

The Truth Is...

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Rated: PG

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Summary: Secrets are revealed when Lois and Clark are locked in together at a safe-house while the Metropolis PD go after Bad Brain Johnson.

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Author's Note: This plot bunny was spawned by a challenge issued by VirginiaR on the Lois and Clark fanfiction message boards. The rules were that Lois and Clark had to be locked in someplace overnight, Clark could not reveal his secret identity, and that either one of them had to reveal a secret (other than that they love each other). WAFFyness without sex was also part of the requirements.

"Come on, Lois. It's really not that bad," Clark said in a placating tone as he opened the door.

"Not that bad?" she repeated after him. Then, for good measure, "Not that bad? Are you *kidding* me, Kent?"

"Look, we don't have a choice in the matter," Clark reminded her, shrugging. "I don't want to be here any more than you do, but I don't see what options we have, other than for us to just grin and bear it."

"We could stand and fight," Lois argued, stepping into the room before him, wheeling her suitcase behind her. "Not run away and hide."

"Lo-is..."

"I mean, why can't Superman just keep an eye out on us? I'm sure he would have agreed to, if we'd only asked."

Clark sighed and crossed over the threshold behind Lois. He set his suitcase down by the door and shook his head, using his foot to kick the door shut behind him, while Lois marched clear across the room.

"I agree," he admitted. "He would have. But I think even *he* would agree that you are much safer here. You and me both," he quickly amended, hoping she hadn't caught his slip-up.

He needn't have worried. Lois was so livid that she was barely paying attention to him.

"I *hate* this," she complained.

Clark softened as he stepped toward her. "I know. But we have to trust in the system."

"Why are you so calm about this?" Lois asked, wheeling away from the window she'd been looking out of and giving him a hard, questioning look.

"Because," Clark said, closing the distance between them and placing his hands on her shoulders. "If giving up a day or week, even a year of my freedom means that I can help ensure that you're safe, I would do it in a heartbeat."

"Clark..." she said, her voice catching in her throat a little, though she tried to bury it amongst her inherent irritation. She stepped back, out of his grasp and shook her head.

"You're my best friend, Lois," he continued, unwilling to let her come to the conclusion that he really *had* meant his declaration of love to her before her recent near-wedding to Lex Luthor. It had taken them long enough to put that whole episode

behind them, and for them to both slip back into the comfortable realm of best friendship they had once enjoyed. "I've almost lost you too many times recently to even *entertain* any ideas that might put you in danger. If that means sitting back and letting the police do their job while we hole up in this safe-house for a few days, that's fine by me."

He took one more step forward and gave Lois a quick hug, which she returned, squeezing his body ever so slightly. Then, as quickly as the moment had come, it was gone again and she was stepping out of his embrace, leaving him feeling oddly cold at the loss of contact with her. He said nothing, only watched as she turned around and examined the apartment they'd been escorted to.

"I guess it's not *too* bad," Lois admitted finally, though grudgingly. "But who decorated this place? It's so...so..." she searched for the right word for a moment before settling on one. "Sterile."

For the first time, Clark paused to take in his new surroundings. He had to admit, Lois was right. The apartment was done almost exclusively in white and beige tones, with little to no color to break up the space. He knew it had been done specifically to make it seem like the small Manhattan studio apartment was bigger than it actually was, but even the bright, cheery, neutral shades of paint didn't make it feel homey at all. Only a couple of pieces of abstract art held any color in them, and those were angry splashes of black in random patterns on the canvas. Clark's own mother had been into modern art for a time, but he had never understood the appeal of it. He shook his head slightly at the framed artwork and turned to the small kitchen area.

Done in white and stainless steel, it felt just as lifeless to Clark as the rest of the apartment. But, at least there was one welcome sight — a coffeemaker and a fully stocked basket of differently flavored pouches of ground coffee. He hoped that it would help soothe Lois somewhat.

"Clark?" Lois asked.

He realized, too late, that he'd been silent too long, and that Lois had been expecting a response to her assessment of the apartment.

"Uh, yeah. I agree," he stammered. "It does sort of lack personality. Sorry, I guess I was a little distracted."

"Sure isn't home, is it?"

"No, it's not," he agreed. "But, we've been stuck in worse places before."

"That's different."

"How?" he asked.

"Those were stakeouts," Lois clarified. "At least we had something to *do*."

Clark chuckled. "So...this is worse because it's a nicer place than almost all of our previous stakeout locations...for the sole reason of..."

"Boredom," she said, cutting him off and nodding. "I mean, we're in the middle of *New York City* for crying out loud. And we can't enjoy any of it. No Broadway shows, no stroll through Central Park, no chasing down a story in some back alley somewhere."

