

# Worth the Risk

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Summary: Valentine's Day 1995. With her ex-fiance back from the dead and behind bars, Lois has to decide if falling for Clark is worth the risk.

"The Phoenix" aired on February 12. Assuming the action stopped on that Sunday, Valentine's Day was on Tuesday.

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*LUTHOR ALIVE AND BEHIND BARS! Superman Thwarts Luthor's Suicide Attempt*

That headline and its accompanying story had lurked in the back of Lois' thoughts for the past twenty-four hours. She still wasn't sure how she felt — if she even felt anything. When Lex had first reappeared she had been stunned and more than a little frightened by his apparent obsession with her. By the time Superman marched Lex out of the tunnels yesterday, Lois had stopped feeling anything at all.

Maybe the shock had numbed her? Whatever it was, it had been good insulation. She had gone back to the Planet as if it were any other day. She and Clark had written up the story and she had gone home with that air of clinical detachment still firmly in place.

After Perry's strict order not to show up at work, Lois started out Monday morning with a brisk jog. She showered and then spent the afternoon at the Metropolitan Gallery. It had been ages since she had taken any time off to play tourist in the city. She was starting to warm to the idea of having a few days off to recharge when she stopped short in front a Vermeer, caught off guard by the discreet plaque underneath that read "A gift from the collection of Lex Luthor".

She stumbled backwards, landing gracelessly on a bench in the middle of the suddenly-stuffy room. All the questions she should have been asking herself came to her in a rush. What had Lex planned to do once he'd retrieved his fortune? It seemed impossible that he would have quietly retired to somewhere without an extradition treaty. Where was Nigel St. John now and what plans did he have for the chunk of kryptonite he'd stolen from Lex? Why hadn't she screamed for Superman the moment Lex first showed up again, instead of letting him go free? Then again, what was one more poor decision on Lex's behalf?

When it came right down to it, she had let herself be seduced by the idea that a billionaire philanthropist was in love with her. She had refused to listen to Clark and Perry when they tried to warn her that Lex was a cold-blooded sociopath.

Once she started cataloging all the bad decisions she had made over the past year, Lois couldn't seem to stop. She left the Gallery and headed for home, still deep in thought. Lex was only the tip of the iceberg. She had thrown herself at Superman after her crush on him reached desperation levels. Her mind skittered away from thinking about that one too much. Knowing that she could never have him only made him that much more tantalizing. Especially since, despite his claims that they could only be friends, she doubted very much that he hung out in other women's apartments with the frequency that he did in hers.

By the time she got home she was castigating herself for the extra five pounds she had put on over the holidays and still hadn't lost. She had made a resolution this year to eat healthy or at least to stop eating anything that came out of a vending machine. Lois took the stairs instead of the elevator. That was another one of her resolutions that she had only sort of heeded. From now on, she would only take the stairs. Unless she had an armful of groceries.

She opened her front door and the first thing that caught her eye was the trophy case containing her Kerths. She slammed the door shut as she remembered how she had lost a Kerth to Clark a few months ago. Hell, she had let Clark beat her to at least three different stories in just the last month alone. In the end, those stories all got published under their shared by-line, but the angle and the majority of the legwork had been Clark's. She was obviously slipping.

The fact that tomorrow was Valentine's Day was only more fuel for her pity party. Here she was, on the slow, inexorable slide towards 30, and she had nothing to show for it aside from a job she loved and a few journalism awards. Somehow that didn't seem like much when all she came home to at night was a fish tank.

The fish weren't going to give her chocolates tomorrow. She was going to end up spending the evening alone cleaning the grout in her bathroom. Lois took a deep breath and asked herself what her ideal scenario for Valentine's Day would be. She quickly discounted the fantasy of Superman flying her to a deserted island for a night of passion.

*Be realistic, she told herself. Think of something that's much more likely to happen.*

Clark still owed her a date. Their first attempt had been a disaster, of course. Clark spent hundreds of dollars on concert tickets that went to Jimmy. Before the food poisoning set in, they had spent the evening watching a lawyer get ready for bed. All in all, it had been a very poor return for taking such a huge risk.

Why was she even thinking about dating another co-worker? Sure, Clark wasn't Claude. The two were as different as night and day. Claude had been all attitude and flash and she always felt on-edge around him. Clark's calm demeanor made her feel less anxious, at least most of the time. Sometimes Clark's levelheaded approach to problem solving made her want to scream and throw things at him. But when he wasn't driving her crazy — and sometimes even while he was — Clark's smile never failed to make her knees go weak. Most days she actually resented him for it.

