

Don't Let Go

By [Sara Kraft](#) <skfolc@gmail.com>

Rated: PG

Submitted: February 2023

Summary: After a full summer of rebuilding their friendship while Franklin Stern is rebuilding the Daily Planet, Lois and Clark make a plan to attend the re-opening carnival together. Lois is struggling with her feelings for two men, both of whom have said quite plainly that they don't want a relationship with her. What is she supposed to do when her heart just won't let go?

Story Size: 12,131 words (66Kb as text)

Author's Note: Well, well... 'tis the 2nd Annual Christmas Ficathon (over on the L&C Fanfic MBs)! Last year, I was assigned to write Queen of the Capes' story. And I barely squeaked it in under the deadline of January 6th. For this second ficathon, I was assigned to write Queenie's story once again! And I was amused and thrilled, and had high hopes that magic would happen once again, though not necessarily the 30,000+ words of magic that *Yours to Discover* ended up being.

Well, on January 10th, I still wasn't done yet, so I decided to post on the boards as I finished it... just like we did in the old days — and to give my muse a kick in the pants.

As we all know from the substitute bonus fic that SuperBek wrote for Queenie (*Hot Cake Contest*), her request was for: a very warm locale, a contest, cake.

And a big thank you to GooBoo for GEing this story for the archive!

Chapter 1

Clark wasn't here yet. Instead, Lois was watching the opening ceremony for the Daily Planet's Grand Re-Opening Carnival alone. Perry and Jimmy were off closer to the stage — which had been set up in the street right in front of the newly renovated building — and she was hanging at the back of the crowd, eyeing the sidewalk Clark should be sauntering down any minute now.

It was altogether too hot for the second week of September, and she found herself wishing she'd chosen the linen shorts after all. As it was, she could feel the damp heat of sweat marks soaking into her simple v-neck tee where the straps of her backpack rested. But she'd fussed in front of the mirror as though it mattered what she wore, as though choosing the jeans that made her butt look great

would suddenly make Clark ask her out on a date or something.

She focused back on the stage for a moment, her heart clenching in her chest as she listened to Superman speaking at the podium, giving his thanks that the proceeds from the carnival would go to the Superman Foundation. He'd barely talked to her all summer. Was he avoiding her or was it just because her life wasn't in as much jeopardy when she wasn't actually working?

Did it even matter?

He'd made it pretty clear that he wanted no part in a romantic relationship with her. No, that wasn't accurate. She knew he *wanted* that — a romantic relationship with her — but he didn't trust her.

But that was fine. Fine. Completely fine. She didn't need Superman.

Superman was the unattainable dream anyway, the fantasy. She'd been fooling herself thinking that she was anything close to what Superman needed — regardless of how much he seemed to want something more than friendship.

But it didn't matter. He didn't trust her. And that was fine. Just fine.

Clark trusted her. He was still her friend even though she'd treated him horribly. They'd spent day after day together this summer — reconnecting, tentatively at first, and then deciding that friends and partners could still survive hard things. And as they'd watched movies and played games, she hoped desperately that it was enough — though sometimes she felt as though it would never be enough — to repair the damage she'd caused. The last few weeks, they had also hit the pavement, making sure they had the beat on the latest goings on, touching base with sources so that they could hit the ground running the second Franklin Stern opened those doors.

Metaphorically, anyway. Currently, Mr. Stern was cutting a ridiculously large ceremonial ribbon on the makeshift stage as Superman stood somewhat awkwardly next to him. A miniscule, petty part of her hoped he felt as uncomfortable as he looked. And she half wondered if anyone else could tell how uncomfortable the stage made him — the way his jaw ticked and how he held himself so stiffly, glancing anywhere but the crowd as though he was just waiting for the moment when he could escape. He'd never been uncomfortable like that with her... except for that night.

But it didn't matter. What did matter is that Clark wasn't here yet. He'd promised they'd go together. Partners, he'd said. Friends. It probably didn't mean anything that he hadn't said best friends. She was probably reading too much into it. Heck, she'd been reading too

much into everything all summer long, trying to figure out what Clark really felt about her.

And she was...stumped. And more than a little heartbroken, because any traces of that love she'd seen so plainly before — had worked too hard to ignore before — were just...gone. Vanished. Hidden behind this mask that was just 'friend' and not 'best friend'. Or at least she hoped it was still there, something he was hiding rather than just nothing there at all — because she'd suffocated it into nonexistence.

There was no doubt that it'd been there before. Looking back...

<You had to have known...>

She had known. She'd known. And she'd...what? Ignored him and stomped on his heart, agreed to marry a man she didn't love — a monster — thinking that was the best chance she'd had at keeping her best friend in her life?

She almost cried out at the agony and frustration of the memory. If only he hadn't sprung it on her, his confession. If only she'd had more time to think, more time to process. Maybe...maybe she would have...

No, she wouldn't have been able to admit her feelings for him then. She was certain that it would have been too terrifying even if she'd had time to think and process.

But she was also certain that she wouldn't have been so...Well, she'd been downright cruel to him in asking him to send Superman her way after she'd just turned him down so thoroughly. It was the part of last May that she liked to avoid thinking about the most. And it was why she was feeling a little bit resentful that Superman was here and Clark wasn't.

Finally, Superman was shaking Mr. Stern's hand, nodding in that way he did, and then he was lifting up and away, flying off into the clouds to wherever the heck he went. His personal life hadn't been anything he'd ever been willing to share, and she wondered if she'd ever know.

Not that it mattered.

"Hey, Lois!" She heard Clark's voice from behind her and she turned around to find him trotting towards her in a pair of navy blue cargo shorts and a light gray t-shirt. "You beat me here," he said cheerfully, holding up his travel-worn backpack by the top strap. "I forgot my change of clothes for the dunk tank and had to run back and get them."

Irritation flickered through her and rose to the surface at the sight of the sheepish grin on his face that he so often paired with his trademark lame excuses. She managed to bite back the urge to gripe at him.

"You just missed Superman," she told him instead, hoping that her voice didn't sound any certain way.

"Ah, oh well," he said with a shrug as he slung his backpack over onto his shoulders.

Clark seemed lately to have this attitude of casual indifference toward Superman. Truth be told, it was nice to have a bit of a break from his usual subtle criticism of the hero. Though that petty part of her reared its head again and wondered where all that not-so-understated jealousy of Superman had gone to — it would at least indicate that he was thinking of her romantically again.

No, no. Jealousy was an ugly trait, one she fell victim to herself, try as she may to stop it, and she disliked it even more in a romantic partner.

So, no...she shouldn't wish for jealousy. Simply wishing for his attention again, wishing for some sign that his feelings for her were true after all...that was what she should wish for.

"Lois, are you okay?"

"What? Huh?" He was looking at her, concerned. Oh. Right...words, conversation, speaking... "I, uh, it's just this heat getting to me." She waved her hand in the air. "I think I might actually be looking forward to the dunk tank."