"Life isn't *all* about stories, Lois," he reminded her.

"But this *is* our story," she argued. "*We're* the ones who figured out those murders were committed by Bad Brain Johnson. *We* should be the ones to cover his arrest."

"Lest you forget, *we* are also the ones he's issued death threats against. I mean, Lois, the man's already killed several people...including three in the Witness Protection Program. What makes you think we'd be any safer than they were, had we stayed in Metropolis?"

"What makes *you* think we're any safer *here*?" she shot back irritably. "Those three had guards too, you know."

“Yeah, but...” he stammered, unsure of how, exactly, he should end that statement.

He couldn't tell her that she could rest easy, that she'd be bunking with Superman until Bad Brain was caught. It wasn't that he didn't *want* her to eventually know the truth about himself. He was just terrified of what her reaction would be. Mad would not even *begin* to cover what he imagined she would be. She would be hurt too. And feel betrayed.

And, on a completely selfish note, Clark really wanted to ask Lois out on a date at some point. But, if she knew he was also Superman, would that sway her decision? Would her anger at him make her push him away? Or would she accept because she'd always been attracted to the superhero? How could he be sure that she would be responding to him as Clark? He wasn't sure what the outcome would be, and knew he probably never would, unless he kept his alter-ego a secret. If she chose to reject his suggestion of a date — or accept it, as he hoped she would — he *had* to know that she was reacting to him, *Clark*, not the Spandex-clad avatar of his powers.

No, it would be a long time before Clark could ever imagine himself telling Lois the truth, and being comfortable with her having that knowledge.

“Yeah, but what?” she challenged him, her hands on her hips.

He shrugged defeatedly. “I don't know,” he said, with a shake of his head.

Lois crossed her arms victoriously over her chest and gave him a smug smile. Clark merely shook his head in response.

A knock sounded at the door and Clark took the opportunity to slip his glasses down to x-ray through the solid wood while Lois' attention was diverted. He breathed a small, concealed breath of relief when he saw it was the same woman who had escorted them to their new accommodations, now armed with two bags of Chinese food.

“It's Strafford,” she announced as she knocked again.

Clark crossed the room and opened the door for her, before Lois could move from her spot.

“Hi,” he greeted her with a smile as she stepped inside.

“Hi. Dinner is served,” the woman, Marissa Strafford, replied, holding the bags out to him.

“That was fast,” Clark said, impressed. He and Lois had only just had their food orders taken right before the police liaison had brought them to the safe-house. “Thank you.”

Marissa bobbed her head in a nod. “You're welcome. I hope you like it. The place where I got it is pretty well recommended around here, but I haven't had the chance to try it for myself.”

“I'm sure it will be fine,” Clark said amiably.

“Can't be any blander than this apartment,” he heard Lois mutter under her breath.

“What?” Marissa asked, throwing a cursory glance in Lois' direction as she set the bags down on the kitchen counter.

Apparently Lois' complaint hadn't gone totally unnoticed, though Clark doubted the woman had heard exactly what had been said.

“Oh,” Lois stammered. “Just wondering if there's a blender. You know, so we can mix some drinks and make this a *real* party.”

Clark shook his head again. There was no way that the police liaison could miss the sarcasm dripping from Lois' words — not this time. But, to her credit, Marissa didn't rise to Lois' needling.

“Guards will be posted around the clock,” she said in a business-like tone, changing the subject. “Outside the building as well as within. We've also got undercover officers patrolling a five block radius. No one will be able to do so much as *look* at this building without us knowing about it. So, you can rest easy tonight.”

Clark could see Lois rolling her eyes.

“Right. And just how long do you plan on keeping us

imprisoned in here?”

“Lois, it's not a prison,” Clark said gently, trying not to let his exasperation show. That earned him his very own eye-roll from Lois.

“I'm being held, locked away, against my will,” she complained her arms crossed in front of her chest again, daring him to respond. “How is it *not* like a prison?”

“I'm sorry,” Clark apologized to Marissa, on Lois' behalf.

“Don't apologize!” Lois chastised.

Clark simply rolled his eyes in return.

“Anyway,” Marissa said, sounding ever so slightly annoyed. “I should get going.” She checked her watch for good measure. “Sleep well. If anything happens during the night, I will be the one to come to you. Open the door for no one else. Got it? And if nothing happens tonight, I will stop by first thing in the morning to discuss what comes next.”

“You'd better be bringing the bagels then,” Lois said, sarcasm dripping.

Marissa did not respond. She merely turned, crossed the small studio apartment, and left, shutting the door as she went out. Clark followed on the woman's heels and locked the door behind her. Mentally, he smiled. The triple deadbolts above the doorknob reminded him all too much of the multiple locks on Lois' apartment door.