Even knowing that Clark was going to be the next in a long list of mistakes didn't lessen his appeal. It actually made him that much more tempting. And the man was already tempting. The remembrance of Clark in a skintight t-shirt two nights earlier still gave her hot flashes. The memory of him carrying her to the bedroom door was enough to make her brain short circuit. God help her, she wanted him.

And that was the problem. It would be perfect if they started dating and it all worked out. Experience told her that was just as much a fantasy as any of her daydreams about Superman. In the real world things rarely worked out. Best friends became bitter enemies. Fish didn't have a very long life expectancy. The man who promised to love, honor and cherish you would haggle over alimony in divorce court. A handsome face could hide a vicious sociopath. Sources switched their allegiances and left you out in the cold and, pretty soon, you were nothing but a hack reporter writing stringers for a tabloid.

The back of her throat tightened unexpectedly and she choked on a sob. Lois mentally shook herself. It was pointless to cry. Crying wasn't going fix anything. It wasn't going to fix Lex or Superman or Claude or Clark or bring back the Kerth she had failed to win. Crying was weaklings. She hadn't cried since... Lois tried to remember the last time.

Her wedding day.

In a rush it all came back to her. Only tonight Clark wasn't there to hold her and whisper comforting words. Eventually she was going to mess things up with him and she'd never be held in his arms again. The thought of that future loss struck her like a sledgehammer. Lois made a keening noise and tried to hold back. Another sob caught in her throat and she gave in, burying her face in her hands as her shoulders shook.

It felt good to let it all out. She cried for Lex and her own stupidity. She cried for Superman and the fact that she could never have him. She cried for Clark and the fact that she wanted more than friendship from him.

Once her tears abated, she swiped at her nose with her sleeve and lurched towards the kitchen to make a cup of tea. Lois took a few deep, calming breaths as she waited for the water to boil. She was definitely going to work tomorrow, and to hell with Perry telling her to take a few days off. If one day off was making her this maudlin and stir crazy, a couple more days could only lead to her being committed.

A soft knock on her living room window startled her. Lois froze. Superman obviously knew she was home. She couldn't go quiet and fool him into flying away. Had he heard her crying?

Lois dabbed at her eyes with a dish towel before heading for the window. When she parted the curtains Superman's expression was so concerned that she knew for certain he'd heard her crying. For a fleeting moment she thought about how nice it would feel to have Superman hold her. Then she realized how pathetic that was and her mood turned darker.

"May I come in?" he asked, his voice muffled by the glass pane between them.

Lois couldn't think of a good reason why not, so she opened the window and gestured for him to enter.

"Is this a bad time?" he asked as he came inside. "I was in the neighborhood and saw your light was on."

That was a promising start. He wasn't asking outright what was wrong, so maybe they could pretend her red eyes were from allergies. "I was just making some tea. Would you like a cup?"

"Sure, if it's not too much trouble."

"No trouble at all." Lois headed for the kitchen and busied herself getting another mug from the cupboard. It never failed to amaze her how much larger than life Superman was up close and personal.

"I'm sorry about yesterday," Superman said quietly. "We never really got a chance to talk after Luthor was arrested."

Lois stared at the kettle, willing it to boil. "That's because there was nothing to talk about."

Superman cleared his throat softly. "I know you cared about him, Lois. I'm sorry."

A sob bubbled up inside her, but luckily it escaped as a choked-sounding laugh. "No! That's just it! I never did. I'm a terrible person."

"No, you're not."

Lois steadfastly refused to turn and face him. She was certain she'd start crying again if he looked even halfway sympathetic.

"Yes, I am. I never loved Lex. I loved the idea of him, but not him. And the whole time I was engaged to him there was this perfectly wonderful guy who I ignored because I'd much rather marry someone I didn't love than risk falling for someone who could really hurt me."

Superman had gone completely silent behind her. Lois wondered what he must think of her now but she didn't want to turn around and find out. Her gaze fixed on the wisps of steam that were starting to escape from the kettle. "I don't know what to do," she whispered.

"About what?" he asked, just as quietly.

"I think I've fallen for Clark," she admitted. "And I'm scared to death because he's going to hurt me."

She heard Superman take in a breath and let it out. "I— Clark would never hurt you."

"Not on purpose, no." Lois finally turned to face him as she tried to explain. "But, trust me, he's going to hurt me or I'm going to hurt him. It's inevitable."

Superman looked confused. "Why would you think that?"

"Because we're friends. And we work together. And now we're sorta dating." To her horror, her eyes welled up with fresh tears and her voice became a hoarse whisper. "Clark is the best thing that's ever happened to me. And I'm going to ruin it. I always do. If Clark was smart, he never would have asked me out."

"If you're so certain it won't end well, why did you agree to go out with him?"

