

Star Stuff

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Rated: PG

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Summary: A WAFFY “Season’s Greedings” episode extension.

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Author’s Note: Thanks to Sue, as always, for her beta advice. This story is for Laura, whose requests are listed at the end.

This is so much better than Arbor Day.

The side of Clark’s head is resting gently against the top of mine as we listen to the Christmas carolers serenade us from the street, and it feels more than serendipitous, like those men and women were meant to be here to complete the perfect tableau. If only one of them had a camera and could take a picture of us, we could freeze this moment in time.

I wonder what they see when they look up at us. Do we look like a married couple, like Clark has found his rightful place in my apartment, by my side? Do they assume he’ll never leave, that the lights will eventually flick off and we’ll turn away from the window and head for the bedroom as they continue down the street in search of another couple to serenade?

It feels like that’s a possibility, as improbable as that seems. His right hand tentatively curls around my waist as if he’s testing the boundaries of our friendship, pushing gently to see if there’s more than I’ve been willing to admit. I lean more securely against him, silently acknowledging his move by making one of my own. It’s subtle and could be interpreted as less than I mean, but it seems like the right thing to do and the natural way to do it.

Somehow, despite the fact that I write for a living, words fail me around him. They get caught in my throat when I stare into his eyes; they’re stolen from my tongue when I cross into his personal space. And that’s okay, because we don’t need words — we never have.

Since the day we met, there was something between us that sizzled with energy and simmered with heat. We both felt it — I know we did. He just wasn’t any good at masking his feelings. They shone through his eyes the moment I walked in on his interview with Perry. They rang through his voice when he teased me about liking to be on top. They laid themselves bare in Centennial Park when he risked his heart on the hope that I could open mine.

But I’m well-practiced at hiding my emotions, at pretending they don’t exist. I’ve done it since childhood, when I thought that rescuing a passed-over tree with the meager savings in my piggy bank could rescue the loneliness I felt inside of me. I’ve done it through adulthood, when I thought that the persona of Mad Dog Lane could prevent the world from seeing any deeper than my surface. I did it in the park when I let him down with trite words and callous indifference.

But it didn’t work. I couldn’t push him away, though anyone else would have run. I can’t push him away, though part of me desperately needs to flee.

Being this close to him hurts. The way my body burns with desire when I catch a glimpse of his glorious body. The way my heart pounds against my chest when I catch the unguarded emotions in his eyes. The rush of heat that warms my soul when he pulls me into his embrace. It all hurts too much, not because of how it feels, but because I know now how it feels when it’s gone.

The black emptiness, the icy cold void that shrouded my soul when I thought he had died. When I cried over his lifeless body on the floor of that back street casino and felt all the light and color pour from my very being. The sudden certainty that without him, I was no longer me.

Or, at least, I was no longer the me that I want to be. The me that’s more than a facade, more than an emotionless avatar. The me that embraces fire and heat and pain. The me that’s willing to put a name to it, claim it for everything it could be, risk touching it and being burned. The me that is in love with Clark Kent.

I think he knows. I think he’s always known, even before I knew it myself. His hope, his persistence, his faith in the face of every obstacle I threw in his way that one day I’d know what he has always known — it’s the only thing that makes sense. He has had every reason, every opportunity to lose faith. And yet, here he is, his hand on my waist and his head tipped against mine, and he must know how I feel, how I’d stand here forever if it meant this feeling would never go away.

I should tell him now. Complete the perfect tableau with three small words that would mean the world to him. I should turn my body into his, reach my hand to the back of his neck, and pull him towards me with a feather-light pressure. And when his lips are a breath away from mine, I should tell him I love him, then kiss him and let my soaring emotions validate my words.

It would be easier if I just kissed him and let my lips speak for me; words just get in the way. I tried in the car after Clark came back to life, when the molten heat of joy doused my icy chill and flooded through the cracks in my emotional walls. I tried to explain, tried to put my feelings into words, tried to be the me that I want to be — the me that wants to be with him. But he was exhausted; he fell asleep, and my voice muted. My old insecurities rebuilt my walls, and I’ve struggled to find a way to tear them down again, pierce the barrier between us. To be real and honest and true.