He grinned at her. "I still can't believe you signed up to be dunked."

"What? You don't think I'm a team player?" she huffed, mostly for show.

"Not historically, no." His grin widened.

The irritation from his tardiness still lingered, but now it was edged with this uncomfortable feeling...not knowing anymore if their banter was actually flirty, as it had always somewhat seemed before, or if it was just a reflexive tendency of theirs. Natural. Casual. She wasn't entirely sure she knew what flirty looked like between best friends...or friends. Or if it was normal. That was normal, right?

So was the touching, right? He was touching her shoulder now, probably to capture her wandering attention. Had she always gotten a warm, tingling sensation when he'd touched her? Her eyes wandered down to his bare forearm as she watched him check the time.

"Well, partner," he started, his hand still on her shoulder, "we're not set to get dunked until 1:00 and 1:30. What did you want to do to pass the time? Carnival games? Rides? Is it too early in the morning for caramel apples? I know you love caramel apples."

Her heart flipped lightly that he'd remembered. But of course he had. He was Clark. Her kind, friendly, caring, and thoughtful...partner. She swallowed. "Well, we should...definitely do rides before any type of food."

"Good call," he said with a wry smile, giving her shoulder a light squeeze before dropping his hand back to

his side. "So, what do you think — Gravitron or Ferris wheel?"

Lois smiled back at him, finally finding just a smidge of her equilibrium again. "Ferris wheel, for sure."

Lois hadn't consciously thought about the seating arrangements when she'd chosen the Ferris wheel. But now that she and Clark were settling into a bright blue passenger cabin, she was absolutely noting the close quarters of their seating for the ride. They each shoved their backpacks on the floor of the cabin between their own legs, and then when they straightened again, the ride attendant pulled the lap bar down over them. Lois noticed Clark flinch ever so slightly as the metal bar clanged and locked into place, and she wondered if he was afraid of heights or something.

Glancing down, she noticed how close their legs were, the material of his cargo shorts brushing gently against her jeans. Half a thought flashed through her mind that it was too bad this wasn't a roller coaster with twists and turns that would cause them to bump closely to one another.

Their cabin rocked and jerked as it moved backward and upward to allow the next cabin to be loaded with passengers. Though they weren't actually touching, Lois could sense that Clark had tensed up and he was grasping the lap bar tightly with both hands.

"A little afraid of heights?" she asked him gently.

"I, uh..." He looked at her with a strained smile. "I just get a little claustrophobic sometimes, is all."

"Oh, did you want me to give you a little more room?" she asked as she shifted slightly, ready to scoot over if he needed her too, but reluctant to do so for purely selfish reasons.

"No! I mean — no, it's okay!" he blurted out. "It's... actually helpful to... have you closer."

She couldn't help but notice the slight roughness to his voice and just how quickly he'd protested her moving away from him, though she warned herself not to get her hopes up about it. Should she... would it be too obvious if she moved closer to him?

Before she could decide, the cabin rocked and shifted again as the ride attendant readied for the next passengers, and...well, she couldn't be sure if the movement of the cabin had shifted Clark closer or if she'd done it subconsciously herself. But right now, they were hip to hip, and she was desperately wishing that she was wearing the linen shorts so she could feel what it was like to have his bare knee brushing against hers. Stupid jeans.

She looked back over at him and he gave her a hesitant smile, just a hint less tense than his last. "Is this your first time on a Ferris wheel?" she asked.

He nodded.

Her heart twisted a little with guilt. "Sorry, I didn't realize..."

"No, it's fine, Lois. Promise." His smile widened and looked more like his usual one. "I'm sure once everyone's loaded and it's a smooth ride, I'll enjoy myself."

She eyed him, a little unsure, but took him at his word — and mostly at his smile, that one that made her stomach swoop. Her gaze flitted to his hand, still tightly gripping the lap bar, and impulsively, she put her hand over his, squeezing it gently.

"The view will make everything worth it, Clark. Just you wait and see. It's really too bad it's not nighttime because the Metropolis skyline is even more impressive then, with the lights of the city buildings all twinkling. Not that...well, you probably can't get a phenomenal view of the skyline from here — it's definitely an interesting location for a carnival Ferris wheel — and it's not night, but it still should be pretty, and..."

Lois looked up to find him staring...and grinning. And her heart did an extra flip at the sight and intensity of it.

"I'm babbling, aren't I? Sorry," she said, ducking her head and feeling the blush start to rise through her cheeks.

"Don't be sorry," he said, his voice quiet as he shook his head and turned his hand palm up to hold hers.

Oh god. Her breath caught. The signs were back. They were back, right?

The cabin lurched again, backwards and upwards, and Clark squeezed her hand more tightly. Lois found herself speechless. She felt like she should be comforting or reassuring him somehow, but all she could focus on was the fluttering sensation in the pit of her stomach and the way his hand felt so warm and so right with him holding it.

They'd not really held hands before. Sure, she usually found herself looping her hands around the crook of his elbow when they walked or linking her arm with his. But...holding hands seemed like...more. It sure felt like more.

"Are you okay, Lois?"

"Me? Am I okay? I should be asking you if you're okay...are you okay?"

"I'm okay," he said, reassuring her with a warm smile even though the cabin had just moved and rocked again.

A flush of warmth flooded through her that had nothing to do with the temperature outside. Things felt awkward and comfortable all at once, and she was completely unsure how that was even possible. All she knew was that she didn't seem to want to ever let go of his hand.

Except the problem was that holding his hand was rendering her incapable of speech somehow. And they'd gotten past that — well, past the awkward silences and stilted conversations. They didn't have trouble talking, not

any more. But right now she was having to wrack her brain for even a scrap of something to say.

"I'll bet Superman has a phenomenal view of the Metropolis skyline..." Clark said a bit absently, almost as though he was just thinking aloud.

Before the awkward silence could take root, she blurted out the first words that came to mind. "I didn't — I don't...I never went flying with him like that, Clark. I-I... promise. I'm sorry." She ducked her head and felt a different kind of heat rising in her cheeks this time as she looked down at their clasped hands.

She wasn't sure what answer, what reaction she expected, but she was surprised and relieved to find he hadn't pulled his hand away. In fact, he was squeezing her hand once again, and when she looked up at him, she found a somewhat guilty expression on his face.

"No, I'm sorry, Lois. I didn't mean...I'm not sure why I said that." He paused and ran his free hand through his hair. She wondered if his frustration was at her or himself. "I didn't mean to imply...of course, you — I mean...it shouldn't matter to me if you had or...not."

"I..." She held his hand tightly and took a moment to gather herself before she found his gaze again. "I can tell, Clark. I can tell it matters to you. And I'm sorry I hurt you. We don't...we don't talk about it much. Seems like we talk about everything *but* that day...that week...those weeks where I was anything but your best friend." She dropped her eyes down to their hands and her voice fell to a whisper. "I wish I could take it all back."

