

# That Old Vat of Mine

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Summary: Shallowford issued an Episode Mash-Up Challenge of “That Old Gang Of Mine” and “Vatman.” Here’s my response. :)

Copyright disclaimer: Some plot points and dialogue from this story have been taken directly from or modified from the script of “Vatman,” written by Michael Norell and from “That Old Gang of Mine,” written by Gene Miller and Karen Kavnar. No profit is being made from this story and no copyright infringement is intended.

Thanks to Laura and Sue for their beta advice! :)

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## Prologue

### *One Year Ago...*

He opened his eyes and looked up at the sun, which was hanging distantly in the sky.

He had asked Superman to do it, to give him the Viking funeral that would destroy the evidence of his life. But as they flew into the sky, racing towards the edge of the Earth’s atmosphere, he had changed his mind. As the certainty of his fiery death loomed large, it had suddenly seemed very important to make his way on his own. To sacrifice his own life — to meet the end on his own terms.

He was dying anyway. He had overheard Dr. Leek’s prognosis, and his father had accepted the news callously. Not with the anguish that a father should feel for his son. Because he wasn’t that — not really. To Lex Luthor, he was just another bullet in a chamber, a means to an end.

His life had been built on a lie. What little life he had had.

And he was in pain; he could feel the weariness brought on by his battle with Superman and the deterioration of his cellular structure. Might is right, but he wasn’t mighty and his very existence wasn’t right.

A noble self-sacrifice had felt like the right thing to do. And at the edge of the atmosphere, at the fuzzy line between heaven and Earth, the line between Superman and himself had also blurred. He suddenly had felt the need to define that line more rigidly. He had encouraged Superman to float back down to Earth while he continued on his way towards the heavens.

So it was odd that the sun was so far away. He blinked, feeling the grass under his back, smelling the fresh scent of flowers in the air, hearing the happy buzz of life that seemed to circle around him. And even odder was what he was not feeling: pain.

He pushed himself into a sitting position and took in his surroundings. Centennial Park was alive with hot dog vendors and strolling lovers, buskers and cyclers, picnic lunches and pick-up sports games.

And he smiled. Because he was alive.

“Superman!” He stood and turned towards the joyfully squealing child, who ran up to him and hugged his leg. He scuffed up the child’s hair and laughed. “Hey, buddy,” he playfully said.

The child’s mother came to his side quickly, tugging the boy away. “I’m so sorry about that.”

He smiled radiantly at her. “It’s fine. I loved it!” He heard the childlike lilt in his own voice.

The woman’s eyes sparkled in surprise. “Oh!” She laughed, then looked him up and down. “You’re really good. Where did you get that costume?”

He looked down at himself and answered honestly, “My father made it for me.”

“Awesome,” she said.

And then he heard other squeals of delight as more boys and girls saw him and came running over to play. He greeted them all, letting them believe that he was Superman, because he didn’t want to ruin the fun.

He spent the whole day in the park, pushing children on swings, watching them pretend to defy gravity. He swirled countless numbers of kids on the merry-go-round, his boundless energy buoyed by their endless delight. Grateful parents shook his hand, watching on as he entertained the crowds.

It was, literally, the best day of his life.

“Great job, kid!” A man slapped him on the arm; he turned towards him and smiled. “You’re a natural!”

“Thanks,” he said graciously.

“Love the outfit. Great quality. You must be a pro. Who’s your agent?”

He looked curiously at the man, not quite understanding the question. “I don’t have an agent.”

The man’s face lit up and he thrust out his hand. “Sammy, at your service. I’m the number one agent in this town. And I know talent when I see it. Boy, you and me, kid, we could make a killing!”

His face fell. “I don’t want to kill anybody.”

Sammy laughed and slapped him on the back. “The look is perfect. I’m telling ya: kids’ parties, bar mitzvahs...” He wagged his eyes suggestively. “Adult parties. You could book ‘em all.”

He thought for a moment. “Parties sound like fun.”

Sammy pulled out a business card and thrust it into his hand. “Just let me be your exclusive agent, and the world will be yours.”

He looked down at the card, unsure of what to say.

Sammy barreled ahead. “Hey, I get it. Times are tough. What do you say to a signing bonus?” Sammy reached into his pocket and pulled out a wad of cash. He peeled off several bills. “One hundred bucks, cash, right now, if you sign with me.”

“One hundred dollars?” he asked.

Sammy tapped him on the shoulder. “No, no, clearly that’s just to start. A one thousand dollar bonus when you book your first gig. Come on. What do ya say? We can copy your ID and sign the papers in my office right now.”

“Oh,” he said sadly. “I don’t have any ID.”

Sammy’s face turned supportive. “Hey, no problem. Times are tough. You’re not the first kid I’ve met who had problems with their papers. I know guys who know guys. We can take care of that.” He stuck out his hand again. “Do we have a deal?”

He looked at the outstretched hand, then up at Sammy’s kind eyes. He shook Sammy’s hand, smiled, and said, “Sure.”

“Woo hoo!” Sammy pumped his fist in the air, then guided him to begin walking. “I’m tellin’ ya, kid, you’re gonna be a star. Hey, what’s your name?”

He opened his mouth, but didn’t know what to say. He wasn’t Superman — he was only a clone of Superman. His father hadn’t even bothered to give him a proper name. So he just shrugged.

Sammy seemed to understand. “Hey, we’ve all got stuff in our past. It’s not a problem. Everyone deserves a second chance.”

He stopped walking and looked at the waning sun. Night would fall and the sun would rise again. His life — the one defined by Lex Luthor — had burned to death in his flight towards the sun. But he hadn’t made it — he must have passed out and fallen back to the Earth.

So he was reborn. This was his second chance. And he would live this new life on his own terms, undefined by the expectations

of others.

He looked at Sammy and smiled as they again began walking towards the talent agency and his new life.