It’s too easy to waver and delay, to shy away from risk. To justify that it’s the wrong place or time — that a better place or time is on the horizon. The horizon always recedes, is always just out of reach, so the words never fall from my lips.

But it’s here: this time, this place. And still, I hesitate, and I’m so angry at myself for being such a coward, for waiting for him to decide that this is the right time and place.

Because he won’t — he’s not going to. He risked the words before; he touched the fire that day in the park and I burned him. So he has every reason for shying away, for waiting patiently, for hoping and having faith.

So it’s up to me. I will take this perfect moment and transform it into something more. I turn into his embrace and smile shyly as I see the love he can’t hide in his eyes.

He sways imperceptibly closer to me, then swallows visibly before backing away and saying, “The food’s probably getting cold. We should eat.” His hand slides off my waist.

So I was wrong — it wasn’t the right time. But it will be — I’ll make sure it is before he leaves my place.

I pat my hand against his chest. “You’re gonna love it. I have everything you could possibly want: turkey, stuffing, cranberry sauce. I even have a pie; well, two, actually. Apple and pumpkin. I mean, pumpkin’s traditional, but isn’t that a vegetable? Why would anyone want vegetable pie? So I got apple, too — you know, the kind with the crumbles on top?”

He gently puts his hand against my arm to halt my nonstop babbling. “You didn’t have to go through all the trouble. I would have come even if it was just turkey sandwiches.”

I breathe deeply, steeling myself against his honesty. I know he would — I know he did. He’s a terrible liar; there’s hardly a flurry of snow on the ground, so it’s all too obvious that he changed his plans for me. And that makes me love him even more.

I draw my eyes away from him and survey the table. “I know it’s stupid. I just wanted the perfect Christmas for once.” I sink into a chair, and Clark sits opposite me with his hands folded politely in front of his plate. “I thought if I had all this food and invited a bunch of friends, then maybe I’d wipe out some of my bad Christmas memories and capture some of your good ones.” I shrug. “Lame, huh?”

Clark reaches his hand across the table and takes hold of mine. “Not at all.” His thumb strokes absently against my skin, making my heartbeat flutter. “I’m sorry more people couldn’t make it.”

I shake my head. “Honestly, the only person I really wanted to come is here.”

His face glows, but then he tries to suppress his smile as he teases, “I don’t see Superman.”

I lean forward and whisper conspiratorially, “I didn’t even invite him.”

A laugh escapes his luscious lips and he releases my hand. He begins to serve the meal, and I wait eagerly to hear his verdict after he takes his first bite.

“This is delicious.” He tilts his head and arches his eyebrow playfully. “Where did you order it from?”

I try to summon my best mock indignation. “Hey! I’ll have you know it took a good ten minutes to transfer all of this food from the plastic containers onto my fancy dishes.”

Clark throws his head back in laughter before taking another bite. “I swear, I’ll never tell a soul.”

“I don’t think I would have fooled anyone anyway.”

He winks at me. “Probably not.”

“And besides, ordering takeout is a highly developed skill in its own right. You can’t just pick up food from anywhere — you have to do your homework and find the best places. So that’s research. And you have to order in advance, so that takes organizational skills.”

“You’re absolutely right, Lois,” Clark says with barely disguised humor. “No one has mastered the fine art of takeout better than you.”

“That’s right! And don’t you forget it.” I take another bite of food, then sober at the memories of past Christmas dinners. “Mother always said I’d never get a man if I didn’t learn how to cook a decent meal.”

I see Clark gulp down a bite of food, and it seems like he’s considering his response. Then he quietly says, “Maybe you just need a man who knows how to cook for himself.”

I can’t let that easy opportunity to tease him pass by. “Know anyone who qualifies?”

“I might,” he says before sealing his lips shut and looking pointedly away from me, as if he’s doing his best to neutralize the grin that’s threatening to overtake his face.

I press the issue, because this might be the right time and it’s definitely the right place. “I think I already met him.”

Clark closes his eyes briefly and I can hear his breath catch, then he carefully cuts through a piece of turkey, clearly avoiding any acknowledgement of my words.

“I think I met him and didn’t realize what I had. I think I was so afraid of accepting everything we could have together that I ended up hurting him so badly that he’ll never try again.”

