

Gifts Really Do Solve Everything

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Summary: It's "Whine, Whine, Whine," and Lois has to decide between her three suitors. But what happens when the Fates intervene in an unexpected way?

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Author Notes

Hi FoLCs!

I want to take a moment to thank PuffyTiger for organizing this ficathon and for the choice of my prompt. It forced me to challenge myself in ways that I didn't expect. So, thank you!

I also want to thank my prompt giver, bakasi, for having such a marvelously devious mind. You guys can't imagine my grin when I realized that this would be the second time I got to write for her during a ficathon! I hope you enjoy this story!

I probably could ramble on a lot more, but that would undoubtedly give you guys too many hints about the plot's details, so I'll keep it brief and invite you to enjoy this adaptation of Whine, Whine, Whine.

And last but certainly not least, another round of thanks goes to my post-posting-Beta and GE Sara, who did some of her very own magic before I submitted this little story to the Archive.

Michael :)

Disclaimer

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The setting is during "Whine, Whine, Whine" in Season 1; the handful of recognizable lines are from this episode.

Story

"Absolutely, honey. You know the only reason I wanted to keep it a secret was so your friends wouldn't think you were marrying a bum."

Too late for that, you *bum*.

I can't believe Calvin Dregg's girlfriend is actually his *wife*. And apparently, his *secret* wife. Makes me thank my future Pulitzer that I haven't gotten hitched to some no-good cheatin' liar myself, as Perry would say. Wait, did I hear them right? She's going to be perjuring herself for her bum? Okay, fine, he's only coaching her to say something helpful, but *come on*, even the new obit writer Perry hired last week could smell *that* rat.

"Hi, Lois."

Huh? Oh, look who's deigned to show up...

"Men are pigs," I heartily inform my own bum of a partner slash wannabe-boyfriend. After all, you have to actually show up, go on more than one date, and stick to your girlfriend's side if you want to be a boyfriend, don't you? The pompous voice from the squeaky speaker of the mini-TV the bum's wife—Elise, wasn't it?—had brought, interrupts me from further explaining our relationship status to Clark.

I don't want to eavesdrop on the boob tube's equivalent of the National Whisper, but the show *is* about the bum's plans for suing Superman, and you never know what information might prove useful in taking him down. Still, listening in on the incessant, self-aggrandizing drone of the "news" anchor mixed with Dregg's own notions of entitlement makes me lose interest in the weak coffee they serve at Le Petit Bistro. As I glance over at Clark, I can see he's thinking along the same lines. He might not be a Class-A boyfriend, but at least he's a good friend to Superman. That's *something* to build a relationship on, isn't it?

There's a sudden explosion from the small electronic device, followed by a much larger, verbal explosion from the target of my investigation. *What a surprise, the equipment failure must have been the wife's fault*. Say what you will about Daddy, he never blamed Mother for his affairs. He would have had to care to do that.

The bum races off to find a new TV to watch himself on, and then Elise as she pays the check she was stuck with.

Now I guess it's finally time to address the *other* couple in the room.

"Well?" I give Clark the chance to explain himself.

"Well, what?" The clueless expression on his face exposes him as just one more typical, oblivious *man*.

"Time to talk."

Still nothing from Clark. *Great!*

"Clark, we were on a date. And you just disappeared and never came back."

"Look, Lois, I'm... I'm not exactly sure what to say."

Is he being serious about his deer-in-the-headlights act? I decide to help him along because I *do* want to try this whole relationship thing.

"The truth. Look, I've come to the point with this, *with us*, that whatever the truth is, I need to hear it."

I take a deep breath. The thought is now out there. The ball is in Clark's court. One way or the other, I will finally know... *that Clark is going to bolt again?* The look on his face says it all.

"Clark, don't you do it!" I still try. I have to. Call it desperation. Call it hope. Call it anger. God help me, I still try.

"I'm really sorry."

Sorry? He's sorry to leave me just like the bum left his wife? I don't dare to vocalize my thoughts—I don't want to get looked at like a crazy person for screaming in the middle of a crowded eatery.