“You know what, kid?” Sammy asked as he clapped him on the back of his shoulder. “You look like a Barry to me.”

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## Part 1

### *Today...*

The sweater wouldn't be enough.

Lois stood by her dresser and pulled it over her head anyway, covering the basic white t-shirt. White was for happy occasions like weddings. Except in China. White was for funerals in China.

So it was right for her to shroud her white hot pain in a cloud of grey fabric. To honor his connection to the world, the bright light that was woven into the very fabric of his being, by keeping the white cotton clinging to her skin, hugging her tightly across her chest in a way that his arms never would again. But that loss was private — not something for Jimmy, or Perry, or the world to see. No, they would see the grey — the comforting material made up of a mixture of black and white. Dark pain that hinted at a brighter future.

But the sweater wouldn't be enough to warm the chill of her soul. The grey couldn't blend the line between the radiant white of life and the bleak, black reality of death. Couldn't change the dark of last night into the light of this morning. Lois looked up at the mirror, taking in the puffiness of her eyes, the red streaks that cut through the sclera like the trail of blood that must have trickled from his wounds. Her dark circles and wan, sallow skin — unmistakable evidence of her lack of sleep. Stark reminders of the nightmares that tortured her restless sleep about a man who would never wake up.

*He died trying to protect me...*

Lois closed her eyes against the memory of the fired shots that echoed in her head. She shied away from the vision of her partner falling onto the cold floor of the casino. But her heart reacted, clenching painfully in her chest as her eyes threatened to spill more tears, as her voice wanted to cry out as she had last night: *Clark...*

Of course he had stepped in front of her, intervening when the clone of John Dillinger had made a threatening pass. It was his nature — the polite, gentlemanly Kansas upbringing that she had unconsciously come to depend on, had assumed would always be by her side. His self-sacrifice had been pure instinct. And in one lousy second, Lois had lost her partner and her best friend.

*He died without ever knowing...*

Well, how could he know what she had only just learned herself? Why did that knowledge have to come at such a high cost? Lois looked away from the mirror, fearing she'd see the emotion reflected in her eyes. But the memory of his eyes played through her thoughts, sparkling at her thousands of times in the course of two years. She should have identified it then, at any of those thousands of times, and accepted it for what it was. But no, instead, she had rejected it the very first time she had spotted it, and had subconsciously been rejecting it ever since.

*Don't fall for me, farmboy...*

Too late, she realized now: he had already fallen hard. Too late, she realized last night: he had already fallen to the floor. Too late to tell him now: she had already fallen for him.

The doorbell rang — a happy tone that cruelly invited her to join the outside world when all she wanted to do was stay locked inside with her pain. There wasn't anyone she wanted to see, except the man who would never ring that bell again. Lois dragged her feet as she slowly left her bedroom. It was probably the police, who would promise to find Clark's killer and bring him to justice. But justice was black and white, marked by guilt and innocence, not the muddied shade of grey that defined

Clark's murder and would forever color her world. She didn't want to discuss justice while wrapped in funeral clothing.

A firm knock rapped against her door. “Lois, are you in there?” And another part of her soul died: her breath seized and her heart seemed to stop. Because the voice sounded just like Clark's. Justice mocked her with his velvety tenor tone, with the voice she would never hear again.

*I've been in love with you for a long time. You must have known...*

No, she hadn't known. She had chosen not to know. She had protected her heart by rejecting that knowledge, denying that she felt the same. And now it was far too late to echo his words, which would forever die mutely on her lips:

*I've been in love with you for a long time...*

Lois shuffled dejectedly towards the door, willing herself to pretend that the man at the door could ever hope to soothe an ounce of her pain. She looked through the peephole, the tiny window bridging the barrier between the light of the wider outside world and the dark of her narrowed interior one.

She caught her breath at the impossible view afforded by the peephole. And part of her refused to believe what she saw, as if the peephole had transformed into a telescope pulling in light from a faraway star, pretending that what was visible today wasn't just really the ghost of something that existed only in the past.

Lois threw the door open and gawked at her visitor; her heart was seized with a searing mixture of both joy and grief.

“Hi,” Clark quietly said with a shy smile.

Lois flung her arms around him and cried.

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Lois was touching him.

Barry closed his eyes and inhaled deeply, pulling his arms tightly around her. It had been so long since he had last held her in his embrace, but the same tingle of desire glimmered through him, as if it was part of his DNA.

Odd how his body automatically reacted to hers, he thought as Lois pulled him into her apartment, shutting the door behind them. Different from the way his body ever reacted to anyone else. And he would know, because he had had a decent sample size for comparison. Ladies liked him: the moms at the birthday parties, the women at the adult parties. They were all fun, and he liked having a good time. But they weren't special — not like she was.

Lois put her hands on his chest, as if she needed to confirm his existence. Her mouth hung slightly open in surprised elation as tears of joy glistened in her eyes. “I can't believe you're alive!”

She didn't mean him — she meant the other him. Barry slipped the front section from this morning's newspaper out of his back pocket and looked down. He had seen the small article, wedged into a three-inch column beneath the fold, that briefly laid out the cold facts of the murder of Clark Kent at the hands of, at this time, an unconfirmed gang of criminals at an illegal downtown gaming club. He hoped, for Clark's sake, that a more substantial article would run in the evening edition — that Clark's life was worth more than 100 words. He set his jaw, steeling himself to action. “I read about what happened — about Clark Kent's murder.”

Lois flinched at the mention of her partner's name and seemed to press her hands more fully into Barry's chest. He looked into her eyes, shaking his head sadly, and he said, “I just couldn't let you believe that.”

“But how?” Lois asked as she smoothed her palms down his chest and then up his arms. “God, it doesn't matter. All that matters is that you're here.” Then she pulled her arms around his waist, hugging him securely as she laid her cheek against his chest, her head tucked safely under his chin.

And Barry held her, waiting for Lois to notice the difference. Because he had pretended to be his brother before, had held and kissed her under false pretenses before, and she had noticed the difference.

