has taken hold of me. Weakly, I mutter. "No problem. Happens all the time in a big city like this. Right?"

Clark's sympathetic eyes rest on me. "You want to tell me what happened?" he asks gently.

"Nothing happened," I reply defensively. Clark just raises his brows. "Well, nothing that important. Griffin called me."

"What?" Clark grounds out. "What did he say?"

"Oh, you know, the usual." I'm trying to sound casual, but fail miserably. All of a sudden, the words just spill like a fountain. "Hi, how are you, long time no see, I'm gonna kill you..." I shiver at the memory and my voice breaks. Tears burn in my eyes and I have a hard time keeping them at bay.

"Kill you?" Clark repeats, aghast. "Have you called the police?"

I didn't, which now that I think of it, was rather stupid. Running to Clark was a rash decision that could have played right

into Griffin's hands. I panicked and threw all common sense to the wind. But heaven help me if I'm going to admit that.

"Clark, I'm a professional reporter. This isn't the first threat I've received." I say, downplaying my fears. "They... never pan out," I add lamely — for good measure — because I don't want to sit weeping in my best friend's apartment.

"Maybe..." Clark concedes carefully, looking rather shaken. "But I'd feel better, if you stayed here tonight."

"Oh, I still think you're overreacting, but if you insist..." Why did I just say that? I actually feel like embracing him. There is no way I could go back to my apartment and sleep there alone. Why can't I just tell him how grateful I am? But my dry tongue is unable to form the words. Instead, I settle back against the cushions of his sofa.

"Gee, I'm sorry I had to twist your arm," Clark says with a wry smile as he slips his arm around my shoulders.

His warmth instantly spreads through me. I take off my baseball cap and lean into his embrace. We leap into a comfortable silence as we turn our attention to the movie. For the first time since Griffin called, I'm starting to truly relax. I should tell Clark how grateful I am that he lets me stay here, instead of taking his easy friendship for granted. Who else would welcome me right in the middle of the night, no questions asked? Feeling completely at ease in Clark's presence, my eyelids grow awfully heavy.

I wake with a start, shivering and covered in cold sweat. My breath comes in short gasps and my heartbeat thunders in my ears. Hard as I try, I can't shake the nightmare. The images replay before my eyes in a loop. Griffin and Clark, Clark picking up a phone and collapsing on the floor, staring at the ceiling with wide empty eyes. I squint my eyes shut against the onslaught.

"It's not real," I mutter to myself, trying to reassure myself and get rid of the uneasiness I'm feeling. "It was just a dream."

Taking a deep shuddering breath, I pry my eyes open and look around. Clark's place lies in the dark, neat as ever. Everything is still as it should be. The box with the half eaten pizza is sitting on the coffee table. Next to it the pile of videos is stashed. The phone hangs on the wall, innocently. I'm sitting on Clark's sofa, covered with a blanket that has slipped down onto my lap. Clark must have given it to me. I reach for it and wrap it around my shoulders. The shivers slowly subside.

The clock on the VCR tells me that it's about two o'clock in the morning. Still plenty of time left to sleep. Briefly, I think about lying down again, but I already know that sleep is going to elude me. The images of the dream are still haunting me. Fear settles in my stomach like a heap of stones. Perhaps a glass of water will help me to calm down. I get up and stroll over to Clark's kitchen counter, taking the blanket with me like a coat. But my restless legs don't make it the whole way. And suddenly I realize that I'm just not able to convince myself that this was only a nightmare. I've got to make sure.

So, a moment later I find myself standing in Clark's bedroom. Looking at his sleeping form finally serves to slow my pulse down. I breathe a sigh of relief and once again tears threaten to roll down my cheeks. Since I met Clark almost a year and a half ago, he has managed to worm his way into my heart. He is my best friend and I'm beginning to understand that I can't imagine my life without him in it.

Killing me is not the worst thing Griffin could do.

I can only hope that's the one thing he doesn't know about me. But thinking about the men in my life, I've always been the last one to see the truth. I didn't suspect that Paul was seeing Linda until I caught them making out. Claude ran off with my story while I was dreaming about sharing a luxurious breakfast with croissants and café au lait. And Lex Luthor was arrested on our wedding day. Clark warned me about Lex, Cat said to be

careful with the French guy. I didn't listen, because I thought Cat was just envious that Claude wasn't going to be another notch on her bed post. What if everyone else already knows how I feel about Clark, everyone but me — and possibly Clark, because I keep brushing him off?