Besides, he merely went to the bathroom, didn't he? He ate something that disagreed with him, and now he went to the bathroom.

I watch as the lunch crowd thins and the waitress skips about, clearing off dishes and readying the empty tables for the next set of customers. Okay, time to face the music, Lane. I flag down the waitress and leave a note with her for my not-a-boyfriend, just in case he does decide to return.

Two words should suffice—*Forget it!*

* * *

As I snap the final deadbolt on my door into place, I reflect that the afternoon I wasted since Clark's abandoned me—again—at lunch hasn't done much to lighten my disposition. Who would have guessed that it's so hard to dig up information on an English bum? Oh, sure, the stooge at the British consulate was very polite and proper as he informed me about the concept of time zones. Hello? I'm the top reporter at my country's leading newspaper, and it

happens to be a country that spans four time zones from coast to coast! Not to mention the handy wall clocks in the newsroom that show the local time from London to Tokyo. Strangely enough, though, my mentioning *that* particular detail to said stooge didn't help at all when he told me, "No, ma'am, I'm afraid the home office is already closed for the day." *Dickens!*

After I get out of my work clothes, I look around for something that needs doing. No, I scrubbed the grout off my kitchen island last week when Clark didn't show up to our agreed-upon midnight meeting in the Warehouse District. At least I got some Superman time out of that one when the hero showed up to apprehend the goons I was busily distracting from escaping. Still, the burgers I had brought with me were cold and the fries were stale when I got home that night, and I didn't feel like eating for two, so I ended up cleaning the grout in my kitchen for the third time this year.

I return to the living room dressed in sweats and armed with a duster. *Careful now, Lane*, I caution myself as I sweep the duster over the various knick-knacks. Angrily breaking pottery was one sure way to let off steam, but I didn't feel like redecorating—again. I pause in front of the pair of Polynesian dancers Daddy had sent me for Christmas when he was attending a medical science conference in Fiji so he wouldn't have to be home for the holidays. Why did I keep those? Besides their being tacky, they were an absentee father's guilty Christmas gift, not a cherished memory. I pick up the male figurine and examine it more closely, expecting the underside to be bearing a stamp that placed their origin in a Chinese sweatshop. Now that's funny; I never noticed that they were standing on rough and unpolished feet.

"So, where *did* you come from?" I ask the male totem in my hand, not really expecting an answer. I snort and shake my head when, after a second or two, the figure still hasn't answered me. I really must be going crazy when I expect a hunk of burned clay to answer me, much less a hunk of clay shaped like a *man*. "So, maybe I should ask your dancing partner?"

It's official now, I'm talking to a statue. Not that real flesh-and-blood men are more forthcoming with me about their whereabouts. "You know, just once, I wish that Clark wouldn't run away from me when it's time to talk." I take a deep breath before I continue, looking into the statue's eyes. "Just once, I wish that he was honest about his feelings and priorities, so we could figure out if there's a future for us." I give the statue a quick dusting, and as I place it back on the shelf, I realize just how dusty it must have been before. Now, I can even see its glazed eyes reflecting the faint blue light from my fish tank. I turn the statue just a fraction of a bit, and the reflection disappears.

Satisfied and much calmer than before, I look for the next spot that needs my duster's attention, but after running it over couple of picture frames on the wall, I realize that I have done enough cleaning for the night. Tomorrow morning, I should be able to get the information about Dregg at the consulate, and then it's off to the courthouse for some local digging.

* * *

As unproductive as yesterday had been, a morning spent at the courthouse more than made up for it. I can already see the above-the-fold headline of my next investigation: The Vindictively Litigious and the Ambulance Chasers Enabling Them. I'll bet Perry's gonna love it! It might even earn me another Kerth Award next year. Aside from the subject matter and society's need to learn about how prevalent this malpractice really is, the Kerth Committee are people, too. And newspaper people at that, all of whom must have had their run-ins with crooked lawyers after they liberated information during an investigation. Yes, the more I think about it, the more I'm certain about this. Kerth Number Four, here I come!