“So...” Clark began, stuffing his hands into his pockets and rocking on his heels.

Lois frowned briefly, then swung her gaze to the bags of Chinese food. “So...”

“I guess we'd better eat,” Clark said. “Before it gets cold.”

“I guess so.”

“Lois, look, I'm sorry about the situation.”

Lois sighed noisily and shook her head. “No, Clark. Don't. It's not your fault. And...I'm sorry I'm so grouchy about things.”

That took Clark aback. Lois was readily admitting to — and apologizing for — her grouchiness?

“It's just that...well, I can't stand this. This...feeling of being helpless. That things are out of my control. You know?”

Clark nodded and moved to the small table in the kitchen. “I do. I feel the same way.”

It was the truth. It was slowly killing him inside to be locked up in this tiny space, with absolutely no way to slip out unnoticed so that he could spin into his suit, find Bad Brain, and end the threat to Lois' life. On the other hand, he had to admit to himself that being confined to such an intimate setting with Lois could have its perks. Not only could he keep a sharp eye to ensure that no harm befell her in the night, but he would have the pleasure of her company while he did so. He couldn't do that as Superman. Or, rather, he didn't dare to.

Lois dug into her chicken and broccoli, stabbing angrily at the food with her plastic fork. She tried a bite, chewed thoughtfully, then swallowed and sighed.

“Not nearly as good as the Chinese takeout in Metropolis,” she said, making the statement sound more like a jury verdict.

“It's not all that terrible,” Clark said, swallowing a mouthful of sesame chicken, though he agreed with Lois. Their usual Chinese place at home was much better, in his opinion.

“Boy Scout,” Lois said, smirking.

“What? What'd I say?” he asked, confused.

“Just...it's so like you. To defend something just because you hate being negative.”

“Okay,” he replied, drawing the word out. “So...looking for the positive side is a bad thing?” He was teasing her and could see from the tiny smile starting in the corners of her mouth that she knew it.

“Maybe,” she replied, smirking again, though now her tone was slightly more playful.

Clark could only chuckle in response. Lois had called him

“weird” once, back when they’d first been partnered up by Perry. And he readily admitted to himself that he was. After all, he *was* an alien. But there were still times when he felt like the normal one in their friendship.

They ate the rest of their meal talking about more pleasant things. Clark diligently kept the course of the conversation away from Bad Brain and their current situation. But he could see, even then, that it was never far from Lois’ mind.

After dinner, they moved from the small kitchenette to the couch. Clark offered the remote to Lois and bit back a laugh as she blitzed through the channels without stopping, at a speed that rivaled his own. She sighed and turned to him, offering him the remote back, which he declined.

“Nine hundred channels and nothing on,” she declared. “You see anything that you want to watch?”

He could have teased her and said that no one could have seen anything at the rate she’d channel surfed, but he held his tongue.

“No,” he said instead.

It wasn’t entirely true. There was a basketball game on that he wouldn’t have minded watching, but he knew it would bore Lois. Lois shrugged and turned the television off, before getting up and exploring every cabinet and drawer in the apartment.

“What are you looking for?” Clark asked, craning his neck to watch as she stalked to the kitchenette behind them.

“Something to do,” came the reply as she pulled her head out of the cabinets. She stomped back to the couch and plopped down. “They locked us up in here, with no idea of how long, and they didn’t even leave us a pack of cards!” She glared at the wall clock before sighing.

“Look, Lois, there’s not much we can do about that,” Clark said, trying to appease her. “And it’s getting late anyway. Why don’t you go change for bed and I’ll make up the pull-out couch for you?”

“Okay,” Lois relented after several seconds of indecision. “But not because I’m tired. It *would* be nice to get out of this work attire. And at least it’s something to do.”

She crossed the room, grabbed her bag, and headed into the bathroom. A few moments later, Clark heard the shower turn on. For a while, he merely stood there, wishing he and Lois were actually a couple. If they were, the pull-out couch would be set up for two, instead of one.

The couch.

Clark nearly slapped himself on the forehead when he heard the shower turn off and realized he hadn’t made up the bed as he’d promised Lois. So, using a small burst of super speed, he pulled the bed out. Finding sheets and pillows in a narrow closet in the corner of the room, he quickly got the bed ready for Lois. For himself, he tossed a pillow and a throw-blanket on one of the two recliners, which stood off to the sides of the couch, almost flanking it.

He finished not a moment too soon as Lois exited the bathroom, towel drying her hair, dressed in baggy red flannel pajama pants and a worn Daily Planet T shirt. She looked at the couch, scowled at the less than plush accommodations, then gave Clark a friendly smile.