But that was part of his old life, before Icarus had gotten too close to the sun and fallen back down to Earth. Part of his old life, before he stopped being defined by the expectations of a father who had taught him nothing about love, but all too much about hate. Part of his old life, when he was nothing more than a cheap knock-off without even so much as his own name.

But he was Barry now — a man with a good heart, good job, and a good life. He knew he wasn't Superman, and he certainly wasn't Clark Kent.

Barry backed away slightly from Lois' embrace, untangling her arms and taking her by the hands. He led her to the sofa and encouraged her to sit down, because people on television always seemed to think bad news was better delivered on comfy furniture. She continued to grasp his hands, though, and he kept that contact because the warm, firm grip tugged like a gravitational pull at the piece of himself that continued to be drawn to her.

He began to tell her the truth. "I'm a clone, Lois. Superman..."

She cut him off, drowning out his words with her own. "Superman found your body?" Her eyes danced up and down him, as if trying to make sense of his reanimated life. "He must have taken you to Dr. Hamilton's lab and used the same procedure that brought all the gangsters back from the dead."

Lois had supplied an answer for him, gave him a lie he could readily accept. But his old life had been built on a lie, and he didn't want to live a lie — he didn't want to lie to her.

"Lois..." he began to explain again, trying to sharply define the difference between him and the other him.

But she cut him off again. "I don't care how it happened. All that matters is that you're here." Then she let go of his hand, leaned against him, and kissed him on the mouth.

The kiss transported him through time to a year ago, when the line between him and his brother had been blurred. When his duty, the very reason for his being, had been to eliminate the competition and take its place. When he had come to this very apartment and had kissed her with the kind of intense passion that was being reflected back at him now.

He moaned softly and accepted her embrace, because kissing was fun. Barry leaned back against the arm of the couch and Lois crawled onto his lap, intent on keeping their tight connection. Her lips parted, and experience had taught him that the accompanying soft sigh was an invitation. Barry licked his tongue over her bottom lip before tilting his head and sweeping his tongue past her teeth. She deepened the kiss as she pressed her body weight more fully into his chest.

Barry threaded his fingers into the back of her hair and decided to enjoy the experience while it lasted. He compared the two kisses in his mind — the false one, when he had taken what he thought he should have — and this one, which she gave to him willingly. But there was no comparison — the wild abandon of her free will was infinitely superior.

A small corner of his mind admonished him, though, for slipping into that fuzzy boundary between brothers, tugging on the line to pull it taut once more. But it was hard to hear that inner voice when his heartbeat was pounding so loudly. And anyway, her lips would recognize the difference soon enough, and when that happened, he'd let her go.

"Oh, Clark," Lois whispered as she backed slightly away from him, breaking the blissful contact of her soft lips against his. She gently brushed her fingertips over his face, caressing his cheek and staring deeply into his undisguised eyes. "When I thought you were gone, I did some thinking about my life —

what it would be like without you in it."

Her eyes were so beautiful, the tone of her voice so heartfelt; Barry felt compelled to listen silently to what Lois had to say.

"I know our relationship has always been..." Her eyes broke contact with his as she looked away, but she took a breath and continued, "...difficult to define." She shook her head slightly, then tilted her head off to the side. "But when I thought about how much I missed you, how much I was going to miss you for the rest of my life...well, I started to think there's more to our relationship than just friendship."

Barry smiled at her innocently. "I'd like to be your friend. And it would be fun to be something more."

Lois laughed, smiling radiantly, before leaning into him again and stealing another kiss.

And as he basked in the rush of desire that flooded through his body, the warm flush of her skin against his, the soft moans and contented sighs that whispered their way into his ears, it suddenly seemed very important for Clark Kent to live. She had been so heartbroken over her partner's death, so healed by his apparent life — Barry just couldn't break her heart again.

So he blurred the line and accepted the lie, even though he knew he wasn't really Superman or Clark Kent. He was just a pale imitation who had been born in a vat.

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Clark flew through the skies of Metropolis, absolutely devastated.

Part of him wondered if strangers would be able to tell — if they could catch the emotion in his eyes. They expected their hero to be there for them, a solidly supportive defense against everything that could go terribly wrong in the world. He wondered if they knew how close to the verge of collapse he actually was.

He had flown to Smallville seeking comfort from his parents — fatherly advice and motherly love. And that's what he had received. But it just wasn't enough. Since Clark had faked his death, cradled in the arms of the woman he could love until death do them part, nothing would ever be the same.

Because Superman wasn't enough. He was enough for so many people in the world; ironic that he wasn't enough for himself.

Not surprising, really, that the public would think that saving victims from crime and natural disasters would be the sum total of everything that was personally fulfilling to him. And it was fulfilling, partially — it gave him the freedom to use his abilities, to make sense of the powers he had been born with. But Superman and his powers didn't completely define him. Because he was Clark.

Well, not anymore. Because Clark was dead.

Such a random, senseless death, brought about by his own arrogance and pride. He had stepped forward, challenged the clone of John Dillinger, a man who no doubt was used to having others back away. Clark hadn't considered the danger of confronting a criminal holding a gun because there was no danger; he did it every day without fear. But now he understood how wrong he had been, just how much he should have feared for the life of Clark Kent.

Because now he was dead. The real him, not the costumed superhero. The man who worked at the Daily Planet and went to ball games with Perry and Jimmy. The man who listened to Lois go off on weird tangents and secretly loved it. The man who secretly loved her.

But she didn't love him. Or, at least, not as anything other than a brother. Or, at least, that's what he had thought.

Clark found himself flying towards Lois' apartment, as if he were on autopilot. He had flown there last night, too. After faking his death, being tossed out of Capone's car, and ducking into an ally to change into Superman's suit, he had taken off into the

night sky, wandering aimlessly, unwilling to face his parents yet and unable to stay at the apartment that used to belong to him. So he circled the city of Metropolis until he acknowledged the building he had repeatedly surveyed. Hers. Clark had landed on her rooftop and stretched his hearing to find a connection to her, anything he could hold on to.