But that's for Future-Me. Today-Me has to help a friend in need. I recognize the subject of my thoughts sitting on a park bench on the other side of the street and afford traffic only a passing glance as I find my path between the cars. Some small part of my brain notices the lack of screeches and honks, and I take a quick look left and right to see a cop casually strolling in front of the courthouse on his patrol route. I file that tidbit away for future use; you never know when a readily available policeman comes in handy to apprehend some goon who's been chasing you. I probably should add all the courthouses to my mental map of the city, not just police stations and firehouses.

As I get closer to Superman, a little girl hugs him tightly before letting go to find her mommy. I feel the corner of my mouth tug upwards, allowing a faint smile on my face. It's good to see someone innocent hugging the Man of Steel when I'm not around to do it. Most people just look for a photo opportunity or his signature on their shirt or something, like he's a rock star. But seeing an innocent little kid hugging Superman, that's genuine affection, and he needs that.

"Careful, I might get jealous." I tease him because it's what I do when Clark's in a funk, and Superman's still a man.

Superman looks up, and I'm startled by how exhausted he looks.

"Lois... what are you doing here?"

"I've been digging up more information about the bum who's suing you." I sit down next to him to tell him about my discoveries. "He's got quite a record back in England. Loved to sue people. Loved to *get* sued so he could countersue. Now, I think that establishes a real pattern..."

"It would, if it were admissible."

"But isn't it?" Admissible? Why would it not be admissible? And where did Superman pick up lawyer speak? "I... I mean he's clearly vindictively litigious." I reach for his hand, trying to make him understand how good this must be for our case.

And Superman pulls away, arms folding over his chest. "I'm sorry, Lois. But thanks for trying."

That's not how it's supposed to go! "Tell me what I can do to help." He was asking for my help only two nights ago, and now this? I try again. "Please!"

Superman gets up and drops his next bomb on me. "You can't help me. Thanks for trying, but this?" His arm darts out to indicate the courthouse. "Getting sued, that's one thing." He pulls his hand through his hair. "But not being able to help people? Not understanding what's going on?" He shakes his head. "I... I just can't anymore..."

"Can't...?" My mind's buzzing like the times when Superman relocates me during an investigation so some bullet or crossbow bolt or anvil doesn't hit me in the face. I never expected to feel this way from a conversation, though. "Can't *what*?"

"I'm sorry, Lois. This entire thing, it's become pointless anyway."

I reach for his arm, but he'd already turned around and started to jog through the park. My head's still foggy, and I just sit there, watching the red cape flapping behind a retreating Superman. He's not running away exactly, more like a fast walk. It's totally incongruous. The blue and red figure pauses a moment to wait for traffic to lighten up enough so he can cross the street on the other end of the park, before he disappears into a narrow alley between two buildings. I hold my breath as I listen for the telltale sonic boom of his departure into the sky, but the city remains quiet except for the noises of traffic and people talking and birds chirping. And then some guy in a trench coat exits the alley, and I watch with numb disinterest as he flags down a cab.

I'm still unsure what has happened, but it sure looks like my deliberation about whether I should be dating Clark or Dan or Superman just lost a contender. I shake my head. No, it was already down to two contenders. But still, did I really just get dumped by Superman before I could tell him that a reporter and a superhero aren't going to be the next couple of the year? And more importantly, what does it say

about the men I date, when they never stay long enough to discuss our relationship?

* * *

I press my back deeper into the shadows of the dimly lit hallway of the OmniCorp headquarters building as the target of my investigation walks past. Observation is so much easier if you know where everyone's going to be beforehand. So long as they actually do show up on time and in the right place. But as the old adage goes—unlucky in love, lucky in investigating.

Still, I let out a quiet breath of relief when Dan—one of my unlucky loves—and OmniCorp president Charles Knox shake hands. I hastily scribble down their exchange—money for drug approval—while I continue to stare at two groups of letters with question marks behind them in the top right corner of my pad. DEA or FDA, which is it? Is Dan truly undercover, or did I manage to date a corrupt bureaucrat? Thinking back, I never actually saw him arrest someone or flash a badge or anything like that. On the other hand, would a bureaucrat really decide to impersonate a federal cop, even if he does have a James Bond complex? There's got to be easier—and safer—ways to worm your way into a newspaper investigation.