The ride lurched forward just then, rattling just a little until it hit a smoother glide in its rotation, and music had started too — some ill-suited instrumental diddy that seemed to warble through the old speakers. Her heart was in her throat. Clark probably hadn't even heard her, at least not the most important part. He'd gotten to take it back... but he shouldn't have. She was the one who had needed to, wanted to. Still wanted to.

She could feel the burn of tears threatening behind her eyes, but she couldn't — wouldn't — cry here, not in front of Clark while she was...what? Trying to apologize? This was hardly the time or the place. And it wasn't even an apology she was certain he wanted to hear. They'd avoided the topic all summer. He probably just wanted to move on and forget about it, especially if...if he'd been telling the truth the day he took it back.

But he still hadn't let go of her hand. And she almost didn't need to look to know that his eyes were still on her...that he was wearing a look of concern on his face...

And that's exactly what she found when she looked up.

She swallowed hard to keep the tears at bay. The cabin swayed gently as it kept going around, but it rocked just a

smidge harder as Clark shifted his body slightly to face her, his knee brushing along her jean-clad thigh.

"Lois, I wasn't exactly being a good best friend, either...I...there are a lot of things I would do differently if I could."

"Like?" She almost felt guilty asking, but she had to know.

Her guilt grew as she watched him search almost desperately for the right words, as though he was terrified the wrong ones would make him feel more claustrophobic than he was already feeling. "I'm sorry, Clark. I — you don't have to answer that. It wasn't fair of me to ask. Just...it's okay."

He looked only half relieved, giving her a weak smile.

She held her breath for a moment and looked forward, fumbling again for words, and she sighed with relief when she saw they were only a few seconds away from the top of the ride. "We haven't even glanced at the skyline yet!" she said too cheerfully. And then her heart sank as they rounded the top and saw...buildings. The ferris wheel wasn't even tall enough to get a good view down 7th Avenue. "Oh...okay...I...guess there isn't a view. Now I feel dumb. We can get a much better view of the skyline from the roof of the Daily Planet. Maybe we should just go up there next, after we're done here? I've been up there once or twice..."

"Lois..."

"...and I promise there actually *IS* a great view of the skyline from there..."

"Lois..."

"As long as they haven't changed things, all you have to do is bring a stapler up to prop open the door with so you don't get locke —"

"Lois!"

"What?"

"It's okay. We're here to have fun. The carnival. It's not about the skyline."

"But...I want to see the skyline with you," she whispered to herself, letting her wish and her bravery dissolve and fade right into the terrible carnival music. "You're right, Clark. Absolutely right." She swallowed thickly. "Let's just enjoy the rest of the ride and figure out what to do next."

She sat up straighter and looked forward, not quite ready to meet his eyes again — so warm and forgiving when she hardly deserved it. And it wasn't until he squeezed her hand that she realized he'd never let go of it.

Chapter 2

Clark's pulse skittered wildly as Lois' sputtered laugh ended with her face buried in his shoulder. "But why a giant stuffed ear of corn? It's ridiculous!"

His heart skipped a beat when she pulled back to gasp for breath, almost doubled over with laughter now. God, she was beautiful. He couldn't help but join in her amusement. "I don't know!" he laughed.

"And it's angry, Clark! Angry!" Lois, her eyes tearing from laughter, held up the almost two-foot stuffed, anthropomorphic ear of corn, its face glaring hotly at him. "Here, farmboy, maybe you know some tricks for cheering up the corn." She thrust it toward him and nudged his arm to get him to hold her hard-won carnival prize.

They both roared with laughter, and she fell into him again, her hands clutching at his free arm to help hold herself up. Her breath was warm against his chest, easier to feel through the single thin layer of cotton he was wearing.

This. This was what he wanted. Lois carefree and laughing and in his arms, his heart so light he thought it alone might float them right up in the air.

After blissful minutes, they'd finally recovered, and she stood back a little, swiping at her tear-stained face and then fussing at the hem of his t-shirt to straighten it out for him. His stomach muscles tensed at her touch and his breath caught, and when she looked up at him, she held still for a moment, her eyes sparkling but tentative.

And then her gaze dipped back down as she tucked a stray lock behind her ear.

"Beautiful..." he breathed, the word slipping out before he could stop it. He cleared his throat. "Beautiful weather today, isn't it?" he attempted poorly.

"Clark, it's well over 85 degrees!" she exclaimed, though her voice was slightly tremulous, clearly unsettled by his slip. Her eyes found his again for just a second before they settled on the stuffed corn cob tucked under his arm instead. "And the humidity is terrible."

There was a slight flush to her cheeks and he was having trouble not staring, especially since he couldn't help but tune into the sound of her heartbeat fluttering wildly. "Let's, uh, go get some lemonade and a bite to eat before our dunk times," he said.

She nodded, appearing grateful for the reprieve, and they walked side by side toward the food stands. The silence between them was awkward, but far from the kind of silences they'd dealt with four months ago. No, this time, the space between them was filled with almost an electrifying energy and indeterminate tension that was leading Clark down a dangerous path he'd told himself he wasn't going to venture down again. This morning's outing at the carnival between partners and friends was feeling more and more like a date.

That wasn't what she'd wanted last Spring. She hadn't wanted him. Not like that. And he'd spent more time than he wanted to admit licking his wounds — his poor, fragile heart, broken twice over.

Friends. Partners. Forever.

It was easier that way. Safer. Safer than putting his heart on the line again. Besides, there was no way he would ever risk their precious friendship a second time. That had been the story he'd told himself, consoling his heart that at least he could have partners and friends.

And now that very same heart was changing the story, throwing caution to the wind and trying to fly freely as if there wasn't the risk of losing *everything*. This energy between them just had to mean something, though. Didn't it? The way her heart raced when he looked at her, the way she kept adorably blushing and getting flustered, and the way it had felt so incredibly dizzying and right and wonderful when they'd held hands...something was definitely different.

When they reached the food stands, Clark offered to wait in line for them while she excused herself to the restroom. She'd given him a smile as she'd left, but he could tell she was still a little on edge. Frankly, so was he.

Her words from the top of the Ferris wheel echoed in his mind, the words he'd heard even when he couldn't really be sure that she'd wanted him to hear. She'd wished she could take it all back, her apology and regret written plainly on her face. Given how it'd all turned out, it wasn't a surprising revelation, but actually hearing it had struck a chord with him.

More than that, though, was the sting of his own realization. It had ached, watching her be so unsure and fretful over just the thought that she might have upset him with any lingering feelings for Superman. They'd always been just a fact — her feelings for the Man of Steel — a horribly inconvenient, irresistible fact. But she'd rushed to reassure him that it wasn't the case, that she would have preferred to see the skyline with the ordinary man.

The full dawning of awareness had hit him — not only was it likely that she had feelings for him beyond friendship after all, but he was also being monumentally unfair to her. He needed to tell her. If he trusted her at all, wanted to consider her his best friend, ever hoped to have a romantic relationship with her, then he needed to tell her.