"Because he's Clark. Because there's this little, teeny, tiny piece of me that thinks it could actually work with him. But is he really worth the risk?"

"You're the only one who can answer that, Lois."

The tea kettle started to whistle, but Lois ignored it. "What if Clark doesn't think I'm worth the risk?"

"He asked you out. I'd say he's willing to take that risk."

Lois shrugged. "I guess."

Superman was starting to look uncomfortable. "You should really talk to Clark about this."

Irritated by this suggestion and the scream of the kettle, Lois turned off the burner and moved the kettle. "I can't. At least not right now."

"Why not?"

Lois gaped at him. Surely even Superman wasn't really this dense. "Don't you know what tomorrow is?"

He hesitated for a moment. "Tuesday?"

"Besides that." She gestured for him to guess again.

"Oh," he said. "Valentine's Day."

"Exactly. It's the wrong day to ask someone you haven't even really dated where he sees the relationship going."

"So be honest with him. Tell him you think it would be better if you two were just friends."

"But I don't want to be just his friend," she admitted miserably. "I want to be his... everything. All of it. I just don't want him to be my everything." Lois gulped in a breath as she realized it was far too late for that. "Only... he already is."

Superman's expression softened. "Do you know what I've always admired about you, Lois?"

"What?"

"The way you jump in, no-holds-barred, to follow your instincts."

Lois sputtered out a laugh and shook her head in disbelief. The consequences of her knee-jerk reactions were exactly why he'd heard her crying earlier.

"You're not afraid to take chances. I always have to be so careful." He flexed his hands as if he regretted their strength.

"You have a gift, Lois."

She stared at him. This was a side to Superman she had never considered. She had envied his superpowers since the moment they met, but it had never occurred to her that he might find them a burden.

Through the still-open window the shrill blare of a siren started up from not too far away. Superman's head tilted, but his eyes never left hers. "Take a chance, Lois. Call him."

"And say what?"

"Surely you can say anything to your best friend."

"Even the scary stuff?"

"Especially the scary stuff." The siren screamed past her window and Superman followed it, leaving a rush of air in his wake.

Lois stood there for nearly a minute, considering her options. It would be great to hear Clark's voice right now. It would be

even better to see him. Superman was right — she should take a chance. Lois grabbed her coat and car keys and headed for the door.

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The drive to Clark's apartment seemed to take forever. Twice Lois almost turned around to return home, but she would have been stuck in the same rush-hour traffic with nothing to show for it so she persevered. It took her another frustrating ten minutes of circling his neighborhood to find a place to park.

She could see lights on in Clark's loft as she got closer. He was home then. A little part of her had sort of hoped to find the place dark. Lois climbed the stairs slowly, still desperately trying to figure out what she was going to say. In a perfect world she wouldn't have to say anything. They'd sit on his sofa and watch a movie while she soaked in his calming vibes. Spending an evening with Clark was better than yoga for her blood pressure.

What if she lost that? What if she ruined the easy companionship they currently shared? Clark had assured her when he asked her out that, if it bombed, they'd always be friends. But what if that wasn't possible? Clark had admitted that he, too, was afraid that everything would change between them if they started dating. She had been relieved by that confession. It meant that Clark valued their friendship as much as she did. Surely, together, they could find some way to make it work?

"Take a chance," she whispered to herself outside his door. "You can say anything to your best friend."

Her stomach fluttered nervously as she knocked on his door. The filmy curtains over the windows distorted her view but she could see a shadow inside detach and move toward her. For half a second she was tempted to turn around and run.

Then Clark opened the door and his face lit up with the smile that always made her knees weak. In addition to the smile he was wearing jeans and dark gray t-shirt that was every bit as form fitting as the one he'd worn on their almost date. For a second or two she wasn't sure she could remember how to breathe.

"Hi!" She barely managed to squeak out that single syllable.

"Lois, hi!" He opened the door wider and gestured for her to come inside.

"I don't know about you, but I'm going stir crazy after just one day off." Lois entered and took the stairs slowly, willing her legs not to shake.

"What have you been up to today?" he asked when he caught up to her at the bottom of the stairs.

"Me? Oh, I went for jog. Visited the Metro Gallery. Alphabetized my spices." Lois decided it was more prudent to skip mentioning her nervous breakdown in favor of making herself sound domestically appealing.

Clark fought a grin. "How many spices do you have that you'd need to alphabetize them?"

Lois knew he was teasing her, but she decided to play it straight and not give him the satisfaction of catching her outright in a lie. "I don't know. I didn't count them. More than ten, but fewer than twenty is my best guess, thank you very much."

"More than ten? Seriously?"