I stare at my scribble, trying to decipher what I'd steno'd automatically while my mind was occupied with Dan, and then my eyes turn back to the two men. Well, Knox just bought what he believes is an FDA approval for their new drug, Nirvana. And with Dan on his way back to the elevator, it's time to face the music. I'm now mostly certain about the tune that's gonna be playing. But mostly certain isn't one hundred percent certain. And that means I have to confront him. Now.

"So, this is what you didn't want me to find out about."

I can see him freezing up for just a second before he drags me into the elevator and frantically pushes the fake *door close* button until the elevator door finally closes.

"Lois, there are things going on you can't know about..."

Nervousness. Time to go in for the kill.

"Really? Like, you're posing as a corrupt FDA researcher? And the man you just met is the president of OmniCorp, who wants to push through a new painkiller called—" I make a big show of checking my notes. "—Nirvana, but the DEA thinks might have mind-altering effects?"

"How... How did you—?"

Okay, so he's not evading the revelation I just dumped on him. Which makes him either a world-class liar and possibly a psychopath—and I'm pretty sure I've learned

how to spot those after almost marrying one—or he really is flummoxed that I figured out what he's doing. Which also rankles because, hello...?

"Because I'm a reporter. A *reporter*, remember?"

"Lois, I need you to stay out of this."

Stay out of it? Why does every man in my life tell me to stay out of things? First Superman, and now Dan. And I didn't have to be here tonight. Not after Superman told me to take a walk this morning, which classifies as a perfect reason for taking a mental health day. But, no, that's my sense of duty rearing its well-coifed head. Besides, I *am* great at my job, Dan just doesn't appreciate it.

"So, that's why you won't talk to me about your work."

I can see Dan getting more and more squirrely. He not only doesn't want me to be close to his case because he fears for my well-being, he actually...

"You don't trust me." I pour all my hurt into it. "You think I'm going to print whatever I find out about it. Is that it?"

Wide, panicked eyes. Gotcha!

"Lois, stay away from this."

"Excuse me—?"

"Stay—"

Oh no, he didn't! "What am I, a house pet?" He's lucky I don't punch him. At least Clark runs away from me instead of telling me to stay. And he never runs away from me when we're dodging bullets. He might trip and fall, and I get to worry that some crates might have crushed him, but he never tells me to stay out of the investigation.

"All you talk about is how evasive Clark is and how he's always disappearing mysteriously. But you know what? At least, he trusts me..."

Clark really does. And so does Superman. Sure, my superhero hasn't taken me to his home or anything like that, if he even has a home and doesn't just float in the clouds all day until he's needed, but he *trusts* me. Except for today, for some reason. I shake the thought off and continue to tear into my "date" for the evening.

"At least, he knows that I would never use someone close to me just to get a story. So here, I want you to have these." I slap my notes against his chest. I've got them memorized anyway. "These are all my notes on your stupid case!" I turn away from him. "Good luck."

Stupid DEA agent! I don't need him to score a headline, and if he thinks I do, then more's the pity. My heels echo angrily in the empty hallway as I make my way to the exit. Looks like the universe made my choice for me: a disap-

pearing boyfriend with intimacy issues, a superhero who thinks he's better off without me, and a federal agent who thinks I'm only dating him for a story. Not to mention, it was Dan who kept showing up at my place—and my dates with Clark—uninvited, not the other way around!

I stop and take a deep breath. I'm in the middle of the street. It's dark outside. And if I scream out my frustrations now, chances are that Superman's going to show up for an impromptu rescue. I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to suppress another scream and then make my way over to where the Jeep is parked. I need a hot bath, a tub of Rocky Road, and an hour of Ivory Tower.

* * *

“—thankfully, no one was critically injured when the school bus breached the guardrails of Queensland Bridge —”

I click off the TV when the news program starts to repeat today's headline story about a school bus nearly taking a dive into West River. The rescue took the entire afternoon and six fire engines, and it's a testament to my dedication to my own investigations that it was still news to me this late in the day. Looks like I never turned on the radio or television the entire afternoon as I was sifting through the OmniCorp data Jimmy had collected and then dropped off at my place.