Soon, he told himself. For today, he would enjoy the rest of this outing — whether it felt like kind of a date or not. It wasn't long before Lois was back and they'd purchased an assortment of snacks as well as two lemonades.

They walked a little further to the edge of the carnival so they could find an area to eat that wasn't so crowded. Choosing a picnic table not too far from where the main stage was set up, they spread out their bounty and dug in. Clark was relieved to find they'd settled easily back into their usual banter even though there was still an underlying current of...something more.

“So you’re not going to gloat, Lois?”

“Gloat? What’s there to gloat about?” she asked with mock-innocence.

Clark hooked a thumb in the direction of the stuffed corn that was resting on the table, currently laying on its side and giving the tree behind Lois its angry stare.

Lois grinned at him from around a bite of funnel cake, the specks of powdered sugar lingering on her lips driving him to distraction. She shrugged lightly as she chewed, then swallowed and peeking her tongue out to clean her lips. “I’m good at carnival games.”

“Specifically the throwing ones, I happened to notice.” Clark raised an eyebrow at her.

“Jealous, farmboy?” Her grin widened and her eyes seemed to twinkle at him. “You didn’t do too badly on those, but I’m starting to think that I might be rather safe from being dunked by you.”

“Oh, you think so, do you?” He knew competitive Lois had been in there somewhere.

She nodded. “You seem pretty distracted today, and that combined with my prowess for throwing games, well...seems like a slam...dunk...that I could outlast you in the hot seat, so to speak.”

“What are you suggesting?” he asked, feeling a bit trepidatious about the trap he’d managed to not only help set up but also walk headlong into without resistance. But oh, there was something sexy about competitive Lois.

“I’m suggesting a little bet,” she said, then sipped at her lemonade.

He waited for her terms, his heart beating just a bit faster.

“If I can dunk you in fewer throws than you can dunk me, then I win!” She looked pretty sure of herself, and his heart skipped a beat at the sight of her self-satisfied smile.

“And vice versa.”

“Of course,” she agreed, though her smile seemed pretty self-assured.

“...okay, but what’s the prize?”

“Winner gets a home cooked meal at the loser’s apartment!”

Clark’s breath caught and his mind flashed to one of his dearest fantasies — a date night at his apartment, making her a delicious meal, dining by candlelight and surrounded by soft decor that held a delicate suggestion of romance. But he was probably reading too much into it. Way too much into it.

It took him a moment to shake himself mentally and realize he hadn’t responded to her yet. Though he was suddenly very inclined to lose this contest, there was still a glaring omission in her plan that he couldn’t resist mentioning. “Lois, what happens if I win? You can’t cook.

How is that a prize for me when I’ll end up cooking either way?”

She raised an eyebrow and a corner of her mouth quirked up — and he found he was struggling not to find her dubious look adorably sexy. Then she gave him a little smirk and waved a hand in his direction. “Okay, okay. I’ll order us takeout if you win.”

“Okay, sure. Deal,” he said, reaching his hand out over the table to shake on it before his mind could warn him — warn them — out of this, this contest that seemed like it would culminate in an intimate date night no matter the outcome.

Feeling the smooth warmth of her hand in his again sent his heart racing again. That dangerous path he’d been intent on avoiding was now rolling out the welcome mat. But that was...okay, wasn’t it? Because when he looked up into her eyes, her gaze locked with his own and he’d swear that they both lost their breath for a moment...well, it sure felt like she might want that dangerous path just as much as he did this time.

The rest of their small picnic passed in a whirlwind of friendly conversation, jittery anticipation, and banter that could only be considered flirty. Had they really been flirting this whole morning? It certainly seemed like it.

As they cleared the table and gathered their belongings, including the giant stuffed corn that Lois had insisted on naming Chompy, Clark’s mind was distracted with all the possible outcomes of this bet they’d made. He wanted desperately to lose, to have an excuse to make her dinner and...well, he’d have to find a way to ask her if they could consider it a date. Or at least some sort of...almost-first date or something. On the other hand, it was honestly hard to let go of the idea of being able to watch Lois eat her own words when she lost — because surely with an entire youth full of playing sports and a little super ability...how could he lose?

When they got to the grassy area that held the dunk tank event just a few minutes before 1pm, Clark was a bit surprised to find that there was already a line of people waiting to dunk him. It wasn’t super long, granted, but... well, he’d overheard some of the chatter this morning about how most people were using the dunk tank for some sort of safe but cathartic office revenge, and he was pretty certain he was well-liked and conflict free at work.

It wasn’t until he saw Lois stride intently over there and exchange some heated words with the ladies at the front of the line, that he realized the line was comprised entirely of women. As he set his things down at the volunteer table and took off his shoes and socks, he couldn’t help but listen in with his super hearing.

“Back off, ladies. He’s mine.”

“Says who? Come off it, Lois? Since when?...”

The questions were fired at her hotly from both coworkers who were single and those who were married, and he could see a good number of them staring at him like he was...a piece of meat, exactly how many women and a few men ogled Superman in public. Oh god...

He tuned out, not sure he wanted to hear the rest, and quite unable to get the sound of her possessive, assertive *He's mine* out of his head. It didn't take Lois long to very smugly take her place at the apparently coveted spot at the front of the line. Clark swallowed nervously as he climbed the ladder to get settled on the small platform that would serve as his seat for the dunk tank.

He stared through the plexiglass wall of the tank at the line of mostly women. At least he would be earning more money for charity. He just had to focus on that. That and his upcoming dinner with Lois...and whether or not it would be wise to call it a date.

He's mine, her voice echoed in his head again and a thrill ran down his spine. He wondered if he should super-aid her throws in some way, but he dismissed it out of hand. It wasn't worth the effort nor risk of exposure when he could just as easily perform a little worse when it was his turn to throw. That is, if he decided to lose on purpose. Which he hadn't yet. Decided, that is.

"You ready to get wet, Kent?" Lois hollered at him from the throw line twenty feet away.

"Bring it on, Lane!" he yelled back at her.

There were a few cheers and whistles from the crowd at large as Lois set up her stance and readied herself to make her first throw. The look of determination on her face and the way she bit at her bottom lip in concentration was more than distracting, which was why, even with his super senses and reflexes...he was surprised to suddenly find himself in the water, staring through the plexiglass of the tank at her, a look of gleeful victory on her face.

He scrambled a bit to grab for his glasses, as they'd been knocked loose when he splashed down into the tank. When he resurfaced, he shook the water from his hair and ran a hand through it to get it out of his eyes and put his glasses back on. There was a brief moment of panic when he realized that he'd literally just slicked back his wet hair, so he ran his hand through again, tousling it a bit.

The attendant was resetting the platform as Clark climbed up the short ladder and got resettled on it, this time sopping wet. A spattering of cheers had erupted when he'd hit the water, but they had died down now that it was time for the next in line. Well, once Lois was out of the way, that was. He looked up to find Lois had come closer, likely to rub in her victory in his face, heedless of the impatient ladies in line behind her. The smile on Lois' face stretched ear to ear and the sight of it was nothing less than intoxicating.