And he had heard her crying. Not just a few tears to acknowledge the passing of an acquaintance. Not the mournful tears that signaled the passing of a good friend. No, these were deep, racking sobs — the sounds of a woman on the verge of collapse. The desolation that comes from the sudden loss of a loved one — an empty, cavernous heart echoing the anguished cry that told the world that Lois Lane had just lost her best friend. Or, maybe, something more.

He had wanted to believe that, as he sat on her rooftop, huddled in his cape and wrapped in his pain. Had always wished she would someday look at Clark Kent the way she looked at Superman. Had looked to her to fulfill his lifetime's worth of fantasies.

But Clark was dead, and with him went their friendship and his wish for something more. His dad rightly pointed out that he could be there for her as Superman, but...no. He couldn't. It just wouldn't be the same.

Because she wasn't the same with him — the Spandex him. Superman didn't cuddle on the couch with pizza and the umpteenth viewing of her favorite movie. Superman didn't banter with her or edit her copy. Superman didn't bring her coffee or stash emergency chocolate in his desk. Superman didn't fall in love with her a thousand different ways every single day. Clark Kent did all of that.

Did, because he was dead.

But he didn't have to be, at least not to her. He could confess his secret and, maybe, keep a small piece of Clark Kent alive. If she could love him, even half as much as he loved her, well, maybe it would be enough.

If only he had done that earlier: before the faked death, before the soul-shattering sobs. The second Dillinger's gun had gone off, Clark's ingrained instinct was to protect his secret — his family's secret. But now, his choice seemed unforgivable. She would hate him for the lies he had told, the pain he had caused. Rightfully so.

But it was the right thing to do — the only thing to do. He would go to her, bare his soul, and give her the only thing he had left to give — the truth. She'd never forgive him — he didn't deserve forgiving — but he'd give her the truth anyway. Because if he loved her at all, she deserved at least that much. And she could decide to love him — half of him, anyway — or not at all.

Clark neared Lois' apartment, trying to fortify his resolve. He squelched his ingrained fear, the root cause that had caused him to cause her so much pain. He drew in a breath, floated outside the fifth floor, and looked through the window.

And he saw Lois Lane kissing Clark Kent.

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## Part 2

Lois backed away from Clark, shocked by her discovery.

She could admit to herself that she'd thought about it before, even more so now that they had become closer in recent months. She had compared Clark and Superman in her mind, though she couldn't possibly have known the truth. Really, though, the hints had been there, if she had been willing to allow herself to believe the evidence.

Clark Kent was an amazing kisser. The brief goodbye kiss during the heat wave last year? Tender and sweet. The rouse before they were pushed out of Trask's plane? Pleasurable, but just a distraction. The distraction in the Lexor Hotel? That one should have prompted her to demand more.

But even Superman's pheromone-induced kiss didn't

compare to what Clark Kent had just done to her on her couch. His strong fingers working their way through her hair, touching spots on her scalp that sent an electric zing through her nervous system. The press of his full, swollen lips against hers, and the soft moans that scattered her thoughts. His broad tongue slipping between her teeth and frantically jousting with hers.

There were no words to describe the sheer bliss of being in Clark's embrace. Though as she backed away, straightening her hair and clothing and attempting to chill her libido, Lois felt like she could get very used to sharing plenty more of these kisses in the future.

Lois took a step away from the couch, visibly eyeing a clock. She said, "We need to get back to the Daily Planet and get to the bottom of this gangster business."

She saw a flash of emotion cross his eyes, but it was too fleeting to identify. He seemed nervous. Understanding dawned on her. "Oh, of course. You need to lay low until the police catch these guys."

Clark sighed, then pushed himself off the couch. "Well, that was too good to last," he seemed to say to himself.

Lois talked over him. "You hang out here today. I'll be back as soon as I can." She picked up her keys and purse from the coffee table and took a few steps to the door.

He followed her and seemed to breathe her first name.

Lois spun to face him and pulled him into a fierce kiss, intent on imprinting the ghost of his lips in her mind, where she could bask in the memories all day. She whispered fiercely against his mouth, "I love you."

Clark smiled shyly and said, "I've been waiting to hear you say that to me my whole life."

Lois smiled, then said, "I'll be back as soon as I can." She left her apartment, walking through her building and humming softly to herself. Leaving the front entry and stepping into the morning sun, she marveled at the difference the life of one man had on her — how dreary the world had seemed without him all through the night, and how vibrant the world seemed now with the rising sun.

Lois began walking towards her Jeep's parking spot, then felt a sudden whoosh of air rush past her as Superman dropped from the sky. Her eyes widened in delight.

Superman began to speak in his serious, authoritative voice. "Lois..."

But she cut him off by pulling him into a hug. "Superman! I can never thank you enough for saving Clark's life." She squeezed him gleefully, holding tightly until she felt his reluctant arms circle loosely around her back.

He only held on for a moment before he broke the hug, placing his hands on the outsides of her upper arms. He opened his mouth to say something.

Lois cut him off again. "I've been blind to a lot of things in my life, but when those bullets hit, I finally recognized the truth." She looked Superman in the eyes. "I love Clark Kent. And I love you for bringing him back to me."

Superman stopped talking. His jaw hung open as if his ability to speak had been stripped from him. It was funny to see him like that — frozen in a rigid stupor. It was even funnier to think that she had caused that look, that she could have such a profound effect on him.

For two years, she had dreamed of affecting him — dreamed of his affection. But he had been unattainable, nothing more than a concerned friend. Or, at least, that's how he always acted. But behind the facade, if he could be honest with her about his feelings, she was just sure that she had seen flashes of more hiding behind his eyes.