But I can no longer ignore those feelings. They are rushing through me. It seems as if someone has first shaken, and then opened a bottle of champagne. Longing, heart-ache, warmth and a sense of belonging spill over me to the point of making me dizzy.

"Are you okay, Lois?" Clark asks softly. "Lois?" he repeats when I do not reply.

I just stand there and stare at him, overwhelmed by the sudden realization that I am indeed madly in love with Clark Kent.

"What's the matter?" Clark sounds increasingly worried.

He switches on the lamp on his bedside table. I blink until my eyes gradually adjust to the light. Clark gets up and closes the distance between us. I feel his hand on my shoulders.

"Please, tell me what happened!" Clark begs.

"I... He killed you, Clark. I mean, it was just a dream, but it seemed so very real and I had to be sure that you're fine and..." I stutter and once again I feel tears burning in my eyes. I cannot lose him. The tears start flowing freely as I lean into his embrace.

"Shhh, it was just a dream. We will catch Griffin before he can hurt anyone else," Clark mumbles soothingly. "I won't let him hurt you."

Time seems to stand still. I bury my face in the crook of Clark's neck. His strong arms are wrapped around my shoulders like a blanket. They're a shield, keeping the outside world off. Warmth radiates from his body and spreads through me. There's only me and the faint whiff of his breath on my hair. His heartbeat pulses against my fingertips. A hint of aftershave mingles with his own unique scent that whispers promises of tender kisses and fervent desire.

For long moments I just inhale that intoxicating scent. I breathe in and out until all tears are dried, until I'm no longer able to tell where my lips end and his neck begins. The first kiss tastes salty. His skin is incredibly soft, addictive even. I'm drawn to him, kissing my way up his neck until my lips brush his earlobe and wander across his cheek until I finally capture his lips.

They taste like milk and honey, sweet and silky. A low moan escapes Clark as he parts his lips and welcomes my tongue with a gentle caress. Gradually Clark takes the lead and deepens the kiss. A rush of warmth fills my belly, sending me on a spiral of pure bliss. My skin starts tingling with excitement, every little inch of it longing for Clark's touch. I have never been kissed like this. If this is what kissing is meant to be like, I have probably never been kissed at all. My lips burn with disappointment as Clark's abruptly leave them.

Clark backs away and looks at me in terror. "I'm sorry," he breathes. "Oh, God, I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have let myself get carried away like this. I..."

"Clark..." I protest, but he interrupts before I can even try to soothe him.

"I didn't mean to kiss you. It sort of happened. I am so sorry." Dejectedly, he sinks back onto his bed and buries his face in his hands.

"Oh, please, stop apologizing, Clark. I wanted to kiss you. I even started it," I say and sit down next to him.

He lifts his head and looks at me incredulously. It's now or never. I can't keep passing up chances like I have. Life has already granted me too many opportunities to do what I should have done the day I met Clark. What if this is my last chance to tell him how I feel? I have taken so many risks without checking the water level. What am I afraid of?

“That day in front of the Planet — I wanted to tell you that I was in love with you,” I add with a huge lump in my throat.

Blood rushes in my ears and my stomach does a nervous somersault. Confessing my love kind of feels like I just jumped off a cliff. Now I’m in a freefall and all I can do is hope that Clark will be ready to catch me.

“I love you, too,” he breathes and shoots me a longing glance, but there is also a hint of fear in his voice as if he does not dare trust his ears. “When I told you that I didn’t...” he harrumphs, “...well, that was a lie. I was afraid that you might feel pressured into anything. And I didn’t want to lose your friendship.”

“Oh, Clark, I was so stupid...” I cry again, but this time they’re tears of joy.

“We’ve both said and done stupid things, Lois,” Clark replies gently and cups my cheek with his hand. His thumb wipes my tears away. “Don’t cry.” He leans in and he pecks the teardrops off my other cheek. “You’re making me so happy, Lois. I can’t stand to see you crying.”

“I’m not...” my weak protest is swallowed by another kiss.

