

No Small Thing

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Rated: G

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Summary: During the anomalous heat wave in “Man of Steel Bars,” Lois is feeling a bit defeated when it seems like everyone has given up on believing Superman isn’t the cause of it, even Clark. After a little infusion of hope from Jimmy, Lois is determined to prove Superman’s innocence, especially to Clark. A “Man of Steel Bars” fix-it fic.

Story Size: 3,404 words (19 kB as text)

Author’s Note: This was written for the 2023 Christmas Ficathon (and Guess the Author contest) on the L&C Fanfic MBs. I received prompts from another FoLC, and I’ve put those at the end of the story. This one ended up coming out all in Lois’s POV, and boy, did she take me for a bit of a ride. I wasn’t expecting it (don’t I always say that?), but I love the way things turned out! Super thanks to SuperBek for GEing for the archive!

Lois sat at her desk, listening to the dull hum of the fans running all over the newsroom. The sound was almost calming—the white noise maybe more soothing than the cool air from their blades. The bare-bones night shift worked around her—writing and editing and layout and all the other day-to-day stuff they did to get the paper out in the morning. And their presence kind of made it feel like other people cared, too, that she wasn’t the only one left in Metropolis who still believed in Superman, the only one who cared about proving that he wasn’t the cause of this heat wave after all. But deep down, she knew they were just doing their jobs.

Watching Superman in the courthouse earlier, surrounded by a throng of people who more obviously didn’t care about or believe in him, had been nearly impossible. They had all been excited to have him leaving. Some had said goodbye, but the jeers of “good riddance” had been louder.

It was heartbreaking.

Lois stared back at her computer screen, the words still blurring in front of her. She wasn’t sure if it was because of how tired she was or from the tears still wetting her eyes. She was tired and heartbroken enough that it didn’t even startle her when Jimmy came up behind her. Then again, he was calling her name quietly, so maybe that was why his presence hadn’t come as a surprise.

She looked up at him, and she could see from his expression—sympathetic and tentative—that he felt bad for having bothered her in the first place. “Uh, never mind. It’s not important,” he said gently, putting a hand on her shoulder.

“It’s okay, Jimmy. What is it?” she managed to say, feeling her energy starting to fade even more. She didn’t even turn around to fully face him.

His voice was quiet, gentle . . . a bit somber, actually, matching her mood. “I sent everything we had over to Dr. Goodman. She said she would take a look at it.”

“Thanks,” she replied without much enthusiasm.

Was there even still a point? She felt like she was the only one. Heck, even Clark had disappeared, hadn’t even shown up at the courthouse to report on the verdict *or* to support Superman. Maybe . . . maybe . . .

“Jimmy . . .”

“Yeah?” he asked as he sat down next to her.

“Do you think we should give up?”

He touched her shoulder again. “No way!” he said firmly, and it set off a little spark inside her, reigniting her fire.

“Me neither,” she said, choking back tears.

After a minute of silent camaraderie, Jimmy handed her a copy of the *Planet*, folded over to a specific article. “Did you see this?” he asked. “I guess CK made it to the courthouse today after all.”

She took the paper from him and started to read, Clark’s voice in her head as she went.

The crowd reacted with surprise and relief. It was all over. Superman knew it. He felt something strike him in the chest. His eyes fell on the face of a young boy who appeared to hold back tears as Superman picked up the object—a Superman action figure, once priceless to its young owner. Superman wanted to return it, but the boy was gone. They say the Man of Steel is invulnerable. I don’t think so.

Just like all day so far, Lois didn’t bother to fight back the tears. Clark’s writing was evocative, emotional—it always had been, but this was . . . more. And her heart was aching because of it. It was crystal clear how much Clark cared.

What wasn't clear was why he wasn't here and helping her, helping his partner rescue their hero after all the times he'd rescued them.

Jimmy had helped reignite the fire inside her, and now . . . now after reading Clark's article, she was more determined than ever to prove Superman's innocence and get to the bottom of things. And she wasn't going to let her partner sit at home and mope about it!

She pushed out from her desk, standing so abruptly she almost knocked Jimmy out of the chair he was sitting in. "Ah, sorry, Jimmy! Will you page me the second you hear from Dr. Goodman or when you have those maps I asked you about? Whatever happens first. We don't have time to wait!"

"Where are you going?"

She straightened out her skirt and blouse and grabbed her purse, feeling motivated. Determined. "I'm going to get Clark."