Of course, what made it truly special wasn't that I had missed the hubbub, but that Superman had as well. Henderson will have an open-and-shut murder case on his hands when I meet that Calvin Dregg character again! I'll give the little bum someone to sue for an actual personal injury, messing with Superman to such an extent that our resident hero doesn't even notice when there's a busload of kids about to take a swim. I guess, I'm grateful that none of the live news 'reporters' connected the dots, instead speculating that there had to have been a mudslide or other natural disaster taking up Superman's time. And the fact that there was no report on such an event escaped them all. I give the TV—and by extension the no longer visible news program—an eyeroll, pack my half-eaten Rocky Road back into the freezer, and call it a night.

Half an hour later, I stare at the ceiling above my bed, wondering if Clark knows what's going on with Superman. He's always able to reach him, a Clark detail that drives me to distraction for entirely different reasons than all his other features. Like his smile. Or his apologetic look just before he makes me so very mad with his constant disappearing acts. I could call him—Clark, that is. The phone is right there next to me on the nightstand, beckoning me.

Disgusted with myself, I kick off the blanket and get up. Calling Clark is the wrong thing to do. Didn't Dan tell

me how a good boyfriend should act? If I quiet my mind enough, I'm sure I can hear his smug voice telling me why Clark isn't being a good boyfriend. Why Clark is all wrong for me. Why I should be dating Dan instead, a man who doesn't even trust me!

I stop my pacing in front of the nightstand and stare at the phone. Clark is just seven button presses away. I'll bet he'd even come over if I asked him to. It's not *that* late in the evening. I peek at the alarm clock. Yep. Not that late. I remember showing up at Clark's when it was much later during the whole Kyle Griffin mess. But I'm still mad at Clark. Why should I chase after my man if *he* isn't willing to put in the work as well? He could have shown up at my door with flowers and chocolates, and we could have discussed how we can help Superman.

I need a distraction! I scan my bookshelf and select a worn copy of *Where the Lost Aprils Are*. It's a mystery romance. It's The Ivory Tower in book form. Lucy once asked me why I keep it in rotation after learning all the book's secrets on the first read. I open the book and flip to one of my favorite spots about the heroine and her troubles with the dumber sex. I never told Lucy the reason, just snagged the book back and stuck my tongue out at her. If I don't tell my coworkers about *The Adventures of Wanda Detroit*, I most definitely won't tell my little sister how I try to glean writing lessons from great authors. Too many questions. Next, she might want to *read* about Wanda Detroit, and that's a hard pass. Lucy is already way too interested in my love life without getting to read about my innermost thoughts in long form.

Five minutes later, I'm back to staring at my phone. I never realized that once you actually got a boyfriend, your entire romantic outlook changes. It's no longer about finding a boyfriend; it's about living with your boyfriend. Not in the same apartment, of course! We're not there yet. And if Clark doesn't start to shape up, we might never get there. But still, and despite all my love for uncovering mysteries and unraveling conspiracies, is it too much to ask that my boyfriend works with me to achieve that outcome instead of being the main attraction of said mysterious conspiracies?

I reach for the phone, pick up the receiver, slam it back down, and start pacing again. I had almost caved and called Clark. I wonder if Doc Friskin would be proud of that? She might even call my thinking of Clark as my boyfriend a breakthrough. I probably should talk about that tomorrow on the couch. It's good to be able to talk to someone who isn't rooting for a particular outcome. All the Doc does is ask me what I want, and all I have to do is ask her to tell me what I want. I think I finally understand why therapy is such a beloved pastime of our society.

Satisfied at having had two major breakthroughs, I consider writing them down so I can remember them in the morning when I'm more rested. My eyes drift back to the phone sitting on my nightstand and taunting me. I never had that phone on my nightstand before Clark. I sit down on the bed, grab the phone, and let my fingers press the well-worn sequence of seven digits on autopilot. *Come on, Clark, pick up*, I tell the busy signal beeping from the receiver into my ear. Perplexed, I stare at the device and then slam the receiver back down. Why is there a busy signal coming from Clark's phone? Whom is he calling this late? But at least he's home. And that gives me options.