He had even once admitted that he cared for her. The memory flashed through Lois' mind, paired with a familiar flash of embarrassment. If only she had recognized and acknowledged

her true feelings for Clark back then...

Lois caught her breath, steadying herself against the pang of regret. So many months wasted, pretending to love a man who was really only a friend. So many months wasted, pretending not to love a man who was really much more than a friend.

One gunshot had cemented that regret. One miracle had resurrected their future.

She was determined to hold onto that future, to honor the miracle that had brought Clark back from the dead. Determined to retire her fantasy and revel in reality. Lois cupped her left hand around the back of Superman's head, bending him down to her level. Then she kissed him on the cheek, pressing and holding her lips there, to show him the truth of her friendship for him and her gratitude for his part in bringing her true love back to her.

Lois took a step back; she saw Superman open his eyes and exhale slowly. Resolve coursed through her veins. "I've gotta go. Those gangsters are gonna wish they had never messed with Lois Lane and Clark Kent."

She smiled while taking a few backwards steps, then turned and walked away.

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"Who are you?" the stern voice boomed from behind him.

Barry turned his head towards his brother's voice and saw Superman stepping through the window of Lois' apartment. He wasn't surprised; he knew he'd inevitably have to face the man, but had hoped the confrontation would be later rather than sooner. He had hoped to have more private time with Lois first.

Barry put on his fake New Troy accent. "I'm you. Don'tcha remember?" There was a look of surprise in Clark's eyes, similar to the look that Sammy had given him when he had used the accent in the talent agent's office yesterday. After Lois and Clark had left Sammy's office, his old friend had looked at him oddly and had asked, "What was that about?" Barry had laughed, saying he was just being funny, and Sammy had laughed along with him, mocking his horribly fake accent.

But Barry had kept the real reason for the accent to himself — the flash of panic he had felt upon entering the office and seeing two people he hadn't expected to see up close again. Something instinctively urged him to protect his secret — conceal his identity. And the embarrassingly bad accent had spilled out of his mouth.

Ironic, then, that he could condemn his brother for keeping secrets, too. Barry chose not to analyze that irony too closely.

Superman looked at him curiously and asked with a wary tone, "Barry?"

Barry gave a mock bow and said, "At your service."

Superman crossed the living room to stand next to Barry. His eyes betrayed his confusion even as he affected his typically impassive stance. "What are you doing?"

Barry stood up from the couch, picking up his copy of the Daily Planet. He lost the fake accent. "No, Clark, what are you doing?" He slapped the newspaper into Clark's stomach.

Clark caught the paper with his right hand and held it against himself for a moment. Then he took the paper into his hands, glancing down at the front cover to the only article that seemed relevant. He set the newspaper down on the end table, then asked with a soft tone that was full of fear, "Who are you, really?"

"I'm you. Don't you remember?" Barry said softly, innocently, and with a trace of sadness.

Maybe it was the childlike quality he had let creep back into his voice that proved to be the necessary clue. Recognition registered in Clark's eyes as he cocked his head and asked, "Brother?"

Barry nodded. "Honestly, I was surprised you didn't recognize me in Sammy's office." He made a point of looking up and down the suit. "I recognized you."

Clark circled Barry, examining him as if there was some way

to independently verify his claim. "Well, to be fair, I thought you were..."

"Dead?" Barry supplied the word.

Clark's eyes flicked away; just a fraction of a second in time was enough to see the mixture of emotions that had flashed through him. "Yeah," he said quietly.

Barry put his hands in his pockets and shrugged. "I guess I'm as dead as Clark Kent is."

Clark's impassive stance crumbled; his spine lost Superman's rigidity as he seemed to sink into himself. "What happened to you?"

Barry's eyes searched up and away for the memory. "I was heading for the sun, in excruciating pain, but determined to make it. As I flew closer, the sun kept feeling hotter and brighter, and the pain grew more and more intense. At some point, I passed out. I don't remember exactly what happened after that, if I fell or if I somehow unconsciously flew back home. The next thing I knew, I was lying in the middle of Centennial Park."

Clark listened silently but nodded, urging Barry to continue his story.

"I don't know how long I had been lying there; I just knew I wasn't in pain. I've thought about it a lot since then. I always seem to feel better when I've been out in the sun all day. It's like it recharges me."

Clark agreed. "I get my powers from the sun."

"Oh. My father..." Barry grimaced, because that phrase touched too closely to the life he had left behind. "Lex Luthor always kept me inside. Maybe he didn't understand how I worked." He offered a wry smile. "How we work. Or maybe the sun healed me. Anyway, however it happened, I'm still here."

Clark leaned against the couch, his body language less guarded, as if Barry had earned a measure of trust. "So where have you been?"

"Around." Barry smiled and winked. "Pretending to be you. It pays more than you'd think."

Clark rolled his eyes, but then tightened his lips as if he had forgotten that he had no reason to smile. "You know, you could've come to see me anytime. Why haven't you showed up until...now?" Clark glanced down at the newspaper when he said that last word.

He sighed and tried to explain. "Because I'm not him... that...I'm not you. I'm Barry now. And I like my life. I have fun. But when I saw that..." Barry pointed to the article.

He couldn't explain — Clark didn't deserve an explanation. Barry felt a year's worth of emotions consume him. The dreams he had had of her, tucked under his body and pressing her warm lips against his. Her radiant smile, when she had thought he was someone else. Oh, she was so hot. After an entire year, a lifetime away from that moment, Lois Lane was still unforgettable.

So when he had walked into Sammy's office and had seen her, sitting next to the other him — well, he could acknowledge his jealousy. But he was resigned to it — Lois belonged to Clark. That hadn't stopped him from smirking as he looked through her shirt, though.

And it would have been okay — Barry could have happily gone back to his regular life — until Lois took a picture of Superman out of her purse. Absurd, he had thought. Clark was her partner — he was sitting right next to her. If they were together, she would have a photo of Clark in her wallet instead.