She frowned at him. Was he mocking her? She was too far into her story to back out gracefully at this point. "My mom gave me a spice collection from some fancy cooking store last year for my birthday. The woman is nothing if not subtle."

He raised one eyebrow in skepticism. "So you've actually used them?"

Lois hadn't, but she wasn't about to admit that. "If I wasn't using them, they wouldn't be all mixed up and I'd find the one I was looking for a lot faster."

Clark nodded, apparently unable to argue with her logic. "Sure," he said genially.

"How many spices do you have?" she asked defensively.

Clark looked thoughtful. "I don't know. I've never actually

counted them."

She felt a momentary twinge of irritation mixed with envy. Of course Clark had spices. He probably actually used them, too.

"I can go count them, if it means that much to you." Clark glanced in the direction of his kitchen, and Lois wondered if he really cared how many spices he had or if he was simply humoring her.

"Nah." She walked over to his sofa and flopped down onto it. The television was on, although she hadn't realized it until just now because the volume was turned down so low. One look at the score and it was obvious why he wasn't listening to the game. The Nets were behind by over twenty points.

Clark headed into his kitchen and opened the refrigerator. "Can I get you something to drink?" he asked.

"What have you got?" With his back to her, she was afforded an unobstructed — and unobserved — view of his backside. Her eyes widened, uncertain what to ogle first — shoulders, back, or butt.

"Milk. Orange juice. Half a bottle of red wine." Clark looked over his shoulder, waiting for her answer.

Lois quickly lifted her gaze to his face. "That's it?"

"I meant to go shopping today, but I never got to the store. I can run out and grab something if you want." He started to close the refrigerator door.

That was all Lois needed to make her evening complete — to see Clark leave on yet another errand. "No, let's finish the wine. Unless you were saving it for something?"

He grinned. "Maybe I was saving it for you."

Lois rolled her eyes and wondered if he had construed her request for wine as some kind of romantic overture. How romantic could half an already-opened bottle be, anyway?

Clark grabbed two wine glasses and the bottle and joined her on the couch. He poured each of them a little wine and held a glass out to her. Lois fixed her eyes on the basketball game and took a sip for courage.

Still not taking her gaze off the television, she decided to cut to the chase and get to the reason for her visit. "So, uh, I know I was supposed to call you about rescheduling our date, but maybe we could talk about that while we're hanging out tonight?"

"Sure." He set his wine glass down and leaned back, settling comfortably into the couch.

Well... good. This was off to a casual kind of start. Lois took another sip. "We can do it after the game is over, if you want to finish watching it first."

Clark picked up the remote and clicked the television off. "This game has been over for a while now."

Even though the volume had been on low, his apartment felt awkwardly quiet now that the television was off. Lois went to set her wine glass down but the base ended up partially on top of a magazine. The glass began to tip but Clark caught the glass before it spilled.

"Nice save!"

"Thanks."

Their eyes met. His looked so suddenly serious that she audibly eyed. It was much, much too quiet and he was looking much, much too tempting. The last time they had been on a sofa together she had been sprawled on top of him. She'd give just about anything to be doing that again.

"What did you want to do?" he asked.

*Kiss you*, she thought.

"What?" she whispered. Was he talking about what she wanted to do tonight or on their date?

"For our date. What would you like to do? We could try another concert."

"Oh." Lois could not shake the mental image of kissing him. She stared at his mouth. All she'd have to do is lean forward and... "I guess a concert would be okay."

“You don’t sound that enthusiastic about a concert. We could go to dinner and see a movie,” he suggested. “Anything you want?”

Anything she wanted? He’d be shocked if he knew what she really wanted at this moment. Lois tore her gaze away from his mouth to gesture at the television. “Maybe we could just rent a video? We can even call tonight a date, if you want. I mean, we’ve got wine and, uh, us. So it’s kind of like a date, isn’t it?” If tonight was a date, maybe he’d kiss her before she went home?

“I’m going to vote for no more almost or kind of dates. You deserve something a lot nicer than this.” He leaned a little closer to her and added in a conspiratorial tone, “Especially for a *real* first date.”

The husky edge to his voice sent squiggle of delight straight down her spine. “Of course I do. But I don’t want to compel you to spend scads of money entertaining me. Especially when I’d be happy just to come over and count how many spices you have.”

He laughed, and the rich sound of it made her toes curl. “I can tell that not knowing is really starting to get to you.”

Lois laughed with him, feeling a little more comfortable that the conversation was shifting to something more neutral. “Maybe a little bit. Just give me a ballpark estimate. More than ten? Less than twenty?”

“I already told you I have no idea.” Clark stood up and held out his hand to help her stand. “Let’s go count them.”