"Pretty pleased with yourself, aren't you?" he asked, his legs swinging above the water.

She nodded. "Piece of cake. No winning for you now — only losing," she said, and then she walked off toward the sidelines.

"Or a tie," he called after her.

"In your dreams, Kent," she yelled back, laughing, and he watched as she found her way to an empty seat at a table a few yards away on the sidelines of the dunk tank.

The whack of a ball against the heavy yellow tarp behind the target startled Clark, and he reluctantly tore his eyes from Lois and focused on his next...opponent, for lack of better term. Not that it mattered whether or not he was watching, but after Lois had knocked him squarely off balance and off the platform in one go, he thought it'd at least be nice to know when or if he was getting wet again.

As the line progressed, several women and a few men got their three chances to dunk him in exchange for their donation amount. Only one or two people had missed dunking him altogether, and increasingly, he was finding it irritating to be dripping wet constantly. At least the spandex of the suit dried quickly enough when wet, especially when he was able to fly faster. Even as invulnerable as he was, it was just downright uncomfortable to sit in a sopping wet shirt.

He worried a little about taking his shirt off when he already felt...on display. But he supposed it was no different, really, than going to the beach or the pool — he didn't exactly swim with a shirt on. So as he settled back on the platform once again, he reached to strip off his shirt, and then he tossed it off to the side on the grass, where it landed with a squishy plop. He sighed and once again faced the line — that was finally getting shorter — and then...

"*Oh god*," he heard Lois gasp, followed by her sharp intake of breath. He whipped his head around to the sidelines where she was watching from a few yards away. Nothing seemed wrong with her, though her eyes were wide and she coughed a few times before waving at him. He waved back, his mind working overtime and his hearing tuning into the trip-hammering of her heart.

But then he heard the cheering start again — and it was painfully loud in his ears since he'd been focused on Lois' heartbeat. He shook his head and looked forward again, wholly unsure of how to handle this information that Lois was...well, she wasn't unaffected at the sight of him with no shirt on. This shouldn't be news to him. Wasn't news to him, really. And yet...

His thoughts were interrupted as Mary from the art department stepped up to the throw line. He tried to force a smile; after all, Mary was someone he'd always found great to chat to. But now she seemed to be looking at him

with some sort of hunger, her eyes shamelessly wandering over his bare chest, and he was feeling more than a little exposed.

Mary managed to dunk him on her second throw, and as he rose to standing in the tank again, he went through his little routine of fixing his hair and then putting his glasses back on. He inhaled sharply when he looked up and found Lois staring intently at him as though she was watching the twitch of every single muscle as he moved.

Clark let out a nervous chuckle and gave her a thumbs up as he finished climbing the ladder and settled himself back on the platform once more. She smiled wryly at him and shrugged as she crossed her arms over her chest and shifted her weight in her seat.

He looked ahead again so he knew what to expect from the next thrower, but he watched Lois from the corner of his eye, her gaze unabashedly wandering hungrily over his chest just as Mary's had. Though now, he was feeling... uncomfortable in an entirely different way.

After yet another dunk, this time from Sally from advertising, he fumbled for his glasses a few seconds longer than usual, but still managed to run his hand through his hair, tousle it a bit as some of the water sluiced off, and put his glasses back on. He heard another gasp from Lois and fought the strong urge to look over at her again. Seeing her expression, listening to her heart beat, and watching the slight flush of her cheeks was torturous. A pleasant torture, to be sure, but not one that he really cared to experience any more than necessary while he was still so very much on display. So he kept his eyes straight ahead.

Finally, everyone in line had gotten their turn — Mary and Sally even taking an extra turn each — and he was excused from the last five minutes of his time slot. As he headed toward the makeshift changing stall they'd set up for dunkees, he noticed that the line for dunking Lois was already forming. It was longer than his had been. He felt a pang of sympathy for her and a different sort of protectiveness than he was used to — not just for her physical safety.

He gave himself a zap of heat vision to get the damp off his skin, and then changed into his spare clothing. He wished more people could know her like he did, see how passionate and dedicated and caring she was about her work instead of seeing Mad Dog Lane. But Clark knew part of that was almost a persona of hers, the byproduct of what it had taken for to climb to the top of their field in such a short time. He could only imagine how much harder it had been as a woman in a male-dominated field...and how lonely it'd been.

As he put his wet clothes in the plastic bag they'd provided, part of him wondered if that was why she'd

stopped fighting so hard against having him for a partner. He knew he was a good writer, but being assigned as a rookie journalist to work alongside the award-winning Lois Lane had felt like a massive stroke of luck...dare he say fate? Regardless of how they'd started, there was no doubt now how well they worked together, how well their styles complemented one another. Falling into friendship with her had been even easier than their work relationship, though no doubt helped by it.

And now, now that he had a foolish amount of hope that there was something even more for them to gain? He was feeling —

“Clark!” Lois whispered hotly outside the changing tent. Shoot, she needed time to change if she'd planned to and here he was daydreaming.

“Sorry!” he said as he pulled back the curtain and slung his backpack over his shoulder. He stepped out of the tent and gestured for her to enter, but instead, she grabbed his wrist and started dragging him in the opposite direction of the dunk tank.

“We need to leave. Now,” she said through clenched teeth.

“Wait, what? Lois, what about your —”

“I'm not doing it. C'mon.” She continued dragging him by the arm.

“Lois, wait...” He stopped moving and let his hand slide into hers as she kept moving, but then tugged gently to stop her when he had her hand.

When she turned to face him, he saw tears threatening in red-rimmed eyes, and he could hear her heart racing almost erratically.

“Oh, Lois. I know...I'm sorry the line is so long. It's not that they don't respect you. They think you're the best damn reporter in the country.”

He heard the hitch in her breath, and she just stared at him for a moment, searching his eyes. “It-it's not that,” she said quietly.

He gave her hand a gentle squeeze. “What is it?”

At first she didn't say anything; she just looked at him, her eyes darting down to his now-covered chest and back up to his eyes. She opened her mouth and closed it again as if the words had escaped her.

And now he was worried — what had happened to make Lois Lane speechless and close to tears? He released her hand so that he could bring both of his hands up to her shoulders, holding her gently. “Lois, talk to me...please.”

“I-I...need to...not be here,” she said. Her eyes darted again, this time to survey the crowds around them — over near the tank and then the people milling around the main stage, waiting for the band that was supposed to play later. And then her eyes were back on his, searching again for

something. “Your apartment. My apartment. Doesn’t matter. Just not here.”

“Okay, okay,” he soothed. “We can go. Did you want me to talk to Perry about changing your time or even canceling?”

“I already did. Let’s go,” she said brusquely, and his heart sank a little as she turned to edge somewhat awkwardly out of his grasp.