So it was clear he hadn't told her, that she didn't know the most important thing about him. His brother was an absolute coward.

But the final straw was the article in this morning's paper. That's when Barry had gotten angry, and he felt the emotion build inside him again. Clark Kent had faked his own death. Lois Lane, who Barry would willingly treasure with everything he had, was sad because his brother was a liar. And, impulsively, Barry had

flown to Lois' apartment ready to tell her the truth.

Barry straightened his spine and removed all traces of his jovial personality from his face. "When I saw the article, it seemed obvious that you hadn't told her about you. Otherwise, why would she have had a picture of Superman in her purse?"

Clark stood up straight, squaring his shoulders. "So, what, you were just going to sweep in here and take over my life?"

"I don't want your life. I don't want to be Clark Kent. I told her I was a clone. It's not my fault she didn't ask a follow-up question."

Clark narrowed his eyes. "So you just want her."

And something in the way Clark looked at him, the evident jealousy burning behind his eyes, irked Barry. How arrogant that Clark believed he had an exclusive right to Lois. "Why not?" Barry asked, intending to wound Clark where it would hurt the most. "If you don't want to love her, then I will. And it's obvious you don't want her or you wouldn't have faked your death."

"I didn't have a choice!" Clark raised his voice in a pitch of despair. "Some people would go to any lengths to find a way to hurt me." Clark set his jaw. "You know that better than anyone."

"So you get an exclusive hold on her? You won't have her, but no one else can either?" Barry scoffed. "That's so arrogant." "I love her."

"Not enough to be honest with her."

"So now you're my moral judge? You get to decide when I tell her the truth?"

"The truth that Clark's alive? She already knows that. And I guess I don't need to tell her the truth about Superman. You know, I thought there was only room in this world for one of us. But maybe I was wrong."

Clark put his hands on his hips. "We may have the same DNA, but our memories, our experiences make us different. You can't just decide to be me."

"No, I'm not you." Now Barry put his hands on his hips. "I'm better than you. Because I threw away my life as a superman out of love for my brother, but you threw away your life as Clark for nothing."

"Get out," Clark said with a tone of menace he probably effectively wielded against everyone else.

Barry set his jaw, unwilling to be intimidated. "Make me."

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"What the hell is going on here?" Lois shouted from her doorway.

Clark and Barry froze. Clark's arm was wrapped around Barry's neck, gripping him in a headlock, and Barry's leg was locked around Clark's, pinning him to the ground. Clark couldn't imagine how shocking it must look to Lois to see Superman and Clark fighting like characters from the World Wrestling Federation.

Clark followed Lois' eyes as she scanned the room. The apartment was in shambles; furniture overturned, holes in the drywall. Clark and Barry had been fighting, and the evidence was strewn about the room. He was breathing hard, muscles exhausted, desperately tired. Though Clark had easily defeated Barry a year ago, they were more than evenly matched now.

Clark released Barry and used the remainder of his energy to swirl around the apartment and right Lois' furniture. He set a broken lamp carefully onto a table with an embarrassed wince. "I'm so sorry."

Barry muttered, "That's coming out of your paycheck."

Clark turned to glare at his brother, but the odd smile tugging at Barry's lip betrayed his amusement and the look in his eye suddenly dissipated the conflict between them. Somehow, fighting his brother had cleared the air between them and oddly left him in a place of contentment.

Spontaneously, they both laughed at the absurdity of the situation.

Lois looked back and forth between the two of them, her eyes wide with surprise. "Care to explain?"

Clark looked at Barry to see if he was going to speak. Barry looked back at him, silently communicating his support. Clark nodded slightly, acknowledging to both Barry and himself that it was time to end the lies.

Barry pointed at him. "He's Clark."

Clark pointed at Barry. "He's Superman."

Barry's voice dipped in astonishment. "I am *not* Superman!"

Clark shrugged. "Well, you could be."

Barry shook his head. "But I don't want to be Superman."

Clark smiled. "It might be nice to have a vacation every once in a while."

Barry rolled his eyes. "I get paid by the hour."

Lois interjected. "Geez, you two fight like brothers." Her eyes widened as she looked back and forth between the two of them. "That's why you can always get ahold of Superman so quickly."

Clark stepped forward. "No, Lois. We're not brothers. Not really." He looked at Barry, who shrugged his shoulders and silently seemed to communicate what seemed to be a signal of acceptance. Then he continued, "But he's like a brother to me. He's a clone. He was made using cells from hair that I donated to a charity auction last year. Do you remember?"

Lois felt a flutter of fear as she took a step back away from both of them.

Barry held up his hands. "I apologize for that. My behavior last year was unacceptable. But to be fair, I was only a few days old at the time."

Lois said, "I really need someone to explain to me what's going on, right now."

Clark seemed to draw in a breath, then gestured his hand towards the clone. "Lois, this is Barry. He was cloned by Lex Luthor, who used him to try and hurt me. But he's been working as a Superman look-alike for the past year and really has changed the way he sees the world."

Lois glanced back, then asked in a voice that seemed to indicate she already knew the answer, "Then why does he look so much like Clark?"

Clark drew in a breath again, trying to push past his evident fear. "Because I'm Clark."

Lois stood silently, processing the information

"I know I should have told you..." Clark began stammering in a nervous rush.

But Lois silenced him with one upturned hand, turning to Barry instead. "So why haven't I seen you flying around lately?" Then she narrowed her eyes. "Or have I?"

Barry shook his head. "The first time I've seen you in the past year was at Sammy's office. I swear. I'm not Superman and I don't want to be him. In fact, I almost never even use his powers. Ever since I found out the truth about who I am, I've been laying low and learning that the real world is nothing like Lex Luthor taught me to believe. And I've had a happy life, just being me."

Lois whipped around suddenly to face Clark. "And you! You've let me think you're two different people for two years. You let me believe that you died in my arms!"