I get back up, select comfy jeans and the flannel shirt I had long ago appropriated from Clark's, and make my way out the door and into a warm late spring night. I briefly consider driving over, but my car keys are still in my apartment, and the fact that I didn't grab them tells me enough. No, it's just a couple of blocks. And Clark's neighborhood has gotten much safer since the days he'd moved in. Walking it is.

* * *

Despite the earlier indications about Clark not getting any sleep either, I'm still pleasantly surprised when I see light shining through the curtains that cover glass in his front door. I would have hated having walked all this way only to find Clark had to go and feed his neighbor's uncle's goldfish or something. Or to have to wait for Clark to finally get back out of bed and plod to the door after I wake the entire building with my constant banging on his door. Instead, I only need to bang twice while calling his name before there's the sound of footsteps overlaid by the sound of a muffled... woman's voice?

Who's visiting Clark at this time of the night? A sudden pang of guilt twists my gut when I realize how grateful I am that I know for certain it's not Mayson. The door opens before I can examine these feelings of jealousy any further.

"Oh... hi, Lois."

"Martha?"

Clark's mom recovers first and drags me inside where I notice Clark's father sitting at the kitchen table.

"Hello, Jonathan." I give a small wave.

"Lois!" He gets up, closes the distance with surprising agility for, well, anyone, at this late an hour, and envelopes me in a bear hug.

I return the gesture with a couple of friendly pats on his back until I can disentangle myself and take a closer look at my surroundings. There are boxes everywhere. And the TV is playing a muted version of the near miss on the

bridge. And there's Clark, staring at the screen and not even realizing that I'm here.

"Hi, Clark..."

Please, please, please, don't have an errand to run.

"Clark!" Martha's voice is much louder and apparently more successful at getting her boy's attention than I am. What a confidence boost that is! "Look who's come by to visit."

Clark slowly turns towards me. Or away from the TV, I can't tell. But he's looking at me without really seeing me. Then he blinks and gets up. "Umm... hi, Lois?" He does some gesticulating with his arm, which I take for an invitation to come closer and appropriate a kitchen chair to lean against. "I..." He points at the fridge. "Do... you want a cream soda?"

"Sure..." Just keep the conversation going!

Clark shambles over to the fridge and takes one of the sodas out. I know that he stocks them just for me, and it never fails to make me feel welcome. "Here."

I reach over, grab it, and our fingers touch for an instant before I pull back. *Open the can!* I pop it open and take a sip. "Thanks."

"Lois? Clark?"

I let my eyes wander over the boxes sitting in his kitchen. Most are empty; some hold plates or glasses, all wrapped in old newspaper.

"We're catching a show." Martha's voice registers somewhere in the background.

"Clark?" I snap my fingers in his face to get his attention. "Why are there boxes in your apartment?"

"Don't wait up for us!"

I hear the front door closing.

"And why are your parents in town?"

Clark turns away from me and picks up a stack of books that should have been on his bookshelf but sit next to a box already filled with more books. "They... wanted to help?"

"Help?"

Help with what? I look around some more, and something clicks in my sleep-deprived mind.

"Wait a minute." I exchange my can of soda with one of the as of yet empty boxes. "Those boxes." I gesticulate with the empty box in my hand, trying to make a point. "You're not just getting rid of some old junk, are you? There are too many boxes for that."

"Lois..."

“Don’t you ‘Lois’ me, mister!” So much for not waking the neighbors. “Oh, do I know how to pick ‘em!” I thrust the box against Clark’s chest because I’m most definitely *not* going to help him pack. “Superman doesn’t want my help.” I tick off number one on my fingers. “And Dan? He doesn’t even trust me enough to *let* me help.” Number two down. “Which brings me to you.” I give up on counting and instead push against the box Clark still holds in front of his chest. “What is *wrong* with you?”

“Ah... Lois...”

“You run away.” I turn away from him, not entirely trusting my tear ducts. “I try to open up and you disappear.” I gulp. “And now, you actually plan on disappearing forever?” His hands are on my shoulders, but I don’t turn around. “Will you run away again when I turn around?”