“Thanks,” she said, nodding vaguely at the bed. “Bathroom’s all yours.”

“Thanks,” Clark replied.

He grabbed his bag and ducked into the bathroom to shower, shave, and slip into his favorite charcoal sweatpants and an old Midwestern football tee. It was a struggle for him to perform even these simple tasks at a speed that resembled a normal human being. He wanted so much to spend every second at Lois’ side — not just because he was in love with her, but also so he could keep an eye out in case Bad Brain somehow found them.

When he finally entered back into the living room, setting his

bag aside once more, he found Lois sitting cross-legged on the bed. She looked up at him almost instantly as he stepped foot out of the bathroom.

“Do you think that will be enough for you?” he asked. “Uh, I mean, the blankets. There’s a couple more in the closet if you want.”

Again, she smiled. “These should be more than enough, thanks.”

“Did you want to get some sleep?” he asked, though the question sounded dumb to his ears as they left his lips.

Lois sighed heavily. “No. I think I’m still a bit too wound up to sleep. You?”

Clark shook his head. “Not yet.”

A silence settled between them as they each slipped into their own thoughts. Finally, Lois spoke.

“You think Metropolis PD will get Bad Brain tonight?” she asked.

Clark shrugged and crossed the room to peer out the windows into the deepening night. “I don’t know. I hope so. Henderson’s got quite the elaborate trap set.”

“You think Superman will help?”

Clark hesitated a moment, framing his response. He didn’t want to lie to Lois, but he didn’t want to make her feel like Superman was abandoning her either. He kept his gaze pointed studiously out at the city beyond the windows.

“Maybe. He could be anywhere though. Metropolis... China... Kansas...”

“Rescues,” Lois said, understanding.

Again, Clark shrugged. “If he’s needed.”

“But...surely he knows how much of a threat Bad Brain can be?”

Clark nodded as he turned to face her. “I’m sure he does. So...I guess it wouldn’t surprise me if he was here in New York somewhere, keeping an eye out from a distance.”

Lois smiled, apparently reassured. “That *does* sound like something he’d do.”

Clark chuckled. “Sorry that I didn’t think to pack anything for us to do. I meant to grab some cards or travel Scrabble or something at the store before we left, but everything happened too fast. I’m lucky I remembered to grab my toothbrush.” He gestured helplessly at his luggage.

Lois smiled and patted the empty space next to her on the bed. “It’s not your fault. I meant to grab the book I’m reading and completely forgot it in the rush. Henderson acted like Bad Brain was already on his way to our apartments with the way he rushed us out of Metropolis.”

Clark took her unspoken invitation and sat down on the bed with her. “Yeah,” he agreed.

“Anyway, I guess we’ll just have to make our own fun tonight.”

“What’d you have in mind?” he asked.

“Well...you’ve been to sleepovers, right?”

“When I was a kid, yeah. It’s been a long time.”

“What kind of stuff did you do at them?” Lois asked.

Clark shrugged and leaned back to lounge against the back of the couch, which was now acting as a headboard.

“Played outside, mostly,” he said. “If the weather was good.

If not...” He let his words trail off as he thought back to the carefree days of his childhood. Back before his developing powers had made him too afraid to spend the night at a house other than his own. “We watched a lot of old movies. Why? What do girls do at theirs?” He wagged his eyebrows playfully at her, eliciting a laugh.

“Well it certainly wasn’t pillow fights in our lingerie,” she said, still laughing and swatting at his arm.

“What?” Clark asked innocently. “I didn’t imply that!”

“Yes you did! With that look you gave me.”

“Did not!”

“Oh you did too, and you know it. Anyway,” she said quickly, cutting off his retort in an effort to win the argument. “We played games, mostly. And talked. And gossiped. I remember we used to swap a lot of secrets. Things we would never tell anyone else.”

“Secrets, huh?” Clark asked, gulping a little. He didn’t like the tone of Lois’ voice. It sounded too much like she was about to suggest that they do the same now, in an effort to alleviate some of the boredom of being locked up in the safe-house.

Lois nodded. “Stupid stuff, mostly. Things like who we had a crush on. Narrow escapes from getting detention. Don’t look at me like that! I never did!” She scowled playfully at him. “Things like what girls at school we hated. A lot of us opened up about our parents getting divorces during the secret swapping time too. We used to call the game ‘The Truth Is...,’ because that’s how we’d start our confessions.”

“Oh, Lois,” Clark said, putting a hand on her shoulder. The look of remembered sadness that crossed her face when she spoke of divorce cut him to his very heart.

She waved away his concerns. “Ancient history. So,” she said, her voice turning perky again. “Wanna play?”

“Play?” Clark hedged.