He let his hands fall back to his sides, and he moved to follow after her, but then she turned suddenly to face him. Her eyes, a bit wild, found his and then dropped to his hand. Impulsively, she clasped it and pulled him along with her. “C’mon. My place is closer.”

Chapter 3

Lois kept stealing glances at Clark as they walked, which was probably only worrying him more. But she couldn’t help it. She was still holding his hand — for some reason desperate to not let go of him. His palm wasn’t sweaty, which made sense. *He* wasn’t sweaty — there was only the faint dampness left in his hair, not fully sun-dried after his shift in the dunk tank.

Lots of things were making sense now. A lot more sense.

That Superman had avoided her all summer...why it had felt like he didn’t trust her...

That Clark had...that Clark had worked so hard to hide his heart again after what she’d said...

And she was feeling relieved and confused and terrified all at once. This man walking next to her, somehow so patient with his love and acceptance, hadn’t said a word or otherwise pressured her into talking yet even though he had no idea what was wrong. He was just walking her home, holding her hand this entire time, taking her at her word that she needed to leave the carnival and talk — no questions, just concern and support.

Lois drew in a deep breath and blew it out. Next to her, Clark glanced briefly to check on her and squeezed her hand. Oh, it felt so incredibly nice and so safe to be holding his hand. Why had they never held hands before, all this time?

...it was more intimate, wasn’t it? Holding hands. Her mind reeled, unable to even try and catalog all the thousands of little touches they’d had in the year or so they’d known each other. She touched him all the time — a hand on the chest to emphasize her point, a swat on his arm to mock-scold his teasing; and he always touched her too — a hand on her shoulder as he edited her copy, his hand on the small of her back as they entered or left a room.

But holding hands? She took another deep breath. That hadn’t happened until the Ferris wheel. And ever since

then, it’d seemed like they’d both crossed some invisible line, from partners and friends to something almost indefinable.

As they went up the stairs to the lobby of her apartment building, and then rode the elevator up, still in silence, Lois could feel her heart racing, wondering what on earth she was going to say to him once they were behind closed doors.

When they finally reached her door, she hesitated just a second before letting go of his hand, half scared that he’d fly off without another word. “Keys,” she said awkwardly, gesturing at the locks on her door before fishing through her backpack.

She kept watch on him out of the corner of her eye while she unlocked each of the deadbolts. He wouldn’t fly off, right? This was Clark. Clark wouldn’t do that.

But Superman had. Oh god, how was he still here? All summer...how had he managed to still be her friend after what she’d said, after she’d broken his heart so much worse than she’d even realized?

The last of the locks unlocked, she opened the door and went inside without checking behind her because...she both wondered if and knew for certain that he’d follow her. There was silence — only the sounds of her apartment, the fish tank filter bubbling gently, the low hum of the refrigerator and the air conditioning — as she let her backpack drop to the floor beside the couch and went to adjust the thermostat.

When she heard the sound of Clark reengaging all the locks behind her, she let out a breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding. He’d stayed. Of course he’d stayed. He would always stay, right?

She turned on her heel and found him watching her — only concern in those beautiful brown eyes, none of the hurt and hate she half expected to find. Her heart was in her throat as she blurted out, “I’m sorry!”

His expression softened more, somehow, and he stepped toward her. “It’s okay, Lois. We didn’t have to stay at the carnival. I’m not mad.” He paused two steps away from her, and his arm came up halfway before he let it drop again, as though he was hesitant to touch her. “Did you...want to talk about it, tell me what’s wrong?” His voice was so soft, so concerned.

The cold air from the AC was hitting her still-warm skin and the sweat-dampened areas of her shirt, and she shivered. “I’m going to go change my shirt,” she said, turning away from him, retreating to the relative safety of her bedroom.

She closed the door and rested her forehead against the cooler wood. What was she doing? She didn’t know how to do this, any of it! She took a deep breath and headed for

her dresser to grab some lounge pants, a long-sleeved v-neck, and some clean, *dry* undergarments.

As she changed, she tried to gather her thoughts, tried to take deep breaths to calm the shakiness in her limbs and the pounding of her heart. *This is Clark. This is Clark. You can trust Clark*, she told herself.

But part of her *did* doubt that...just a little. After all, it was clear that part of him didn't trust her fully. How could he when he hadn't told her the single biggest thing about himself?

And while she felt keenly the anguish and guilt of how she'd treated him, how he must have felt that day and later that night...she knew she wasn't fully to blame for that. No, she'd somehow fallen in love with two men who were one and the same. Of course, it made perfect sense *now* how that had happened — but how was she supposed to have known? How, as someone who felt so strongly about being monogamous, was she supposed to reconcile the fact that she felt she truly loved two men at once?

It hadn't been fair. And while part of her wanted to lean into that, the fact that she wasn't wholly to blame, pick a fight to deflect and distance them both from her own culpability...the fact of the matter was that they had both hurt each other.

Now, months later, after all that time slowly rebuilding their friendship...the last thing she wanted to do was fight with him. Her heart wouldn't be able to take it if he flew out her window like that a second time.

Lois took a few deep, shuddering breaths and headed back out of the bedroom. She found Clark in the kitchen, leaning against the counter with his arms crossed over his broad chest and his legs crossed at the ankle. Next to him, the kettle was on the stove, and she could hear the water roiling as it got closer to its boiling point.

"I know it's hot out, but I thought...I thought maybe you'd like some tea?" he said seemingly casual, though a bit tentative. He was still unsure how she was feeling, what was wrong.

She nodded, not entirely sure how she was feeling either. Superman was making her tea. In her kitchen. Her partner, her best friend, and her hero...just standing there sexily, leaning against the counter, all forearms and charm, making tea for her.

Just like he was going to make her dinner. She frowned — make that *had* been going to. There was no way she felt right making him pay up when he hadn't even had a chance to compete. The idea had been impulsive anyway, reckless. Lois Lane may jump in without checking the water level first, but that was when it came to work. She wasn't one to throw caution to the wind when it came to her personal life, not anymore.

But this was Clark. The incredibly too gorgeous, most kind and compassionate person she'd ever known. Not to mention patient. Because even now, though he had to be worried out of his mind, he was giving her the space she needed to settle, waiting until she was ready to talk. But she had no idea if he was being Patient Friend Clark or...or if he still...cared about her — loved her, like he'd told her that day in the park.

She finally looked up at him and said the first thing that came to mind. "Were you going to cheat?"

"What?" he asked, surprised.

She was surprised too; it wasn't exactly the first thing they ought to have talked about. "If you'd had your turn, were you going to cheat?"

"Is this about the bet, the prize?" He straightened, turning off the burner for the kettle and moving away from the counter slightly. "If it's...If you're feeling uncomfortable, we don't have to do anything at all," he said, his tone somehow still patient, understanding.

"What would have happened if there was a tie?"

"I'm not sure...What are you trying to get at, Lois? I'm confused." He ran a hand through his hair and blew out a breath. She couldn't tell if he was frustrated or nervous. Why would he be nervous?

"I need to know if you still want to make me dinner!" she blurted out.