“Lois?”

I still don’t turn around to face him. But then I’m looking at his face. I gulp. He looks horrible. Like he hasn’t slept in days. Kind of like Superman did this morning.

“I won’t run away anymore.”

“You won’t?” I can feel a glimmer of hope in my chest as it warms my heart and thaws my frozen tears. *Stupid hope!*

He leads me back to the kitchen table and pushes me into a chair before sitting down himself, somehow never letting go of me.

“No.”

I’m still not trusting him.

“But those boxes...?” My voice holds steady, and I start to believe in miracles again.

“Yesterday’s news.”

I blink. “You *did* plan on running.”

Clark shakes his head. “No.”

I raise an eyebrow.

“Yes.” He takes a breath. “No.” He shakes his head again. “Would you believe me when I tell you that the reason no longer matters?”

Secrets? Again? “No.” I pull back a bit, but Clark doesn’t let go of my hands.

“You really have to know?”

I blink. I snort. I roll my eyes. “You’re not serious, are you?”

Clark lets go of my hands, gets up, drags his hands through his hair, and turns his back to me.

“Clark?”

“Fine.” He turns back around. “But you won’t believe me. And it honestly doesn’t matter anymore.”

I’m standing again, and the chair is bumping against something in his kitchen. “Of course, it matters!” My index finger presses against his chest. “If you want this relationship to work, you have to trust me! You can’t just tell me it doesn’t matter and keep your secrets to yourself. That’s not trusting!”

Now Clark’s snorting in what I have learned to recognize is disbelief but before I can interject, he wraps my poking hand in both of his.

“Just remember after I tell you, I did warn you about believing me.”

“Clark! Just spit it out already!”

“I’m Superman.”

I blink.

“No wait, that’s not right.”

Of course, it’s not right. I could have told him that.

“I *was* Superman.” He takes his glasses off and places them on the table. “I’m not anymore.”

He sits down and drags me with him, and somehow, we both end up on chairs again, facing each other.

“It’s because of that bum, isn’t it?” I remember how dejected Superman had been in front of the courthouse this morning. Or Clark. My head is spinning. I should say something more, shouldn’t I? “He’s dead.” No. “I mean, he *will* be dead when I find him.”

“Lo-is!”

I pull my gaze up again and look straight into Clark’s naked eyes. “I mean it.”

“It’s not Dregg’s fault.” He reaches over and pulls a legal pad from beneath a pile of stuff on his kitchen table. “Mom and I have been on the phone with my lawyer the whole evening before you got here, trying to sort out this mess.”

I stiffen. Even my farm boy wouldn’t abuse attorney-client privilege to such an extent as to tell his lawyer about Superman’s *adoptive mother*, would he?

“No, Ms. Hunter didn’t know Mom was on the phone, too. She just listened in!”

I need to get up. I need room to pace. Doc Friskin would call it distancing, I’m certain. Shrinks always blame it on your parents and have you distancing. But I just need a chance to think. And I think best when I move about. It’s the only reason my apartment is always clean.

“Then why?”

“My powers are gone.”

I stop pacing. I take a breath. I turn around to face Clark.
“What?”

“My powers.” He shrugs. “They’re gone.”

Kryptonite. “Kryptonite?”

“No.”

“Then what?”

“Does it matter?”

“Of course, it matters!”

“Not anymore.” He gesticulates around his apartment. “Don’t you see? I was packing up my stuff. I was planning on leaving. It was becoming impossible to be Superman, and I couldn’t stay as Clark and not be Superman.” He shrinks in on himself. “I was planning on leaving you.” He looks back up, and his eyes, I swear, they are pleading with me. “I didn’t trust in us the same way you did.”

“You—”

Clark suddenly slaps his hands over his ears and squints his eyes shut, and his entire face looks like Lucy’s had when she swallowed that frog on a dare.

“Clark!” Not kryptonite, at least! I’ve seen him in pain from kryptonite exposure before. Well, from getting shot with kryptonite. Either way, that’s not normal behavior, and I can’t lose him!