He looks directly at me — his eyes bore into mine — and I’m flooded with a flash of nerves that steal my breath and overwhelm me, because I can see everything he feels, and the purity and depth is unimaginable, like nothing I even remotely deserve.

I flee — I can hardly believe I’m doing it, but I find myself suddenly transported to the kitchen where I’m struggling to breathe and desperately trying to contain my emotions. He doesn’t follow me, which just adds to his perfection, because he knows me well enough to understand that I need a measure of

space. My racing heartbeat normalizes after a minute, and I’m ready to face him again. I pick up the apple pie and a knife and bring them to the table as my pretended excuse for having left in the first place.

As I cross back into the living room, Clark appears to be deep in thought. When I set the pie on the table, he refocuses his attention and smiles at me. But it’s the adorable, placid smile of my partner — it’s not seductive or ironic, so I know he’s concluded that it’s not the right time. It’s my turn to be patient, and I resolve to do just that.

So I search for something to say, to find a safe topic of conversation for two people ignoring the sexually charged atmosphere between them as they share a meal traditionally defined by familial love in a potentially romantic setting with soft flurries of snow falling past twinkling, glittering lights.

Impossible.

I serve him a slice of pie and wait for him to render his verdict. “Is it good?” Ugh. What a stupid thing to say — almost as lame as asking him about the weather.

He smiles politely. “Sure. I mean, it can’t hold a candle to my mom’s apple pie, but nothing can.”

I sink into my chair. “I’m sorry. You’d probably be eating that right now if I hadn’t roped you into staying here with me.”

His hand darts across the table and covers the back of mine. “I wouldn’t trade this pie for the world.”

I smile shyly, because I can hear how sincerely he means that. Still, he did sacrifice time with his parents, who he only sees occasionally, for time with me, who he sees every day, and I should make sure he knows how much that gesture means to me. I press my palm against his, and our fingers intertwine. He looks at our joined hands with wonder, as if he can’t believe our relationship has progressed even this tiny step beyond what it was before we sat down for dinner.

I clear my throat. “So, are you going to fly out there tomorrow?”

He drops my hand, and an odd expression of shock crosses his face. He picks up his fork and shoves a heaping pile of pie in his mouth; as he chews, his features return to his default jovial charm. “Yeah, I was able to change my flight.”

“Too bad you couldn’t just get Superman to take you.” I lean back in my chair as a vision flashes through my brain, and I laugh. “He could cradle you in his arms and fly you through the night sky.”

Clark narrowed his eyes. “Gee, that sounds dignified.”

I laugh louder. “Well, how else is he supposed to do it? Are you going to crawl onto his back and ride him like a horse?”

He rolls his eyes. “When has he ever even given you a piggyback ride?”

I pretend to think about the question, but can’t suppress the incredulous laugh that bubbles up from within. “Hmmm...that would be never.”

“I suspect he enjoys holding you in his arms anyway,” Clark mumbles under his breath with what sounds like a hint of envy.

I say pointedly, “I think that ship sailed a long time ago.” Suddenly, I feel bold enough to acknowledge the undercurrent between us. I leisurely stand and make my way around to his side of the table. I run my fingertips lightly over his bicep and see his eyes widen behind his glasses. I smolder mine and tease, “Besides, you’re probably strong enough to pick me up if I need to be carried somewhere.”

Impulsively, he stands, accidentally knocking over his chair, and he grabs me. I squeal with laughter as he cradles me in his arms, shifting my weight insecurely as if he’s about to drop me. I clutch my arms around his neck, which causes half of my chest to press against his.

Everything freezes — his shifting, my squealing, his breath, my breath, his delighted gaze, my playful tease. Nothing else

exists except him and me — us: a small word that suddenly defines our world. And I know that this is the right time and place, that perfection is me held tightly against his body. So I should inch my head towards his, and he should recognize my intentions, and our lips should meet, creating a big bang that would reset our universe and begin our relationship anew.

I feel the moment slipping away as he carefully releases the tension in his body and starts to set me back on the floor. But I will not let him deny what I'm sure he feels, so I lace my fingers behind his neck and refuse to let him defer and back away. He searches my eyes, and I try to show him all the words I can't seem to say. His arms tighten around my back, and I want to keep my eyes open so I can see his expression when our lips touch, but my eyelids flutter closed of their own volition, so I must content myself with extending every other sense I have at my disposal.