“The Truth Is. I’ll start.”

“Lois, I don’t think...”

But she cut him off before he could finish. “The truth is...” she paused, apparently thinking of a good secret to share. “I was impressed with you, when you sent me on that wild goose chase to the Metropolis Sewage Reclamation Facility.”

“You... what?” Clark asked, surprise flooding him. Had he heard that right? She’d been ready to remove his spleen back then, without the benefit of anesthesia.

Lois nodded. “Don’t get me wrong. I was beyond angry with you. But at the same time, I admired that you had the guts to stand up to me. I couldn’t have respected you at all if you’d just let me push you around all the time. You weren’t the first person Perry attempted to partner me with, you know. There was two other guys and a girl. Not one of them had any sort of a backbone. And if they couldn’t stand up to me, how could I expect them to pull their weight and not fold when our job got tough and we needed to put the pressure on the people we were interviewing? But not you. You refused to let me bully you.”

“You didn’t look impressed,” Clark countered.

Lois sighed. “I know. I still felt insulted that Perry had stuck me with another partner, and such a rookie to boot. Then, after getting lost for hours amongst the muck and filth and mosquitoes... I was livid that I’d been duped. I’m sorry, Clark. Sorry that I forced you into doing what you did. Sorry that I didn’t give you a fair chance from the start.”

“There’s no need to apologize,” Clark said, sitting up and giving Lois a smile and a friendly squeeze on her shoulder. “The truth is... you made me the reporter that I am. Before you... before the Planet, I’d done mostly small time stuff. Trying to keep up with you and your high standards... well, yours and Perry’s really... it forced me to become a better reporter. So... I owe you my thanks.”

Lois gave him a smug, satisfied smile that he could tell was almost completely playful. “You’re welcome.”

Clark chuckled. “Maybe that wasn’t a good secret to share,” he laughed. “I’d hate to inflate your ego further. You won’t fit into anymore hats.”

Lois snorted lightheartedly. “I guess it’s my turn again. The truth is... I said ‘no.’”

“No?” Clark asked, confused. What on Earth was Lois talking about now?

Lois nodded. “To Lex. At the wedding. Almost wedding. The Archbishop asked if I would take Lex as my husband. And I said no.”

“So... it *wasn’t* Perry and Jimmy who stopped the wedding?”

Clark could not have been more surprised than if Lois decided to confide in him that the late billionaire had also been a cross-dresser. In the months since he’d almost lost Lois to that monster, she’d never spoken of the details of her wedding or the close call it had been to stop it before she could become the newest Mrs. Luthor.

“No,” Lois said, shaking her head. “They burst in a second or two after I turned Lex down.”

“Why?” The word escaped on his breath before he could stop it.

Lois’ eyes sank to the blankets on the pull-out couch. “I couldn’t stop thinking about what you’d said.”

For a fraction of a heartbeat, Clark hoped she’d say that his confession of love was what she’d meant. For a fraction of a heartbeat, he was terrified that hope would manifest itself into his features. He couldn’t reveal his secret desire to be with her. Not now. Or... could he? If Lois confessed to feeling the same way about him, he could admit to his own secret — that he lied when he taken back that profession of love. Couldn’t he?

For a single heartbeat, Lois looked almost scared by her admission. Then she recovered. “I mean, uh, you know. All that stuff about Lex being the face of evil and everything.”

“Oh,” Clark did his best to keep his disappointment hidden.

“And I realized something.”

“What?”

Lois took a deep breath and let it slowly out of her nostrils before answering. “You never would have said anything, if you didn’t believe it one hundred percent. That you were doing your best to try to protect me. That as much as you hated Lex, you never would have tried to stop me from marrying him if he’d actually been a decent guy. That you never would have allowed any kind of jealousy from fueling your actions.”

Clark nodded. “As much as I hated Luthor, you’re right. If he’d been a good guy, I would have been happy for you, Lois. But Luthor...” His voice trailed off and he shook his head. “I only wanted to see you happy, Lois. And I knew Luthor would never — could never — make you happy. Not the way...” He paused and corrected himself. He’d nearly said ‘the way I could make you happy.’ Instead, he said simply, “Not the way you deserve. He was beneath you, Lois. You know that, right?”

“I do now,” Lois answered, nodding solemnly. “The truth is... looking back, looking at the person I became during that time... I don’t like who I was. I can barely recognize myself. I... I tried to change... for him. And the changes I made... they were for the worse. No wonder people started to avoid me. Why you did.”

“Oh, Lois,” Clark breathed, shaking his head. “That’s not why. You *have* to know that I would have never given up on you. I was just... so distraught by the idea of you marrying that monster. It was hard for me. And then I was so focused on trying to prove my suspicions about him. It sort of... consumed me.”