Before I can even think of what to do, he’s pressing his lips against mine, his hands cradling my head. What...?

I pull back after a second because Clark does well. He’s grinning like a fool and that spark is back in his eyes. What the...?

“There’s a fire. Apartment building. Suicide Slum.”

Then there’s a small tornado in the kitchen, and several of the empty boxes fly about, and the next thing I know, Superman is standing in front of me.

“Stay! I’m not running away from you.”

I squint. What the hell?

“Please? I love you.”

I don’t have time to answer before he’s out the balcony door. At least, I think that’s the way out he took. I never realized how fast he goes when he has to get to a rescue.

Still dazed, I grab my soda, the legal pad with the notes Clark took during his conversation with his lawyer and plop myself in front of the TV. The very late-night news update has long since ended, and I decide to turn up the volume on whatever documentary Channel 5 is airing as a filler

program. Perhaps the background noise will help me focus on the case notes, because watching Superman perform a rescue certainly won’t.

* * *

“Welcome back to our in-depth look at Polynesian mysticism. I’m Marlin Pfinch-Lupus, and with us tonight is Dr. Nathaniel Carmody, general practitioner and mystical enthusiast.”

The scene on the TV changes to bring a distinguished-looking professor-type into view, replete with a balding head and a gray-white beard. *“‘Tis a pleasure to share my experiences with our audience.”*

“Dr. Carmody,” the program’s host continues, *“before our commercial break, you mentioned your own adventures in Polynesia.”*

“This is correct, Marlin.” Another change to the scene brings up a series of photographs of a slightly younger-looking Dr. Carmody dressed in rainbow-colored tropical gear, who appears to be closely examining some tribal artifacts. *“I had the distinct pleasure of visiting the Fiji Islands in the 1950s and learning about their Tiki cult from the tribe’s elders.”* The sequence of photographs stops to show the doctor with one of the aforementioned elders holding up a statuette that looks just like the pair I have in my apartment. *“And what I learned is that Tiki magic is both very real and very unstable at the same time.”* Another photo appears, this one black and white, obviously taken in a lab setting like one would use to document an archeological find. *“The elders imbue their magical statues with the power to grant your deepest desires, but as I learned from observation during my time with the tribe, ‘tis a power you do not want to tap. Instead, the elders give these totems to strangers in their hope these strangers will leave them in peace and never return.”*

“This is fascinating, Dr. Carmody,” Marlin injects to give the audience some chance to catch up. *“Truly fascinating. I only ever heard of Tiki magic as rumors.”*

“Indeed, Marlin!” The scene switches back to focus on the show’s guest speaker. *“This is because the magic is so unstable.”* Dr. Carmody turns to look directly into the camera. *“You see, the Tiki cult’s elders, they do not want to cause permanent harm to those they hex with the statues. Nor do they want others to exploit their magic. And their way to accomplish this, a very clever trick ‘tis: Tiki magic, once evoked, never lasts but a moon’s turn. Or until the work is done, whichever happens first.”*

The camera returns to Marlin. *“Thank you for sharing this truly fascinating glimpse into the fantastic world of Polynesia.”* Marlin nods to the doctor and turns back to the

audience. *“And on that note, we will leave you for the night, but The Secrets of the World will return tomorrow with Dr. Anton Mamba and a look into the regenerative properties of the Doppel-Buffer frog of the Amazon rainforest. I hope you will join us again. This is Marlin Pfinch-Lupus, late at night on Channel 5.”*

Stunned, I switch off the TV, desperately suppressing a frantic cry of *Superman!*

THE END

Ficathon Prompts

Things I Want:

- A day without powers
- A Confession (may be the big reveal, but doesn't have to)
- A Misunderstanding

Things I don't want:

- Mxy
- Next Gen
- Tempus

Closing Author Notes

Dr. Carmody and the idea of a totem imbued with Tiki magic are lifted from *Love and Capes* by Thom Zahler and adapted slightly to fit the needs of this story.

The popular-scientific exploration of Polynesia is meant as a homage. I have tried to stay away from any and all stereotypes, so as to offend no one by tapping into the reservoir of storytelling opportunity.