All rational thought is gone as he starts nibbling on my lower lip, sucking gently, teasing. His tongue flickers against mine, slips into my mouth like a thief set out to steal my heart. I lose myself in the feel of those lips that can do the most wonderful things. My heart beats excitedly. With every gentle probing of his tongue, he fuels the desire that is slowly building up deep inside my belly. Clark’s lips leave me just before the growing flame turns into a firestorm.

“Is it really true, Lois?” Clark whispers happily, but also self-consciously. “You love me?”

“I...” I’m not able to form a coherent thought.

My lips still mourn the loss of his touch. A warm, fuzzy feeling permeates me. Dazed, I sit beside Clark and drown in the dark pools of his eyes. But the thousand-watt smile that lights his face gradually fades with each passing moment. Slowly, it turns into an expression of anguish. When Clark finally pulls back and jolts up, I come to my senses.

“I can’t believe I did this again,” he mutters, pacing and tearing at his hair.

“You’re getting it all wrong,” I protest, realizing too late, that it’s the worst thing I could possibly say.

“I guess I am,” he replies, subdued.

He stops pacing and looks at me. I can see the hurt in his eyes. His lips have become a thin line. I’ve seen this expression before, the day I rejected him and asked him to get Superman for me. Clark had bared his heart and I had ripped it right out of his chest. I feel my cheeks burn up with shame.

“That’s not what I meant,” I hurry to say and once again find myself hesitating, before I make the final leap of faith. “I love you, Clark. I love you with all my heart.”

The words feel kind of odd on my lips. I don’t think I have ever said them to anyone else, said them and really meant them. I remember telling Superman that I was in love with him, but now that has a strangely hollow ring to it. If I didn’t mean it then, how can I be so sure that this is the real thing? How can I be sure that I’m not going to turn my back on Clark and hurt him?

The pained lines on Clark’s face gradually fade, turning into a wary kind of hope. The display of emotions on his features indicates that he’s weighing my words, trying to decide if he can actually trust me with his heart.

“Why now, Lois? What made you change your mind?” he asks bluntly and then cringes at his own words. “I’m sorry, Lois. That was uncalled for.” He stares at his feet, shifting his weight from one foot to another and buries his hands in the pockets of his sleeping shorts.

And all of the sudden, it’s obvious what is bothering him. “Oh, Clark, you’re not just the consolation prize. Don’t ever think

that.”

It was to be expected though, after I turned to Luthor and an unattainable Superman instead of seeing what was right in front of me. I gave him a hard time over the Kerth he had won; I lashed out at him when I thought that Stuart Hofferma had died. Basically, I had been insufferable as of late.

“I wasn’t thinking that, exactly...” he hedges and a blush creeps across his features. “It’s... it’s more complicated.” Still not quite able to look me in the eyes, he slowly approaches me. “I’m sorry, Lois. I guess that rejection in the park still kind of stings. It’s my own fault. After all I knew what I was getting myself into. You weren’t ready to hear me say those words. I shouldn’t blame you for reacting the way you did.” He releases a deep breath and sits down next to me.

“That wasn’t your fault. I was cruel to let you pass on a message to Superman,” I concede with a sad smile. “I was so confused. Lex’ proposal, the explosion of the Planet — my whole life was turned upside down. That’s no excuse, though.”

“Perhaps, we should just take it slow. One step at a time,” Clark suggests and brushes a strand of hair out of my face, before he finally gets up. “How about we go back to sleep? We’ll see where we go on from here in the morning.”

“Sounds good.” I manage a real smile and prepare to get back into the living room. But the prospect of sleeping there alone is giving me the creeps. “Clark?”

“Yeah?”

This time it’s my turn to stare at my feet, self-consciously. “Would you mind if I stayed with you?”

“Of course not,” Clark replies sympathetically. “Griffin’s really scaring you, isn’t he?” I just nod and gratefully slip underneath the covers that Clark is holding up for me. “You’re safe here.”

“Thank you, Clark,” I mutter, still slightly embarrassed by my own behavior.

The mattress buckles as Clark joins me. He doesn’t slip under the covers, though. Instead, he uses the blanket that he has picked up from wherever I had dropped it earlier. Considerate as it may be, I feel a pang of disappointment. After the kisses we shared, I yearn for his touch and reassurance.

“Good night, Lois,” Clark whispers.

“Good night, Clark,” I reply quietly. As Clark slips his arm loosely around my waist, I finally feel myself relax. He’s right. We’re safe.

THE END