Lois nodded again. “Perry said you were the driving force behind the investigation into Lex. He said that, without your persistence, Lex would have gotten away with everything.”

Clark blushed a little, but did not respond. He didn’t want praise or recognition for his efforts. The fact that he’d exposed Luthor’s criminal activities was enough. The fact that Lois hadn’t married that sociopath was enough.

“Which is why,” Lois continued, looking him in the eye, “I could never figure out why you weren’t there, with Perry and Jimmy and Henderson, when they tried to stop the wedding. The truth is... I was crushed when I didn’t see you right away.”

“I’m sorry, Lois. I didn’t mean to cause you any more pain than what I’m sure you went through that day.”

“Please... tell me where you were. I need to know.”

Clark dropped his eyes to his lap. “I’m not sure that you *want* to know.”

“Believe me, I do,” she challenged. “I think, in some weird way, it will give me full closure to the whole thing.”

Clark sucked in a breath and held it for several seconds as he contemplated what he should say. Slowly, he let out that same breath, coming to a sudden decision.

“I was with Superman,” he confessed, purposefully staying as vague as he could.

“Superman? He was in on the plot to take down Lex too?” Lois sounded genuinely surprised and more than a bit curious.

Clark hesitated a moment before answering. He didn’t want Superman to come off sounding as jealous as Clark himself had probably appeared to be during that time. “Sort of. He had his suspicions about Luthor too, encounters with him that made Superman extremely uneasy.”

“Sort of?” Lois repeated. “Clark, where, *exactly*, were you?”

“Luthor’s wine cellar,” he confessed, hating himself for allowing Lois to rope him into this discussion in the first place, and knowing that he would have to explain himself fully. “He’d caged Superman.”

“Caged? That’s not possible. A cage can’t hold Superman. He’s...well...*Superman*.”

“A normal cage wouldn’t,” Clark agreed.

Understanding dawned on Lois’ face. “But it *wasn’t* normal, was it?”

Clark shook his head. “No. It wasn’t.”

“Kryptonite?” Lois asked in a whisper, as if speaking any louder would alert the world to the superhero’s one weakness.

“I’m afraid so.” He cast his eyes downward, unable to meet her gaze.

A pained gasp escaped Lois’ lips. “How bad was it?” she asked, her voice even lower than it had been a moment before.

“Bad.” He hated to elaborate, knowing the truth would only cause Lois more pain.

“*How* bad?” she wanted to know, her tone indicating that Clark would have no rest until she had the answers she was looking for.

Clark closed his eyes against the memory. He’d had nightmares about that cage for weeks after the ordeal. And, in many of those nightmares, Luthor won. He’d marry Lois. He’d torture and kill Clark.

“Bad,” he said again, his voice sinking to match Lois’ volume. “Maybe...” he swallowed around the confession. “Maybe only minutes from death.”

Lois closed her eyes as a near sob escaped her. “Oh, God.”

“Neither one of us wanted you to know,” he quickly added, bringing his gaze up to lock eyes with her. “Superman and I both agreed that it would serve no purpose for you to know. We knew it would only cause you further grief.”

To his surprise, Lois shook her head defiantly. “No, I’m glad to know. It makes me feel all the better that Lex is dead and buried. What kind of monster was he?” She shuddered and scooted a little closer to Clark.

“The worst kind,” Clark answered, drawing her into his embrace, knowing from the subtle cues she was giving off that she needed it. “The kind who would use the woman he claimed to love to fulfill his own selfish desires.”

“I was an idiot,” she lamented.

Clark shook his head before resting his chin atop Lois’ hair. “No, Lois. You were in love.”

Lois shook her head again, this time, slowly and sadly. “Can I confess a secret?”

“Isn’t that what we’ve been doing this whole time?” he teased.

A small chuckle escaped her. “Yeah, but...this one...I guess it’s a little different.”

“You can tell me anything. You know that, right?”

“I do. Which is why I trust you with this. The truth is...I

don’t think I ever loved Lex. I was flattered by his attention. Lured in by his power and wealth. But...deep down...I think I always knew. He wasn’t ‘the one,’ you know? But I thought I’d never be able to do any better. I thought that maybe I could learn to love him, at least enough to be happy.” She sighed. “Like I said. I was an idiot.”

“It’s not that stupid, Lois, wanting to be with someone. Wanting to be in love.”

“It’s just that...I’ve never had that feeling, you know? Of being in love with someone who loves me back. I just wanted it so badly. But maybe...maybe you don’t know what it’s like. I mean, a guy like you, with your looks. You must have constantly had women falling for you.”