His lips are soft and warm, and he tastes faintly like sugar and apples. He moans almost imperceptibly, as if I've heard it in my brain before the sound actually travels through the air. His body melts against mine; any distance between us has magically disappeared. What I feel for him, the swirling emotion that has ebbed and flowed, crystalizes into something solid and substantial.

Our kiss ends and Clark loosens his grip. I do the same and we part only slightly, as if something instinctive continues to bind us together. I'm not sure what expression I wear, but it's making him nervous; I can see the wary trepidation on his face, which I understand, because the idea of risking our easy friendship on the gamble that we could have so much more is both thrilling and terrifying.

I wonder if three small words are the right things to say. I stroke my hand against his cheek, and I watch his eyes hopefully dilate as he lets out a slow breath. I try to speak, but my emotions squeeze tightly in my chest and the only thing that escapes my lips is, "Wow."

Clark's face transforms and brightens — his eyes glitter playfully. He laughs lightly and says, "Yeah."

Who would have guessed that three small letters would be enough?

"I liked that." His playfulness is infectious.

"Me, too. A girl could get used to that."

Clark gently caresses my cheek, using his fingertips to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. His expression turns tender and serious a moment before he kisses me again. Our hands don't clutch frantically in a race to seek out more; rather, we stand still, and time seems to stretch as infinitely as our friendship will last.

And that should scare me — risking our friendship is what has caused me to back away in the past. But I'm seized with an innate understanding that this is it, that we are real, that beside him is the right place and forever is the right time. I have no fear; his resurrection from the casino floor has somehow resurrected my willingness to risk my heart. I don't need to dwell on past heartache and old betrayals. I will cherish the future instead.

It's stunning to admit that to myself — I don't know how to admit it to him. I end our kiss and step away, at war with myself, fighting against my body's instinct to flee and my heart's need to stay. I settle on a compromise, circling around the table and slinking back into my chair, using the heaping mound of food between us as a protective shield. He smiles knowingly when he picks up his chair and takes his seat, lowering his eyes to the table as he picks up his fork, allowing the crackling energy between us to diffuse. It's astonishing, really, to know how well he can read me, how sensitive he is to my needs.

I wish I could do the same. I wish I knew him as completely as he seems to know me. I know it's my fault, that by fortifying my emotional walls against him, I've stymied my own ability to get to know him better. I'm committed to doing so, though. Committed to him.

He has some walls to tear down, too. His vibrant personality is a colorful mask that slips whenever he slips out the door. His fumbled excuses as he flees from me don't hold up; his lies are transparent, but opaque enough to shade whatever it is that he hides. I suspect that I'm the source of his pain, that he has struggled to contain the feelings he's always seemed to have for me. I think that when I get too close, when he comes too close to revealing his feelings, that he flies off to find a lid that will more securely fit the box around his heart. But he doesn't need to do that anymore — our kiss has wrenched the lid free, so he can finally completely be himself and show me all of the depths and complexities that make up Clark Kent.

But we don't have to do all of that tonight. For now, we can smile at the memory of our kiss and flirt over dessert, and I can make sure I extract another kiss from him before he leaves.

I raise my eyes and see that he's gazing back at me. I can't help but smile, and he does the same. The silence between us simmers, and I need to find something to say before I surrender to the rising heat and crawl over the table to claim him. I break our smoldering stare and search the room for a safe topic of conversation. His lovely present sparkles in the twinkling light from the tree and I clear my throat. "Thanks again for the ornament. It's beautiful."

I let my eyes wander over the sharply defined edges and multi-faceted design of the cut glass. The gift is perfect, special, treasured. I glance his way as his lips curl into a radiant smile, then he whispers, "Beautiful," in agreement.

I smile in return and am finding it easier to admit to myself what that look on his face means, the one I've seen for about as long as I've known him. Making eye contact with him is like connecting with the cosmos — I could fall into his soul and become one with the universe.