"I didn't know what else to do! I had to pretend I was dead or everyone would know I was Superman. Now everything I've worked for...my job, my friends, my life...is over."

"You should have told me!"

"I know. I've known it for so long. I wish I had. I just..." Clark smoothed his hands over his hair. "I've just screwed this up so badly."

Clark could see a tear shining in Lois' eye as she puffed angry, heavy breaths. Then she looked at the floor, shaking her head as if she was engaging in an argument with herself. Clark watched silently, giving her time and space to process his secret.

After a few minutes, Lois took a few tentative steps towards Barry and lowered her voice, even though it was now clear that Clark would be able to hear what she said anyway. She whispered harshly to Barry, “You shouldn’t have let me kiss you!”

Barry couldn’t seem to prevent a slight smile from curling the corner of his lip. “You’re kind of hard to resist.”

Lois let a small laugh slip at the compliment.

Barry leaned in and quietly said next to her ear, “He’s a good man. Don’t be too hard on him. This secret we share is kind of a heavy burden to bear.”

Lois reached out and held Barry’s hand, squeezing it lightly. “I think you’ve grown into a pretty decent guy.” She smiled and then said, “Don’t be a stranger, okay?”

Barry winked and said, “Oh, I’ll be around.” Then he nodded a goodbye to Clark, who returned the gesture.

Lois kissed Barry on the cheek; he hugged her tightly before letting her go. He hung his head as he walked to the apartment door. Barry opened the door, but paused, then looked back at the two of them with a sad smile and said, “Who knows? Maybe someday I’ll find my own Lois Lane.”

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The door closed behind Barry and the apartment suddenly seemed very quiet. “So…” Lois said.

“Yeah.” Clark’s eyes were cast downward like a small child waiting to be punished.

Silence stretched through the tense atmosphere of the apartment. She felt awkward standing near him without the usual easy camaraderie they typically shared. Lois moved to the couch and sat down. ‘Superman is Clark and Clark is Superman and Barry is just Barry.’ Odd how the existence of a clone seemed like the easiest idea to accept.

Clark shifted restlessly; it seemed strange to see Superman project anything other than confidence. “I’m just gonna go,” he said as he made a fractional movement towards the window.

“No,” Lois said softly. She saw him freeze. “Stay.” She shifted over on the couch to leave room, hinting that he should sit beside her.

She saw Clark hesitate, but then he complied, slowly walking around the couch and sitting on the cushion beside her. The cape was tucked underneath him, and he shifted uncomfortably, tugging as if it felt wrong to be sitting on top of it.

She watched him out of the corner of her eye. It did feel wrong for him to be sitting on the cape. Superman flies and stands and saves the day — he doesn’t lounge about like everyone else. Watching the man she thought she knew so well, just sitting there in those vibrant primary colors...it just somehow seemed wrong. “Can you just take off those clothes?” she asked. And then she felt a flash of guilt for wishing she had asked him that under entirely different circumstances.

He looked down at himself, his eyebrows knit in concern. “Oh. Yeah.” He stood, took a few steps away from her, and then stopped, as if he was unsure of what to do. Then he closed his eyes, sighed, and spun — a whirlwind of colors coalesced, transforming the superhero into her best friend.

And the awkward silence returned, settling on the two of them as Clark stood in front of her, shifting in place uncomfortably. The motion suited the man better in his more casual state of dress. Lois nudged her head sideways, mutely inviting him to sit back down. And again, he complied; it felt like he’d comply with whatever she wished for.

Clark again lowered his eyes to the floor. “I’m sorry,” he said in a voice filled with not only sorrow, but also with shame and regret. “I’m sorry that I hid the truth, that I wasn’t strong enough to be totally honest with you. And I can’t even begin to apologize for last night. That I let you think I had died in your arms — how I hurt you so badly. It’s unforgivable.”

Lois released a breath. “Yeah, it was pretty bad,” she said

with a tightness in her throat.

“I know. I was just…” Clark shook his head, as if he was arguing with himself. “It doesn’t matter. There’s no excuse.”

Lois’ throat constricted and she nodded her head. “That’s true.”

Clark rubbed his eyes with his palms, then seemed to make a decision. “I should just go.”

“No. Stay. I still want you…” Her throat caught on the words that most of her still wished were said under different circumstances. “Here. I still want you here.”

“And I want to be here. With you. Always.”

“You should know…” Lois took a calming breath to gather courage. “Even after all of this…” Lois’ voice got very quiet. “I still have feelings for you.”

Clark caught his breath, then asked, “Like a brother?”

Lois looked away and admitted, “No, not like a brother.”

His eyebrows raised just slightly and the hint of a smile could be seen at the corner of his mouth. But he bit his lower lip to contain it. Then he said, “I’ve lied to you once before. After Lex...when I took it back. I’ve never stopped.”

Lois looked up and into his eyes. She caught his meaning — thought back to that time and what had led up to it. “Oh,” she said as she remembered the confessions she had made to both halves of him. A look of guilt crossed her face. “I understand why you didn’t tell me right away.”

“Lois…” He seemed to say her name as if he treasured it. Clark placed his hand over hers; the connection felt like them — like what they were and what they could be again. She didn’t pull away.

Lois dared to look deeply into Clark’s eyes, wanting to see him without any deception between them. What she saw there, combined with what she felt inside, gave her hope that they could get past the hurt they had both caused the other.

She placed her left hand on top of his and rubbed gently. “Come on,” she said, indicating the apartment’s front door with a nudge of her head. “We’ve got bad guys to catch.”

They released their hands and stood up. Lois started towards the door and Clark followed behind, guiding her with his hand at the small of her back. The familiar feeling made her smile, but she quickly suppressed it as she looked meaningfully at her partner. “Could you just give me one day to hold onto my righteous indignation?”

Clark released her and pushed his hands into his pockets like a child caught with a pilfered cookie. “Yeah, I can do that.”