* * *

The lights were on at Clark's place, which she figured would be the case. What she hadn't been expecting was for Martha Kent to open the door before Lois had even knocked. Jonathan was right behind her as if they were on their way out, the timing super uncanny.

"Martha . . . I didn't expect to see you so soon again . . . and in Metropolis?" Lois paused for a moment, looking past Martha and Jonathan to see Clark sitting on his couch, his elbows resting on his knees as he looked down at something in his hands. She couldn't see it from this angle, but she could see from his posture and tell from the fact he hadn't even so much as looked up at her entrance that this thing with Superman was affecting him far more than the article had indicated. Her heart clenched at the sight.

Lois cleared her throat, realizing she'd been silent . . . they'd *all* been silent for an unusually long time. Martha had been watching her watch Clark, and Jonathan, too, though his gaze fell to the floor when Lois noticed. There was a weird energy in the air, and it was extremely unlike Clark not to have even greeted her. For a moment, she feared he might be seriously ill or something, and she carefully measured her next words. "Clark didn't mention you'd be visiting."

"Ah yes, well . . ." Martha started, trailing off, her eyes casting about as though she didn't actually know why they'd come . . . or as though Clark really was sick and she couldn't or wouldn't say.

Jonathan piped up behind Martha. "This close to Thanksgiving . . . and with the heat wave . . . Martha wanted to, ah, go shopping . . . the malls here are wonderful for—"

"Right!" Martha said, raising a finger. "Christmas shopping! Can't be too early!" She turned to get her purse off the coat rack. "Well, right now we're too early because the stores are closed, but Jonathan and I were just about to . . ."

"Go grab a late dinner . . ." Jonathan added, the two of them seeming to ping-pong off of each other, and she wasn't quite following their logic or understanding what this was all about.

"So if you had anything you needed to talk to Clark about . . . work or whatever . . . or . . ." Martha said, her voice dropping to almost conspiratorial levels as she eyed Lois pointedly for reasons unknown.

With the knot in her stomach telling her there was something very wrong with Clark, she wasn't sure what to say, other than the reason she'd come here in the first place. And though she'd initially planned on saying it to Clark with some level of frustration or anger in an effort to win his participation in this investigation, she didn't have the heart to be angry anymore. "Or why he's not at the office with me, trying to prove that Superman isn't responsible for this heat wave?" Lois asked, her eyes back on Clark. He still hadn't even so much as looked up, despite all the strange conversation up here on the landing.

"Yes!" Martha said loudly, startling Lois. "Clark should work! With you. To figure out why Superman isn't responsible for this heat wave—he just can't be. I refuse to believe it!"

"I'm glad you agree, Martha!" Lois said, finally feeling a bit cheered again. At least Clark's mother was also on her side. "Everyone else has already written him off, but I'm not going to let that happen, not after all he's done for Metropolis."

Martha made a peculiar noise next to Lois. Almost a gasp, maybe? When she looked over at the woman, Martha put a hand on Lois's arm, squeezing gently. "Thank you, Lois . . ." It seemed like she wanted to say more, and even as caring a person as Martha was, Lois was surprised to see the sheen of tears in her eyes.

Lois put a hand over Martha's and kind of gave it a reassuring pat. "It's . . . it's my job, and it's the right thing to do," Lois said.

Martha and Jonathan both nodded in agreement, and then Martha was pulling Jonathan out the door, swatting at his arm and reminding him he didn't need to grab his coat with the weather being how it'd been.

When the door snicked shut behind them, a silence fell over the room, and with it, Clark's melancholy seemed to spread, permeating the air and making her want to gasp for breath.

"Clark?" she tried gently, making her way down the steps into the living room of his apartment.

He didn't look up, and she wasn't sure what to say, not until she got a better gauge on where he was right now. After that article . . . after seeing him like this . . .

As she got closer, she realized what he was holding, and she gasped, her hand coming up to cover her mouth.

The Superman action figure.

It *had* to be the one from the courthouse, the one the boy had thrown at Superman, the one from Clark's article.

"Clark?" she tried again.

"A ninety-nine-cent lump of molded plastic . . ." he practically whispered, his voice breaking on the words.

Silently, she sat down next to Clark on the couch, putting her arm around his shoulders. He shifted so he was facing slightly more toward her. His body was warm next to hers as he continued to stare down at the toy, and she stayed quiet, knowing that he had more to say but didn't yet know how.