To her disappointment, he let go of her hand as soon as she was standing. Clark walked into his kitchen and opened a cupboard. The bottom two shelves were crammed full of spices. There had to be over fifty spice bottles in there.

“Are you kidding me?” she exclaimed in amazement. “Do you actually use all of these?”

“Well, yes.” He sounded surprised that she’d even think they were for show. “Not all at once, but I do use them.”

Lois shook her head in wonder. This was nothing like her spice collection. Hers were in identical bottles that lined up neatly in a row. The labels were so similar that you’d have to look closely to select one. Clark’s were an eclectic mix of sizes, shapes and colors. At least two of the bottles were sealed with a cork instead of a screw-on cap.

She picked up a short square jar and frowned at the name on the label. She sounded it out slowly, “Ras el hanout?”

“It’s Moroccan. It’s actually a blend of a bunch of spices.”

“And you use it for what?”

“As a spice rub on meats. It’s really good on chicken.”

Lois set the jar down and picked up a tall, skinny one capped with a cork. “Harissa?”

“Tunisian. It’s very spicy.”

“You have three jars of paprika?”

“They’re all different,” Clark corrected. “There’s a sweet one, a smoked one, and a really spicy one.”

Lois pulled out a plastic bag with four shriveled sticks in it. “What are these?”

“Whole vanilla beans. They’re a key ingredient in vanilla pudding.”

“You make pudding from scratch?”

Clark shrugged. “It’s not that hard.”

“Why not make chocolate pudding if you’re going to go to all that trouble? Vanilla is so... bland.”

“Trust me, mine is nothing like the pudding that comes loaded with preservatives in a plastic cup.”

Lois picked up a smoky gray bottle labeled in an exotic language that was completely foreign to her. “And this?”

He took the bottle from her to read the label, his fingers brushing lightly against hers in the process. That slight contact sent a shiver through her. “Ajwain seeds. They’re kind of like thyme.”

“Where are they from?”

“India.” Clark smoothed his thumb over the label and his lips quirked in a smile.

Lois wondered what the story behind the bottle was. It dawned on her that there might be a lot about Clark that she could only guess at. Could he read Hindi or did he simply know which spice it was because of the unusual jar? “You’ve actually been around the world, haven’t you?”

Clark nodded, still lost in a memory.

“I always think of you as this guy from the Midwest, not some world traveler.”

His gaze shifted from the ajwain seeds to her. “Can’t I be both?”

Lois shrugged. “I guess.”

Clark set the bottle down and focused his attention on her. “What about you? What’s the furthest you’ve been from Metropolis?”

She thought about it. “Kinshasa in The Congo. Have you been there?”

He shook his head. “The closest I’ve been to Kinshasa is Tanzania.”

Lois gestured at the cupboard. “Do you have a spice in here from Tanzania?”

Clark grinned. “I bet you have it, too.” He paused for effect, his eyes twinkling, and then said, “Cloves. Both whole and ground.”

“What in the world would you use a whole clove for? Besides sticking it in an orange for a grade school art project?”

“Macaroni and cheese,” he said, as if it should have been obvious to her. “You make your roux, add milk, peel an onion, and stick a bay leaf to it with a clove. Let that simmer in the sauce while it thickens. It gives it a nice complexity.”

Since when was macaroni and cheese supposed to have a nice complexity? He had to be kidding. Lois rolled her eyes. “My mac and cheese comes from a blue cardboard box.”

His nose wrinkled in distaste. “Then I definitely have to make you mac and cheese.”

The thought of Clark cooking for her was just as appealing as the thought of him kissing her. “Tomorrow night?” she suggested.

“You’re on.” He smiled and picked up the bag of vanilla beans. “I’ll make you vanilla pudding, too.”

Too late, she remembered that tomorrow night was Valentine’s Day. “Or Wednesday night. It doesn’t matter,” she backpedaled. “You don’t have to make me dinner tomorrow night.”

“Lois, I’d make you dinner every night if you wanted.”

She stared at him, her cheeks flushing at the possible implications. He blinked and turned red, too.

“I, I didn’t mean it like that,” he sputtered. “I just meant that I wouldn’t mind, uh, being with you, or, um, being—.” He took a breath and looked directly into her eyes. “I like being with you. It doesn’t have to be a date.”

He was so cute when he was flustered and she found it reassuring that he was as nervous as she was. *Take a chance*, she told herself. *He thinks you’re worth the risk.*

“What if I do want it to be a date?” she asked softly.

His answering smile made her grateful she had one hip leaning against the counter for support. “Then it’s a date.”