I close my eyes momentarily in an attempt to collect myself and suppress my desire to drown in his kisses. I offer a joke to try and diffuse some of the sexually charged tension between us. "Are you sure you didn't just pick that up at Macy's?"

Clark laughs quietly to himself. "Oh, yeah, I'm sure." He nudged his head upwards. "Superman got it from up there."

"Is there a mall on the moon that I don't know about?"

Clark rolls his eyes. "I guess it's more accurate to say that he got the silica from up there."

I let my brain search for memories from my high school chemistry class. "Isn't silica just sand?"

"Well, partly. There are all sorts of small asteroids that come close to Earth's orbit. They usually burn up as they enter the atmosphere. Those little chunks of rock are made up of lots of different elements, and many of them contain silica. If you heat silica to the right temperature, it crystallizes and turns to glass."

"Wow." I think for a moment, then conclude, "He made it with his heat vision, didn't he?"

Clark nods and looks away as if he's slightly embarrassed. "He heated the glass, let it cool in a mold, then cut the edges. It was kind of a pain in the butt." He shrugs, then mumbles, "Apparently."

"And what did you do for your share of the present? Supervise?" I smile broadly so he knows I'm just messing with him.

He rolls his eyes and shakes his head. "Well, I gave him the idea." He sits up straighter in his chair and knits his eyebrows in thought. "I think I just wanted you to understand. You, me, him... there's something about us that's all the same. 'We are made of star stuff.'"

I tilt my head as I recall the phrase. "Carl Sagan?"

Clark picks up his fork and scrapes at a piece of his dessert. He stares at it as he collects his thoughts, then offers it to me, and for some reason, it feels very important that I accept it, so I surround the fork with my lips and swallow the bite of pie. The

fork hovers in the air a moment longer before Clark places it back on the table. “The nitrogen in our DNA, the calcium in our teeth, the iron in our blood, the carbon in our apple pies were made in the interiors of collapsing stars. We are made of star stuff.”

A fierce sincerity is blazing from his gaze — it’s clear that he needs me to interpret his message. So I take my time and consider the quote. “Superman’s planet exploded. He travelled through the galaxy and ended up here. But despite all of his powers, when you get right down to it, he’s really no different from you or me.”

Clark inhales, then slowly blows out the breath; I must have said the right thing. He nods slightly, then pushes away from the table. As he crosses to the window, he says, “The cosmos are within us.”

The tone of his voice tells me that we’re on the cusp of something important. Our light banter and sexual flirtation has been abandoned, replaced with a heavy weight, but I’m not going to run from it. I rise from my chair, determined to see this through, desperate to understand.

He stands, looking out the window at the twinkling lights that shine down from above. I catch his profile and note the way his spine holds him rigidly upright, arms crossing his chest with his face tipped upward. His stance is regal, majestic, aloof and distant, as if his thoughts are as far away as the suns that sent their rays to Earth millions of years ago.

I gasp, holding my breath. Because it’s suddenly so clear: why he disappears, why I feel the same way about two different men, why it’s so easy in this moment to imagine him wearing a tight-fitting uniform.

He is made of star stuff.

The realization hits me and I’m flooded with conflicting emotions I can’t begin to process. I start to shake and tears threaten at the corners of my eyes and I don’t even know why they’re there or why I’m shaking or why I’m not breathing or what I’m doing or what I’m going to do or why he did it or why he’s just standing there or why tears are glinting in his eyes or why his chin has tucked down towards his chest and his shoulders have slumped or why I want to hold him and kiss him and throw him out the window.

He exhales deliberately, steeling himself to the truth he knows I’ve discovered. He looks away and reaches for the glass ornament, carefully taking it down. He stares blankly, flipping it over in his hands. “I engraved it,” he says, before handing it to me.

He doesn’t even glance at me as I take it. I notice the middle of the star and trace my fingertip over the distinctive outline of Superman’s shield and the swirl of the stylized letter contained within.

“It’s permanent,” he says. “Real and solid and true.” I hear him sigh before he takes the star from my hand and turns it over. “But you could throw it to the ground and shatter it into a million pieces.”

And I can no longer contain my tears; they fall as my thumb caresses the engraving centered on the ornament’s other side — the letters C and K surrounded by a heart. He closes his eyes, as if he’s surrendering to the inevitable.