“Not really,” Clark said, shrugging casually. “The truth is, I’ve always been very careful, with my relationships. I’m not the type who likes to date around. I’ve only dated women who I thought I might see a future with. So...as a result, I really haven’t dated much at all.”

“Rachel?” Lois asked, teasing him a little.

Clark chuckled. “Nope.”

“She seemed pretty smitten with you, when I met her.”

“Maybe. But we’re only friends. She was like a sister to me, back when we were in school. I could never have dated her. Yeah, I took her to my prom, but that’s because Lana and I had broken up not long before and I didn’t want to go stag.”

“Clearly, that closeness doesn’t bother her. Rachel, I mean.”

Clark smiled. “One day, she’ll meet the right guy. And when she does, I’ll be happy for her.”

“So, I just admitted to the pitfalls of my love life. It’s your turn. Don’t leave me here, the only one of us with their heart completely exposed.”

Clark took in a breath as he stalled for time. Exhaling again, he spoke. “The truth is, Lois, we aren’t all that different, you and I. You didn’t love Luthor. And I...” He shook his head. “I’ve never been in love with any of the women I’ve dated. Like you, I *wanted* to love them, but...” He let his voice trail off, leaving the rest unsaid.

“Really?” Lois asked, a mix of wonder and skepticism in her voice.

“Really,” Clark said sincerely. “That’s why I don’t think the idea is stupid. I mean, I was with Lana for eight months before we broke up. She got mad that I wouldn’t tell her that I loved her. But I *couldn’t*. Because I *didn’t*. I couldn’t give her false hope that there was more to our relationship than there was. Well, that, and I was getting tired of her attempts to bully me around. I started to realize that our relationship wasn’t really a relationship at all. And when I finally stood up for myself... “Again, he shrugged. “That was the end of that. She broke up with me.”

“That’s awful,” Lois said, her voice low and soft. “I’m sorry. No one deserves that.”

“Don’t be,” Clark said, shaking his head. “I don’t think I’ve ever admitted this out loud, but I think I really dodged a bullet there.”

He kept his tone light and playful, though he could not have been more serious about that if he tried. He’d kept his special abilities well under wraps with Lana, but he knew, without a doubt, that she would have tried to force him into squashing the urge to use them, had she ever found out. Lois, on the other hand, unwittingly encouraged him to use them all the time. She was, after all, Superman’s biggest champion.

“I’m sure that’s not...” Lois started to argue.

Clark cut in gently. “Believe me, it is,” he said earnestly.

“Well, aren’t we quite the pair,” Lois said after a moment’s silence.

“What do you mean?” Clark asked.

Lois snuggled a little deeper into his embrace. Clark reveled in the solid feel of her in his arms. He only wished he could hold

her the way he truly wanted to, without having to hold back his love for her. To be able to plant a kiss on the top of her head, burying his lips into her dark, silken hair.

“Well,” she said, after getting herself more comfortable, “look at us. Both in our mid-twenties. Never having experienced love.” She gestured vaguely.

“Yeah,” Clark said, in a non-committal way. Technically speaking, he *had* experienced love. Just not with someone he’d *dated*.

“Can I share one more secret?” Lois suddenly asked, changing the subject.

“If you’d like.”

“Part of me *is* a little scared over this whole Bad Brain thing.”

Clark smiled. “Nothing’s going to happen, I promise you. I won’t let it,” he swore.

“Mmm,” Lois hummed, almost to herself.

Clark was taken aback. He’d expected her to make some comment on how he “wasn’t Superman” or something to that effect. At the very least, he thought she’d laugh at him. But she didn’t comment, didn’t laugh, didn’t tease him. He realized, belatedly, that she was probably getting tired, when the clock on the wall lightly chimed. When had it become the middle of the night?

“Getting tired?” he asked.

“Maybe a little,” she admitted, stifling a yawn.

“Get some sleep, okay?”

He started to get up from the couch, gently disentangling himself from Lois. But she grabbed at his shirt, stilling his movements.

“Where are you going?”

“I’ll take one of the recliners,” he said, matter-of-factly. “You take the couch here.”

“You’ll be miserable in the recliner,” she argued.

“I’ll be fine. I’ve slept on worse before.”

That was the truth. In his world travels, Clark had slept in some of the most uncomfortable places imaginable, mostly because his constant movement hadn’t afforded him the ability to take a steady job in order to pay for more lavish, plush accommodations.

“You’re staying put, right here,” Lois said, poking her finger down on the thin mattress, hard.

“I don’t know, Lois,” Clark stammered, his heart pounding.

He wanted so badly to share a bed with Lois, even on friendly terms. But he was all too aware of how Lois viewed him — as a friend only. And what if he were to float in his sleep, as he sometimes did?