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Lois woke up on Valentine’s morning to the sound of rain drumming against her window. She stretched and then rolled over, pulling the covers up higher. There was something decadent about lying in a soft, warm bed during a rainstorm. She thought about her upcoming date with Clark that night and her pulse ratcheted into overdrive. A glance at the clock revealed that she had another twelve and a half hours until seven p.m.

What to do with the day? She could clean her apartment. She could play tourist again. She could go to work. Was it a sad

commentary on her life when going to work was her most appealing option?

An hour later she stepped briskly off the elevator and into the newsroom. Her gaze was immediately drawn to Clark's desk only to find it empty. It didn't matter. In eleven hours and twenty-three minutes she'd be knocking on his door. Not that she was counting the minutes or anything.

Perry did a double-take when he saw her, but it seemed he knew better than to harass her. He merely stopped by her desk and asked, "What are you working on today?"

"Gretchen Kelly," Lois answered. "How did she get Lex's body? How did she bring him back to life?"

Perry's expression became concerned. "Were you planning on interviewing Lex for this story?"

"No. At least, not right away. I'll see what I can find out from everyone else who knew her first."

The thought of having to talk to Lex made her skin crawl. Lois glanced over at Clark's desk. If and when she did talk to Lex, she wanted Clark there. Not for her protection, but for Lex's. She needed someone to stop her from strangling the man. Then again, Clark's reaction when he found out that Lex was alive and loose in Metropolis made her wonder if she'd be the one holding Clark back.

Lois checked her wristwatch. Ten hours and fifty-six minutes to go. She allowed herself a grim smile at the irony that Clark had kept her mind off of Lex on the night he'd reappeared in her life, and now she was using Lex to keep her mind off Clark.

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At two minutes before seven that evening, Lois was standing in front of Clark's door. She had been determined not to wear anything remotely red, so she had chosen a dark blue sleeveless dress. She had agonized for nearly an hour over how to wear her hair. Twice she had pinned it up, only to take it back down. There was no sense in looking too formal. Tonight was simply a nice, semi-casual, dinner between friends, that was all. Well, okay, it was a date. It was a *real* date. What would a real date with Clark entail? Would he kiss her? Or should she call his bluff and kiss him first? She had come so close the night before. It would be a waste if she got the chance again tonight and squandered it.

Lois took a deep breath and let it out slowly. She could smell something delicious wafting from inside and her stomach gurgled in anticipation. The last time a date had cooked for her she had been a sophomore in college. Rick Sanchez had made her a grilled cheese sandwich on a hot plate in his dorm room. Hopefully tonight wouldn't end with the same sort of awkward fumbling that had followed that long-ago meal. Clark hardly seemed the type to expect a little action as the price of dinner.

It dawned on her that Clark had cooked for her before tonight. He'd even made her a grilled cheese a few weeks ago when they were watching a movie. She told herself that tonight wasn't really much different. Okay, so she was dressed nicer. The meal had probably taken a little more effort and they'd be eating at the table instead of on the sofa, but the same basic principles applied. It was a meal with Clark. They had eaten together countless times before. Tonight was no different, if you excluded the fact that she had sort of set a goal for herself not to leave without finding out what it was like to kiss him without it being part of a ruse.

She took another calming breath and knocked on the door.

When the door opened, her jaw almost dropped. Clark was wearing a dark suit and a tie that was considerably more conservative than the ones he usually wore. Her first coherent thought was gratitude that he didn't come to work dressed this elegant because she'd never get anything done.

For a few seconds they both simply stared at each other.

"Wow," he said in an awed tone. "You look amazing."

"Thanks. You, too." She gave him a shy grin. "Is that a new

suit?"

Clark looked down at his suit and then back up at her with a pleased smile. "I just got it. I wasn't sure about it, but the sales guy said it 'pulled me together'."

"He was right. Did he pick out that tie, too?"

His grin widened. "You like it?"

"Very much." Lois impulsively reached out to straighten his tie. Her fingers stilled the moment she realized how forward the gesture was and she snatched her hand away. "So, uh, are you going to invite me in or are we eating out here?"

"Sorry." Clark stepped aside and gestured for her to enter. "Please come in."

Lois stepped inside and then stopped short. Instead of overhead lights, his apartment was lit by the glow of hundreds of tiny white Christmas lights strung across his bookshelves and woven along the stair railings and banisters. She'd always thought Clark's place felt cozier than hers, in spite of the high ceilings. Tonight it looked like an enchanted fairyland. His kitchen table was set with nice china and a single long stemmed rose in a vase. Two tall, slender candles burned on either side of the rose. Soft music was playing in the background.

"Clark, I, wow—" Lois was speechless at how much thought and effort he had put into this date. He hadn't just made her dinner. He had gone out and bought a new suit and had probably spent hours decorating. For her. He had done all of this for her.