Lois slid her hand against Clark’s cheek; he froze and looked adoringly at her, as if he was hoping she’d understand everything he felt for her. She slid her hand into his hair, then raised onto her toes and kissed him lightly on the lips.

And she knew they’d be okay.

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## Epilogue

### *One Year Later...*

Centennial Park was his favorite place in the world.

Barry smiled and tipped his head in thanks as he received his hot dog from the vendor. The park was brimming with the simple pleasures of life that Barry enjoyed surrounding himself with so much. He strolled along the dirt paths that led deeper into the park, looking for an open bench where he could sit and eat his lunch.

‘Life is interesting,’ Barry thought as he watched the people of Metropolis enjoying the bright, sunny day. He’d eat his lunch, and then he’d strip off his shirt, lay in the grass, and let the sun’s rays soak into his skin, recharging his energy, regenerating his cellular structure, bringing that sense of peace and contentment he always felt here in his happy place.

Barry wandered near the park’s large pond, watching couples laugh as they floated on their paddle boats. Children played at the

edge of the water, tossing bread crumbs at the ducks and squealing with sudden fear as the ducks came waddling out of the water, honking and squawking in their aggravated cries for more food. His eyes scanned the perimeter of the pond until they rested on a woman sitting hunched over, sadly gazing out at the water.

His stomach flipped, because it always flipped when he saw her. And though he hadn't seen her since he had walked out of her apartment a year earlier, that part of his DNA, the part of him that irrationally seemed to belong to her, instantly recognized Lois Lane.

Barry froze in place, surreptitiously observing her while he decided what to do next. She looked desperately sad, with a lost frown that seemed in odd contrast to her vibrantly orange outfit. The white crop top jacket she wore was filthy, which made him think that perhaps she had just come from an undercover investigation that had gone terribly wrong. A part of his soul ached, and he felt himself walk towards her, pulled by an invisible magnetic force.

Barry halted beside her and said, with a voice he hoped sounded like casual friendship rather than desperate longing, "Hey, Lois! What are you doing here?"

She looked up at him, squinting slightly against the sunlight. "Oh. Hi, Clark." Her eyebrows wrinkled in confusion, then she looked out at the pond. "I was just so hungry. But I don't see any frogs."

An odd thing to say, thought Barry as he sat down beside her. He offered her his hot dog. "Here, have this."

She smiled and took the food graciously. She bit into it and her eyes closed as if she savored the taste. And Barry watched her chew thoughtfully, enjoying the pleasure of her company. Comfortable silence stretched between them and he tried — he really tried — to stop his mind from making more of that than there really was.

But it was too easy to imagine how it would taste to lick the drop of mustard off the corner of her mouth. To gently push her backwards onto the soft grass, hitch his leg over hers, and engage in a shameless public display of affection. To hold her forever and bask in her glowing love.

Barry darted his eyes away, putting his fantasies back inside his guilty heart. Lois loved his brother, not the pale imitation.

He tried to find a safer topic of conversation. Once again, he cast his eye over her filthy clothing. "What happened to you?" he asked.

She finished the hot dog and looked down at herself. "I must have passed out. When I woke up, there was so much rubble around me, like the tunnel had collapsed. It took me hours to get out of there."

Barry's left hand automatically reached out to touch her knee, placing his palm gently against her skin as a gesture of support. "Are you okay?" Barry blinked as his x-ray vision kicked in — and he was shocked, because he rarely ever used the gifts he thought rightfully belonged to his brother. But he scanned her skeletal system and, by his admittedly unpracticed eye, Lois didn't seem to have any broken bones.

She put the fingertips of her left hand to her temple in a gesture of confusion. "I think so." Then she glanced off to her left, as if she was gazing back to wherever she had been when she had gotten hurt. "Lex is still down there, though. I'm pretty sure he's dead."

Barry reeled back at the name. She must have meant his father, but that was impossible, because Lex Luthor was dead. But even the thought of his name brought back a flood of memories. His childhood — the lessons Luthor had taught him about life. The circumstances of his very existence. A small, smug smile tugged at the corner of his lip at the thought of how disappointed Lex Luthor would be with his son, and how satisfied Barry was with the man he had become.

Lois looked back at the ground, pulling blades of grass absently from the lawn. "Doesn't matter anyway. I'll be dead in a few days, too."

Pain squeezed his heart, and his hand again reached out to her of its own volition. Lightly gripping her arm, Barry asked, "Why would you say that?"

Lois tilted her head as she turned to look at him. Her beautiful face was creased with sorrow. "I already told you. Lex cloned me ten days ago. He says I only have two weeks, tops."

And the pain in Barry's heart shattered, replaced with a rush of emotion he stopped himself from identifying. "You're a clone? You're not Lois Lane?" he gasped.

She shook her head as the expression on her face changed to light annoyance. "Don't make fun of me."

Barry stopped breathing; his hands came up to caress her face. And he watched her eyes — her beautiful, luminous eyes — as she gazed back at him. An emotion was hiding there — the emotion he had always hoped he'd one day see.

He bent forward, captured by the ingrained feelings for her that he had had his entire life. Barry kissed her, pressing his lips passionately against hers.

Barry felt her body freeze in surprise for a moment, but then her arms wrapped around his back and she leaned into his embrace. He darted his tongue across her lips, and she responded by parting her lips and moaning a soft sigh. And he was thrilled, because kissing was fun.

They broke apart slightly and Barry slid his hands down to encircle her waist. His eyes widened with delight as he told her, "Lex Luthor lied to me about that lifespan thing, too. And I've been around for a lot longer than two weeks."

Her eyes lit up and sparkled, and her mouth turned into a smile with the brightest of wattages — a smile that could recharge him as effectively as the light of the sun. For the first time ever, Barry felt complete.

He smiled and confessed to the love of his life, "But I'm not Clark Kent. You can call me Barry."

THE END