I’m not sure how long we silently stand there, how long it takes for my thoughts and feelings to crystallize. I wipe the tracks of tears from my cheeks then hand him the star. His shoulders sag further in disappointment, because he pessimistically accepts the worst interpretation of my action.

“Put it back, please.” I don’t look at him, but can sense that he hasn’t moved. “It’s mine. It belongs here. I love it.”

He hesitates, but then sets the star in its rightful place on the top of my tree. “Lois...”

I stop him with a hand placed gently on his chest. “Clark...” And even as I pause after uttering his name, I understand that he

is Clark, that nothing about him has really changed, that I’m the one who needs to change and adapt to the shifting dynamic between us. I drop my hand and gaze out the window, searching for a way to express what I feel.

“You know, light is like a cosmic time machine.” I see him nod slightly out of the corner of my eye before I continue. “So even though Superman is here, and his planet is gone, the light from his star is still reaching out to him.”

Clark looks curiously at me but says nothing. He’s waiting, no doubt, for an emotional outburst, for the kind of painful rejection he’s felt before. How he can stand here with me after all I’ve done to him in the past is beyond my comprehension.

“Your parents...” I nudge my head towards the night sky as I give him a weak smile. “Your birth parents...they must have loved you very much. To send you across the galaxy, to give you a chance that they didn’t have.” I try and contain my emotions because I want him to hear me, to understand me; I need to express my thoughts in words that are so hard to formulate. “But they reach out to you every night.”

Clark follows my gaze with a slight smile tugging at his lip. “Carl Sagan said, ‘We are a way for the cosmos to know itself.’ No matter where I was born, I know who I am; I know why I’m here. I know I have a place in this universe, a purpose for being here.” He turns suddenly to face me, clasping my hands, and says with heartfelt conviction, “There’s nowhere I’d rather be than by your side.”

I have to look away because his sincerity causes my heart to race. I deflect in order to gain a moment to regroup. I cock an eyebrow and say, with a wry, droll tone, “Well, I was going to throw you out the window.”

He smiles as he shrugs. “I’d survive the fall.”

His joke catches me off guard and I laugh, and then he laughs, and the tension between us evaporates. I look up into his eyes, then quietly say, “If you can forgive me for all of the stupid mistakes I’ve made in the past, then I can forgive you for neglecting to tell me one rather relevant piece of information.”

“Deal,” he says with a wink. Then he leans slightly towards me and asks, “Am I really getting off that easily?”

“Oh, I reserve the right to be furious at a later date. Just consider this a Christmas miracle for now.”

I see his grin radiate with happiness. “Yes, ma’am,” he says in a tone that makes me roll my eyes. When I look back at him, he squeezes my hands lightly, then says, “I love you, Lois.”

I know he does. I’ve known it all along. And since I never actually gave him a present tonight, I can at least give him the words I know he’d treasure more than any tie I could buy at the mall. “I love you too, Clark.” I sigh dramatically, then add, “I tolerate you, Superman.”

He rocks back on his heels and lets out a peal of incredulous laughter. “You tolerate me?”

“Eh,” I said with disinterest, “Everyone has their flaws.”

He lets go of my hands and pulls me into a hug; my cheek snuggles against his chest as I wrap my arms around him. With sudden, certain conviction racing through my veins, I know, without a doubt, that this is both the right time and the right place.

I look up at him, he looks down, and as our lips press and slide against each other, our souls unite. Two hydrogen atoms fuse in the core of a star, and the radiant energy consumes us.

THE END

Author’s Note: Over the past year, Laura (LMA) has become an incredibly supportive beta reader and a wonderful friend. As a small token of my appreciation, I offered to write a story just for her. These were her requests:

Want:

- Immediate continuation of the evening together — and potentially day after — the end of “Season’s Greedings”

- Fun, flirty, waffy, emotionally-weighted banter
- A clear indication that Lois and Clark are officially now together as a couple

Don’t Want:

- Oddly, considering the episode, “Christmas” feel to the story (prefer centered totally on Lois and Clark)

- A Plot...nah — don’t need it :)

- Interruptions — “Super” rescues, visitors, videos to return, and all that etc.