She watched and waited as a whole host of emotions flickered across his face, and the silence stretched between them for a moment before he stepped closer to close the distance between them. "This isn't about dinner..."

She nodded vigorously, tears pricking again at her eyes, and her voice trembled when she spoke. "It is," she insisted. "I just...I need to know if you're going to make me dinner."

"I'll make you dinner whenever you want," he said without hesitation, his voice soft and just a little thready, and the sound of it made her breath hitch.

A few tears spilled out, hot as they rolled down her cheeks. In an instant, it seemed, he was right there in front of her cupping her face and wiping away her tears with the pads of his thumbs. "What's really going on, Lois?"

"Oh, Clark!" she sobbed. "I'm sorry about that day in the park. I'm so sorry. I wish I could take it back."

Clark was quiet, but she could see the emotion written plainly on his face as his eyes searched hers. And he nodded, almost imperceptibly.

"I just..." she trailed off and turned from him, needing a break from the intensity of the moment. She took a deep breath and turned back to face him. "I'm no good at relationships, Clark. I ruin them. And didn't want to risk the best thing that's ever happened to me." Her breath was coming faster now, the tears spilling as they pleased. "I

was so conflicted, more than conflicted, Clark...I loved you — *love* you. And I love Superman. How was I supposed to know? What was I supposed to do?"

She'd seen his shock — her own revelation of love — and then his flinch at the words 'love Superman'. And he looked torn. Anguished. Just like that day in the park. Just like that night he'd come to reject her. No...not the same, a different pain but just as anguished.

"Lois..." he said, his voice gruff and thick with emotion. "I need to tell you..."

She shook her head, but she couldn't get the words out past the lump in her throat. Instead, she closed the distance between them and wrapped her arms around him, hugging him fiercely, tightly because she didn't want to let him go ever again. He buried his face in her neck and held her, his strong arms unyielding with their desperate comfort and regret.

"I choose you," she whispered in his ear. "Both of you." Lois felt him tense in her arms for just a moment, so she held tighter. "All of you," she promised.

He let out a shuddering breath, and she felt the tension drain from him, his body relaxing but at the same time, his arms tightening more around her. "Thank you," he breathed against her neck.

The hug seemed to last forever, but it was the most comfortable forever. Warmest. Safest. And she was sure she could feel his love for her within his embrace, but the scared and unsure part of her — the one that found it hard to trust, to let go — needed to hear it.

Finally, she loosened her arms and he did too, her hands coming to rest on his chest. And though she didn't expect it, her heart leapt at the fact that he didn't fully let go — he let his hands slide down to the small of her back, holding her closely, though they'd both pulled back just enough that she could see his face.

The look on his face took her breath away — she could see it now clearly, the love that he'd hidden away for months and months, yet his eyes still seemed to hold a hint of apprehension. It was as though she could feel his heart, his hope held suspended on the precipice...waiting to fall for her a second time if that's what she wanted.

And she wanted it, oh so desperately.

So she answered him, tipping her head and leaning in until her lips met his. There was warmth and tingling and a slow tentativeness that made them both a little breathless. She drew back only for a moment before they fell back into the kiss, and as their lips moved, she was overwhelmed with a surge of feeling she could only describe as love and desire and consummate belonging. One of his hands came up to cup her face and he ran his thumb across her cheek as he deepened the kiss. Threads

of love and desire raced through her at will, making her whole body feel alive and free.

When they finally pulled back, he rested his forehead against hers as they both worked to catch their breath. "Wow..." she whispered.

Clark let out a breathy chuckle that sounded like half relief and half amusement. "Yeah..."

"You're Superman..." It wasn't quite a question, but not quite a statement.

He pulled back ever so slightly and nodded. "Yeah..." He ducked his head and added, "I'm sorry. I...I...should have handled things so differently. I could ha —"

She put her fingers to his lips to stop him. "Clark, we both could have done so many things differently...and we have a lot to talk about..." She paused, taking in his features, his expression, trying to see him — all of him. Her fingers ran along his lips and then over his jawline. "But today...maybe today you could just hold me and don't let me go?"

He shut his eyes tightly for a moment and nodded, then he opened them again only to steal her breath again with the look of absolute love and longing. "I can do that," he said, smiling, his voice husky. "I can definitely do that."

Epilogue

Clark smiled as he looked around the living room and kitchen, his nerves a jumble of excitement and a touch of restlessness. With some hesitation and a lot of courage, he'd managed to ask her after all — if she would let him ask her on a date to his apartment to cook for her. And she'd said yes.

He couldn't help but hum along to the soft strains of *I Only Have Eyes for You* by the Flamingos as he added the finishing touches to his apartment. Scattered about the room on bookshelves and end tables were small mason jars with short-stemmed, wild, red roses — about two dozen of them. He'd gone to Smallville only to cut a few to put in a vase on the dining room table, but his mother had insisted — squealed with delight, actually, and then insisted — that she had the perfect idea. It'd taken two careful trips with boxes filled with the jars and roses and candles — small votives that were also nestled in mason jars and spread around the room.

When his mom had also given him a cream-colored tablecloth to borrow, he half expected she might send him off with her good china and silver too. He chuckled to himself at his mother's exuberance and his father's good-natured laughing at it all — it made him feel so good that his parents were happy for him, shared in his joy.

The aroma of sauteed garlic from cooking the green beans filled the air and met with the savory smell of the crusted parmesan that covered the chicken breasts. Dinner

was just about ready, and with perfect timing — it was 7 o'clock.

Just a few seconds later, he heard a soft knock at the door. She was here. A wide grin spread across his face and his heart felt light as he skipped up the stairs to let her in.

The door swung open on a wide arc, revealing everything he'd ever dreamed of right there on his front porch. His breath caught and he wasn't entirely sure he hadn't floated off the ground a few inches. She was a vision in a strapless and flowing lavender dress that fell to just above her knee, and his eyes couldn't help but be drawn to the smooth expanse of creamy skin, her collarbone and shoulders accentuated by a double strand of pearls.

"Hi," she said, her voice small and a bit breathy.

"Hi," he managed, lowering himself back down, as he had indeed floated, hopefully not enough for her to have noticed. "You look...incredible."

She blushed and ducked her head slightly. "Thanks. You don't look too bad yourself," she said, taking in his charcoal suit and patterned tie.

Then his brain kicked in and his manners, realizing they were still standing in the doorway. "Oh, I'm sorry. Please, come in!" He swept his arm in toward the apartment as she walked through the door and down the steps with a shy smile on her face.

As he was closing the door, he heard her gasp behind him. "Oh, Clark! It's..."

A small twinge of alarm gripped him — maybe he'd done too much, gone overboard, and he —

"It's beautiful. This is..." She turned around to look at him as he was coming down the steps into the living room. "This is all for me?"

"Is it too much? I'm sor —"

"No! No, it's perfect. Thank you," she said, tucking her hair behind her ear.