"I wanted to make sure you didn't confuse this with a pizza and video kind of date." He offered her his arm and she took it. They walked down the stairs together. With each step down she could almost swear she was falling deeper and deeper for him. No one had ever gone to this much effort for her. It was as exhilarating as it was flattering.

"It smells wonderful."

"It tastes even better," he said and pulled a chair out for her.

He wasn't exaggerating. The creamy pasta he'd made was vastly different from the stuff that came from a box. The orange powder-based glop she'd eaten since childhood didn't even come close.

They chatted as they ate about stories they had worked on, their co-workers and, eventually, her trip to Kinshasa. One of her biggest fears had been that she'd have nothing to say to him in a more formal setting. She couldn't have been more wrong. Clark was simply Clark. Nothing had changed just because they were dating. Well, almost nothing. At the back of her mind there was the constant realization that she desperately wanted to kiss him.

"Are you ready for desert?" he asked after she had finished a second helping.

"Did you really make vanilla pudding?"

He smiled and stood up. "I really, really did." Clark opened a cupboard and peered inside. Not finding what he was looking for he opened another and then another.

"You can't find the pudding?" she teased. "Maybe you should have kept it in the fridge."

"No, I can't find my hand mixer. I swear I have one here somewhere." He started looking in the cabinets beneath the countertop, moving pots and pans around with what seemed to be increasing desperation.

"So the pudding isn't finished?"

Clark straightened up, his expression sheepish. "I was going to put whipped cream on top."

"You don't have whipped cream in a can?"

He shook his head.

Lois shrugged. "If the pudding is really that good, why not serve it plain?"

He sighed and opened the refrigerator to take it out. "All right. But you'd better not deduct points for presentation."

Lois laughed. "You think I'm keeping score?"

"You're always keeping score."

She was about to deny it, when she realized he was probably right. “You’ve already outscored all other dates I’ve been on combined, Clark. I stopped keeping score about thirty seconds after I got here.”

He grinned. “Okay. I’ll risk it.”

“I’m worth the risk,” she said with a smile.

His expression softened. “You’re worth any risk, Lois.”

The earnestness of his words was deepened by how quietly they were spoken. Her stomach fluttered as she recognized that he wasn’t joking. Both excited and frightened by the possibilities this created, Lois looked down at her empty plate in time to see it move away and be replaced by a small bowl of pudding.

“Oh my god,” she moaned around the first spoonful. The pudding was practically an out-of-body experience. She closed her eyes to savor it. When she opened them again she found Clark was sitting across the table and watching her expectantly.

Lois adopted a frown. “I don’t know,” she said slowly. “It’s missing something. Whipped cream, maybe?”

His eyes twinkled in a suppressed laugh. “I appreciate your honesty.”

She ate another spoonful of pudding. “Because it’s you, I’ll overlook it.”

“Thanks.” Clark gave her a teasing salute with his spoon before taking a bite.

After she had scraped the last bit of pudding from the bowl, Lois sat back in her chair, utterly content, and looked at Clark with new eyes. “So do you cook like this every night?”

“Most nights, yeah.” Clark shrugged as if it wasn’t a big deal. “I like cooking. It relaxes me.”

“You can relax at my place any time you want.”

He let out a laugh. “Okay.”

Lois leaned forward. “You don’t think I’m serious, do you?”

“On the contrary, I’m hoping you are.”

Lois giggled. She wasn’t sure if it was the romantic atmosphere or Clark himself, but she was starting to feel giddy. The thought of eating dinner with him every night was wildly appealing. Hell, he didn’t even have to string up Christmas lights. She could be happy with nothing but pudding and his company.

Needing to steer her thoughts in a new direction, Lois looked past him and saw that he had also strung lights around the large window in the part of his loft that served as a bedroom. From her vantage point she could see the bottom corner of his bed. Unbidden, the memory of Clark carrying her to the bedroom door on Saturday night flashed through her mind. After he set her down, his hand had lingered on her waist. She had been unable to stop touching him either, reluctant to lose the heady feeling of being that close to him. If she hadn’t been sick that night, she would have tried kissing him. Now that dinner was nearly over, there was nothing left to do but kiss him. Just the thought of that set her pulse racing. She stood up abruptly and grabbed her empty bowl to take it to the sink.

“Lois? You don’t need to clean up.” Clark’s fingers brushed the bare skin of her left arm to catch her attention. Caught off-guard, Lois dropped the bowl into the sink and swore under her breath. It landed with a clatter but didn’t break.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

“Did I do something wrong?”

Only if doing everything right was wrong. Which in his case, it definitely was. Lois bit her lip and fought the urge to say that it wasn’t him, it was her. It would have been absolutely true.