There were a few fresh tears trailing down his cheeks, following the path of ones that had dried already, and her heart ached more, the need to wipe his tears away more powerful than any potential embarrassment either of them might feel. She reached up, her fingers brushing lightly over his damp cheeks, and she thought she might have felt a hint of a smile but it never came to the surface.

Superman's future was hanging in the balance, but her partner and her friend—her *best* friend—needed her more right in this moment.

After everything that had happened in Smallville last week, with the Trask lunatic almost killing Clark . . . Lois had to admit, at least to herself, that there was definitely something stronger than friendship between them. She hadn't had the time to think about it on her own, let alone find the courage and the opportunity to talk with Clark about it. But that didn't mean she couldn't comfort him now.

Clark still hadn't said anything. Maybe he'd spent all his words on the article.

Gently, she gave his shoulders a squeeze, and with her free hand, she reached out with the intent to touch the action figure, but instead, she found her hand coming to rest over top of his. "I think we both know it's more than that, more than a lump of molded plastic, Clark." She spoke the words

softly, more solidarity than any trace of admonishment in her voice. "More than a miniature Superman."

He seemed to flinch slightly when she said their hero's name.

"Did you talk to him?" she asked, already knowing what the answer had to be, given that Clark was holding the toy Superman had picked up at the courthouse, the same toy from Clark's poignant and heartbreaking article.

"I'm . . . He—he's leaving Metropolis . . ."

Oh, how she wanted to shout from the rooftops, somehow make him hear her and understand that he didn't have to leave. But Clark was . . . Clark had talked to Superman. And if Clark was this affected, she could only imagine how Superman was feeling. She knew that at the courthouse, he'd only shown a fraction of what he'd been feeling.

"That's why I need your help. I need my partner." Her heart clenched when he looked at her again—there was pain there in his eyes, some sort of struggle or conflict, and she couldn't even guess at why, why this was affecting him like this. "If we work together, there's nothing we can't do! And Superman *needs* us—you wrote the article, Clark, you know how much he needs us."

Clark made a noise that sounded like . . . choking back a sob or . . . something . . . and his eyes dropped back to the Superman action figure. "I'm—he's a solar conductor, Lois. Gets his energy from the sun. And you can't deny that the spikes in the heat wave are correlated directly with his recent activity."

"Correlation does not equal causation. That's journalism 101, Clark, and I think the public perception—"

"It's not about public perception," he cut in, finally tossing the action figure on the coffee table, and as he ran a hand roughly through his hair, it seemed like he wanted to say more but didn't.

"I know he feels like everyone's against him on this, cheering for him to leave. But they don't understand. You don't understand, either, Clark—he's *not* the cause of this. I know it. We just need to get to the bottom of what's really happening so that Superman can stay in Metropolis."

"He *can't*, Lois!" Clark cried, his voice insistent, desperate as he looked at her. "Don't you see? It's not safe for him to stay . . . and it's . . . killing him that he might be putting people at risk . . . people he cares very much about . . ." His voice was thready now and his eyes still watery, his gaze falling back to his hands clasped in front of him, and all of it cut at her heart. "He doesn't have a choice."

"Clark . . ." she prompted gently, trying to get her own voice to be stronger and not sound quite as thready as his.

She put a hand on his knee. “Why is this . . .” She took a deep breath and started again. “This seems to be really affecting you . . . I mean, the article was more . . . emotional—god, don’t take that the wrong way, please—but it was more . . . *more* than you usually are, and I can see how much this is eating away at you, and I’m not sure how to help you because I don’t know what’s going on. And—oh! Oh . . . I—I . . .” She narrowed her eyes just a bit, tilting her head and looking at him differently. “Clark . . . are you . . . ?”

His head jerked up, his eyes darting up to find hers and looking a bit wild or . . . fearful? “Am I . . . ?” he whispered, as though he was both terrified and wishing that she knew the answer already, as if he thought she’d be mad or upset if she knew . . .

And her mind kept going to a place she didn’t want it to go, but one that made so much sense if she thought about it. Clark always able to get a hold of Superman when no one else could. Clark always a bit emotional about Superman, either with mild criticism or fierce protection. Clark always getting more Superman exclusives than anyone else did. Clark being *this* agitated, *this* devastated about Superman having to leave Metropolis . . .

Clark was still watching her, clearly waiting for her to say something, to finish her question. But she didn’t want to ask it now; she didn’t want to know the answer. While that theory made sense on the surface, she just . . . It couldn’t be right. Something in her heart told her it wasn’t true. Both of them had been openly flirtatious with her, and neither of them seemed to be the type to be anything other than committed and honest . . .