Clark breathed a sigh of relief and smiled. "You're welcome." He put his hand on the small of her back and guided her to the table. "Here, have a seat. Dinner's almost ready." He pulled out her chair for her and pushed it in gently as she sat. "I have wine or sparkling cider...or cream soda, if you want?"

She smiled and chuckled lightly. "Wine would be wonderful, Clark."

"Oh, good," he said, starting to feel the jittering of his nerves again, "because I have a great pinot grigio that will pair really well with our dinner."

He got to work pouring them each a glass of the chilled white wine, making sure all the burners and the stove were off, and plating their food. After setting the wine glasses on the table, along with the rest of the bottle, he went back to grab their plates. Lois was adjusting her knife and fork and

fussing a little with her napkin in her lap, he noticed. At least they were both nervous, he told himself.

When he set her plate down in front of her, her eyes went wide. "Oh, wow! Clark! This looks and smells amazing." He watched as she closed her eyes to take in the different aromas of everything on her plate. God, she was beautiful.

Clark seated himself to her right and smiled. "We've got parmesan crusted chicken breast, fresh green beans sauteed with garlic, and a crispy fried polenta with butter and chives."

"This all seems like...just wow, Clark," she said, smiling at him, though she seemed a bit taken aback. "I didn't realize you could cook...like this. I was expecting maybe spaghetti and meatballs, not an elegant, gourmet dinner. I...I kind of feel a little guilty that you went to all this trouble when you didn't even get a fair shot in the contest." She fussed a little at her fork, sliding it to reposition it on the tablecloth.

"It's no trouble, Lois," he said automatically. Then, he took a chance and covered her hand with his own. He waited until she looked back up at him, then said, "It was never about the contest for me."

Her smile was a bit unsure, but her eyes were shining.

"Besides, I was, uh..." He ducked his head a bit before meeting her eyes again. "I was thinking of losing on purpose anyway, so I could cook for you. Actually, I was going to offer to cook dinner for you either way, and my only hesitation was that...I really wanted it to be a date." They shared a smile, and he closed his eyes for just a moment to listen to the sound of her heartbeat, strong and just a little bit wild.

"I think I did too," she said with a shy smile. "I mean...it wasn't a very clever prize when you think about it. Clearly, my subconscious had other things in mind."

He gave her hand a squeeze. "Well, however we got here...I'm really glad we're here," he said, his voice thick with emotion.

"Me too." She let out a small breath and smiled at him.

They let the silence stretch between them for a moment longer, and Clark allowed his heart to revel in the fact that they *were* here. And while they had a lot to talk about and figure out, he could only be happy about the fact that all his truths were out in the open and she accepted him, loved him for who he was.

"I, uh...I guess we should eat before this gets cold," he said, giving her hand another squeeze before he moved to grab his silverware.

"Oh! But you could warm it up with your heat vision gizmo, couldn't you?"

He chuckled, though his heart soared at her casual yet exuberant mention of his powers. "I could...but it doesn't taste the same, usually."

"Oh, interesting." Her smile was genuine and he could almost see her mind trying to work out all the commonplace uses for his powers. "Wait! Is this how my coffee is sometimes hotter than I remember it being?!"

Clark ducked his head and grinned sheepishly.

"Wow...I...thanks. This is going to take some getting used to," she said, and he was grateful for the levity in her tone, her casual acceptance.

For the next while, they enjoyed the meal and the wine. There were pleasant lulls in conversation, and otherwise, they talked about lighter topics and what getting back to work would be like. When they'd had their fill and pushed back their plates, Clark got up to clear the table and bring out dessert and some decaf coffee.

"Death by chocolate cake for dessert," he said, setting her plate in front of her with a flourish.

He watched her eyes light up and a slight thrill of desire ran through him as her tongue peeked out to lick her lips in anticipation. "You spoil me, Clark." She grinned up at him, her eyes twinkling.

"You deserve it," he said simply, unable to help the slight huskiness that had slipped into his voice. He set his own plate down and sat down again.

Clark was starting to question the wisdom of his choice in desserts as he listened to Lois' all the intoxicating little noises she made as she enjoyed her cake with gusto. So he was grateful when she pushed back the last half of her dessert and started up the conversation again.

"Polenta was a bold choice...given Chompy's mood, you know." There was a flirtatious teasing in her tone and her eyes twinkled at him.

He could only laugh heartily.

"Where is he, by the way?" she asked.

"Uh...he wasn't invited?"

"Clark! Really?"

"Look around, Lois..." He gestured at the decor around the apartment. "I was going for...um, a romantic atmosphere and he's...well, he's...corny," he said, barely able to get out the last word without laughing.

Lois groaned and rolled her eyes, but she couldn't hide her smile from him. And he thought...he could happily do this for the rest of his life. He could only hope that she would too, and that someday he'd know the right time and place to ask her. For now, though, for now he was more than content with everything he had right here.

"Where'd you go just then?" she asked. "Oh...did you...hear something? A call for help? Wow! All this time, I thought...well, that doesn't matter! If you heard something, you need to go. I woul —"

He touched her hand, interrupting her, and shook his head. "I didn't hear anything." Part of him wanted to sit and bask in the knowledge that, now that she knew his secret, there was just an automatic acceptance of the fact that he would have to leave at a moment's notice. But the bigger part of him just wanted...

Clark stood and grabbed a hold of her hand. "Can I...I want to show you something. Will you come with me?"

She clasped his hand automatically, and he helped her to standing, her body suddenly very close to his. He could sense the change in her breathing, the slightly more rapid rise and fall of her chest, and the way she looked up at him, the way her lips seemed so inviting...

They fell into the kiss together, his mouth capturing hers and her lips and tongue so eager to explore. She tasted of chocolate and faintly of their dinner before that. As if by reflex, one of his hands slid down around to the small of her back, holding her just a little more closely, and his other hand went up to cup her cheek and thread his fingers through her hair. The feel of her lips against his was dizzying and magical, and he was sure he would never get enough. His heart raced with desire that threatened to overwhelm him, so he gentled his kisses and eventually pulled back.

"Wow," Lois breathed. "Is that what you wanted to show me?" She grinned at him, though looked about as dazed as he felt from their kisses.

He let out a soft chuckle. "That wasn't part of the plan, no. But...I couldn't help it."

Somehow, her smile got wider. His heart was soaring again.

"You wanted to see the skyline with me," he said, his voice a bit low and rough.

"You heard me," she gasped softly. "...of course you heard me."

His palm still cupping her face, he swept his thumb across the soft skin of her cheek. "You don't know how many times I've wanted to take you flying, show you the skyline, the stars and the moon at night...everything..."

"Oh, Clark." She pressed her cheek into his palm. "You know, I'll bet Superman has a phenomenal view of the Metropolis skyline..."

"It's a good thing it's nighttime because the Metropolis skyline is even more impressive now, with the lights of the city buildings all twinkling." Clark grinned widely. "The view will make everything worth it, Lois. Just you wait and see."

THE END