“Please?”

One simple word and his iron will melted.

“All right,” he said, nodding. Then, unable to resist teasing her, he added, “But no funny business on your part!” He wagged his finger at her for good measure.

Lois laughed. “As if, Farm Boy. As if.”

He gave her a warm smile before settling back into the mattress and pillows, this time, laying flat on his back instead of propping himself up against the back of the couch. He put one hand behind his head and used the other to hold Lois close.

“Is this okay?” he asked.

Lois shifted herself and put her head on Clark’s chest. She put one hand there as well, getting comfortable. “It’s perfect. You know, you’ve always been there for me, Clark, whenever I’ve been afraid or upset. Even when I’ve just needed someone to talk to so I could get things straight in my own head. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. The truth is, Lois, you’re my best friend. You’re closer to me than anyone else in the world. And I treasure that, above all else. So I’m more than happy to be there, whenever and whatever the circumstances. And I always will be,

no matter what.”

“Thanks, Clark,” Lois said, stifling a yawn.

“Why don’t you get some sleep?” he offered. “I’ll stay up for a while and make sure nothing happens, okay?”

“You don’t have to do that,” she said, even as another yawn took her. This time, she could not stop it from coming. “I’m sure everything...”

At that moment, a loud pop filled the air outside the safe-house’s windows. Lois gave an involuntary, though small, shriek as she clutched reflexively at the blankets. Every muscle in Clark’s body tensed as he sprang out of bed, so swiftly he wasn’t even aware that he was moving. In an instant, he was at the windows, peering out into the night.

Even at that late hour, New York was awake. People still wandered the sidewalks, though far less than during the day. Lights turned the darkness to midday. Dogs barked. Music played from a lone guitarist on the street corner, begging for spare change from passersby. In the far distance, a siren wailed. Clark listened closely until he was sure it was an ambulance, and getting further away with every passing second. His keen eyes swept the entire area until, at last, he saw what had caused the noise. Not a gun, as he’d feared, but an old motorcycle. He watched as the owner tried to start the bike again, the vehicle giving off the same noise. He breathed a sigh of relief.

“It’s okay,” he said over his shoulder to Lois. “It’s just a motorcycle that backfired.”

“Are you sure? It can’t be a Bad Brain trick?”

“I’m sure. Listen. Hear that? The engine’s roaring now. The guy is driving away as we speak.”

Lois also breathed a shaky sigh of relief. “That’s good. For a moment there...”

“Me too,” Clark finished for her.

A pounding knock sounded at the door. Clark wheeled and x-rayed it, while Lois whipped her head toward the sound. Again, he was relieved to find that it was nothing insidious. He strode over to the door as the person beyond called out to them.

“Mr. Kent? Miss Lane? It’s Trafford.”

Clark unfastened the locks and opened the door.

“Good news,” the woman announced as she entered the apartment. “I just got a phone call from Inspector Henderson. The plan worked. Bad Brain is in custody. They got him about an hour ago and they were just finishing booking him when Henderson called. You are free to go home whenever you like. Shall I call a car for you?” She looked pointedly at Lois.

Lois shot a look to Clark. For his part, he waited to see what she would say. He fully anticipated something along the lines of “you should have called one already.” She surprised him, instead, when she smiled at him.

“In the morning,” she said. “It’s late now. Clark and I were just about to get some sleep. But thanks for letting us know about Bad Brain.” When Marissa hesitated, Lois added, “Well, don’t just stand there. Go. Goodnight.”

Strafford tensed a little, Clark could see. Lois had ruffled the woman’s feathers. But, wordlessly, she nodded and turned on her heel.

“Oh,” Lois said, just as the woman crossed the threshold back into the hallway, “Strafford. I wasn’t kidding about the bagels in the morning.”

To her credit, Marissa held her tongue, choosing, instead, to simply walk away. Clark closed and locked the door behind her.

“Lo-is,” he admonished. “You didn’t have to be like that.”

Lois grinned and shrugged. “I know. I just don’t like her.”

“Why? None of this is her fault, you know. She’s just doing her job.”

Lois nodded, still grinning. “I know. I just didn’t like the way she looked at you, that’s all.”

“What? How did she look at me?” he wanted to know.

But Lois simply gave him a devious look as she settled back down into the blankets. “Well...the truth is...” She hesitated, widening her smile. “That I’m tired. Goodnight, Clark.”

Giggling, she threw the blankets over her head while Clark shook his head in quiet amusement.

The truth is, Lois, I love you, he thought to himself as he climbed back into bed. And someday, I promise that I’ll tell you that. When I do, I won’t ever take it back. And that is the truth.

THE END