“Lois?” The wild in his eyes had died down, and now he seemed more worried about her. “You kinda went from full babble-mode to . . . nothing . . .”

At some point, she’d moved her hand from his knee, and she was now nervously wringing her hands in her lap. She knew Clark well, really well. Sure, they’d really only known each other for a few months, but they’d worked together closely, got along . . . mostly well, and she considered him her best friend. If she had to guess, she was pretty sure Clark considered them best friends too. She knew him well enough to know that the next words out of his mouth would be . . .

“Are you okay?”

Even though he’d been the one almost inconsolable just minutes ago. But now she was upset and he was Clark so of course he’d now be worried about her instead of himself. And she had no idea what that meant nor why her mind was on this wild tangent, thinking that he and Superman were lovers or something . . . Because she knew him well enough

to know that . . . he had feelings for her. Feelings she’d *never* seen him exhibit toward Superman. In fact—

Her head snapped around to look at him. And she searched his face. Even as he stared at her, worry hiding behind those glasses of his. She narrowed her eyes just a bit, tilting her head and looking at him differently.

Clark’s brow furrowed as he seemed to pause and frown, looking at her closely. “Lois, you’re starting to worry me . . . Are you okay, really? Do you need me to make you some tea? I probably should have offered before. I have this great blend that I got when I was in China and—”

“Clark, c’mon. Let’s go,” she said, standing up suddenly and holding her hand out for him.

“Go? Lois? Are you—”

“Yep. I’m good. I’m fine! And I know you’re upset about Superman. Which is why the only solution is for you to come with me back to the Planet so that we can work.” She flexed her fingers impatiently, indicating he should take her hand already.

And even as the protest was coming out of his mouth, he was still standing and folding his hand around hers. “But, Lois, it—it’s late and . . .”

“Yeah, since when are you concerned about working nine to five? We’re investigative reporters, Clark. Investigations don’t always happen during business hours.” She was already tugging him toward the door, her purse still slung over her shoulder since she’d forgotten to even take it off.

“I—I was thinking of . . .”

She stopped mid-stride and turned to him. “What were you thinking?” She tried to sound open, curious, anything but mad and hurt and all of the other emotions that were running through her mind. Part of her wanted to dare him to say it out loud, whatever it was that he’d been thinking.

“Um, that . . . you probably forgot to eat and that we should get some takeout?”

Lois almost laughed out loud—mostly from relief—but she managed to hold back. “You’re absolutely right. Let’s grab some takeout on the way.”

* * *

The entire way to the Planet—including the fifteen minutes they’d stopped on the way to order and pick up Chinese food—Lois’s mind kept going to a place she wasn’t sure she wanted it to go. But . . . it made so much sense if she thought about it.

Clark was always able to get a hold of Superman when no one else could.

Clark was always a bit emotional about Superman, either with mild criticism or fierce protection.

Clark was always getting more Superman exclusives than anyone else did.

Clark being agitated, *devastated* about Superman having to leave Metropolis . . .

“I’m . . . He—he’s leaving Metropolis . . .”

“I’m—he’s a solar conductor, Lois. Gets his energy from the sun. And you can’t deny that the spikes in the heat wave are correlated directly with his recent activity.”

“It’s not about public perception . . . He can’t, Lois! Don’t you see? It’s not safe for him to stay . . . and it’s . . . killing him that he might be putting people at risk . . . people he cares very much about . . .”

“He doesn’t have a choice.”

Clark had been silent the whole way, which wasn’t unusual, especially when he was dealing with a determined and high-strung partner. Sure, he didn’t know the reason—at least not the *full* reason she was feeling a bit high-strung and *super* determined—but he didn’t need to know. Not right now.

Nope, right now she needed Clark Kent, investigative reporter—her partner—to help her figure out how she would get him to stay, to know that it wasn’t his fault.

Because Metropolis needed him.

She needed him.

He needed her.

And she just had to get him to see that.

The End

End Note: Blueowl’s prompts were . . .

Want:

- Miniaturized Clark/Superman (can be physically smaller or younger, how is up to you)
- Hurt/Comfort
- Lois figuring out a secret (doesn’t have to be the big reveal, but can be)

Don’t want:

- Lex Luthor
- Lois to know Clark=S (at least not at first)
- Excessive Pettiness (from either Lois or Clark)