“Talk to me.” Clark leaned back against the counter. He wasn’t touching her, but he was irresistibly close. “Is this about being afraid that things will change if we start going out?”

A pang went through Lois at how well he knew her. “It’s changed already. You aren’t just some guy I work with. You’re my best friend.”

“If that’s all you want from me, Lois, I’m happy with that.”

“Really?” Her voice had become shaky and high pitched. “Because I don’t think I can be happy with that. I want—” Lois hesitated, unsure what to say next. She wanted a lot of things right now. “I want—”

She looked up at him, hoping that he’d understand what she was trying to say, even if she didn’t exactly understand it herself. His dark eyes looked deeply into hers, Lois felt almost hypnotized by the intensity of his gaze and the electric charge that seemed to crackle in the space between them.

“What do you want?” he asked quietly.

Lois shook her head, torn between what she knew was safe and the risk of trying for everything. “I don’t want this to get complicated.”

“It’s just us. We’ve eaten dinner together before.”

Lois wanted to shake him. He knew damn well that there was a huge difference between tonight and any other meal they had shared. He had said himself that he didn’t want her to confuse this date with their typical pizza and a video. He couldn’t have it both ways.

“Tonight is different, Clark! You never strung up Christmas light for me before. You bought a new suit. And you cooked. And you lit candles and—” His expression fell and she hastened to reassure him. “I didn’t mean it like that. I know you went to a lot of trouble to make tonight nice and I really do appreciate it. Dinner was great and, when we were talking, that felt right. It felt like us. I like us.”

“So I guess you need to decide what kind of us you want us to be.”

Her breath caught in her throat. “Why do I have to decide? What do you want?”

Clark didn’t pause to consider, didn’t even blink; he simply said, “You.”

“Oh.” It was all she could say. That kind of simple honesty was hard to argue with.

“We can take this slow,” he reassured her. “We don’t have to rush into any—”

She didn’t give him the chance to finish. She swiftly closed the distance between them and covered his mouth with hers. For a breathless moment, neither of them moved. Then his hand cupped the back of her head, bringing her lips against his in a decisive kiss.

The world slowed down around them. Sensations were sharper. The fabric of his suit against the bare skin of her arms, the faintly vanilla taste of his lips, and the muted groan he made were all distinct experiences that she was sure she’d never forget. Lois twined her arms around his neck and deepened the kiss, touching her tongue to his. His response was a soft, slow and utterly thorough kiss that sent a fresh rush of heat through her belly.

When their kiss broke Clark looked as dazed as she felt.

“Do you think we’re rushing things?” she panted.

He kissed her forehead and murmured, “I’ve waited two years to kiss you like this.”

“Have you?” Lois was left even more breathless at the thought.

He nodded and bent his head to kiss her again. Her last functioning brain cell told her that nothing this deliberate could be rushing things. She suddenly had a new and deep appreciation of all those times that Clark’s slow approach had frustrated her. Lois wondered if her spontaneity ever drove him just as crazy. Together maybe they were the perfect blend of caution and recklessness.

The kiss ended and she laid her cheek against his shoulder and closed her eyes. “This feels right, doesn’t it?” she whispered.

“It feels like us.” His arms tightened around her.

“I like us,” she said with a giggle. Lois relaxed against him, utterly content. Who would have ever believed her favorite place

in the world would turn out to be snuggled up between Clark and his kitchen sink?

THE END

A few people requested that I include Clark's recipe for vanilla pudding when this went to the archive. So here you go:

1/2 cup + 2 Tbsp sugar  
1/4 cup cornstarch  
1/8 tsp salt  
5 large egg yolks, lightly beaten  
2 cups milk (don't use skim, whole or 2% work best)  
1 small can (5 oz) evaporated milk  
1/2 vanilla bean, about 3 inches long, split lengthwise  
2 Tbsp unsalted butter, quartered  
1 tsp brandy (this is optional, but it gives it a nice zing)

- 1) Whisk sugar, cornstarch, and salt in medium saucepan.
- 2) Add yolks, then immediately but gradually whisk in milk and evaporated milk. Drop in vanilla bean. Cook over medium heat, stirring frequently at first, then constantly as mixture starts to thicken and begins to simmer (about 8 to 10 minutes).
- 3) Once mixture simmers, continue to cook, stirring constantly, for 1 minute longer.
- 4) Remove pan from heat; whisk in butter and brandy. Remove vanilla bean, scrape out seeds, and whisk them back into pudding.

It's amazing served warm, but if you're going to serve it cold be sure you cover it with plastic wrap that's in direct contact with the pudding to keep it from forming a skin.