

The Proposal

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Rated: PG-13

Submitted: January 2026

Summary: What if all the worst parts of your personality came together to lead you to the right decision, but for all the wrong reasons? When Clark gets a tip that's too hot for him to handle, he has to make a decision that could melt his relationship with Lois into lava. This is a light story, with a little swath of angst, a little dash of WAFFY-ness, and a LOT of silly choices that the original series probably could have gotten away with in the '90s, but television really couldn't get away with now.

Story Size: 15,878 words (88 kB as text)

tl;dr: There's a proposal, and possibly some bad decisions.

A/N: This adjusts the show's timeline in "Barbarians at the Planet." Here, Luthor never buys the Daily Planet. The sequence here is that Luthor blows up the Planet, then proposes, not the other way around.

Huge thanks to 90stvfangirl and CalliopeWayne for such kind and helpful beta work! And thanks to Bek for her wonderful GE help!

"Got a tip for you."

The gruff voice made Clark pause in his steps, and he turned back to see a newly familiar face.

"Bobby!" Clark said in a cheerful greeting.

Lois had introduced him to the snitch a few weeks back when they had been tearing their hair out looking for any lead or angle to scoop the *Star*. Now Bobby was leaning against the corner of a building adjacent to a dark alley just a few blocks from the Planet.

Bobby nodded into the darkness. "C'mon," he said, and started down the cracked asphalt without checking to see if Clark was following.

Clark looked down at the twin coffee cups in his hands, considering.

Coming back with cold coffee wouldn't gain him much.

Luckily, he had a handy solution for that.

He'd bought them to cover stepping out for a rescue, figuring that coffee might make some headway in mollifying Lois once she learned that she had missed both an encounter with her hero and a story about him.

And coming back with hot coffee *and* a hot new lead from one of her favorite sources might just keep him out of the doghouse entirely today.

He turned and followed Bobby into the dark alley, catching up with him about halfway down when Bobby stopped behind a dumpster.

"I don't do freebies," Bobby said bluntly.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Clark said helplessly. "I don't have anything on me." Lois had told him that Bobby only spilled secrets when he opened his mouth to put food in it, he remembered.

Bobby shook his head.

"I was gonna say I don't do freebies, but I'll consider this a one-time-only pass since you're new in town."

"Well, gee, thanks. That's awfully nice of you."

"I'll take a coffee, though," he said, reaching for Clark's right hand.

"Sorry," Clark said, pulling it back. "This one's Lois'. But you can have mine." He offered the hot cup in his left.

Bobby took it with a raised eyebrow.

"How is your partner?"

"Lois? She's good. She's at the Planet."

"Huh," Bobby said after a sip, assessing the coffee with what looked like pleasant surprise. "I hear she's got a new boyfriend."

Clark tried not to grit his teeth.

"We don't talk about it much."

Bobby chuckled. "Yeah, I guess you wouldn't."

Clark felt heat rise to his cheeks at the implication. Did *everybody* know how he felt about Lois?

"Would you know if she turned, though?" Bobby asked him with a shrewd look.

"Turned?"

“You keep an eye on her. You see her getting into anything she shouldn’t?”

He couldn’t help but snort. “Lois gets into *plenty* that she shouldn’t. It’s why she always gets the story.”

“No, new guy,” Bobby said, talking to him like a child. “Is she getting into anything illegal?”

Bobby’s questioning was making him nervous. Because Lois definitely toed the line—and beyond—in the pursuit of a story. She seemed to be a habitual jaywalker. He’d seen her use her lockpick kit more than once. He’d even heard rumors she hung around the precinct just to use unlocked computers that the detectives momentarily left unattended. Heck, the week before he’d shown up, she had stolen a car to bring down an auto theft ring and break a case the MPD had been trying to solve for nearly a year. But Clark wasn’t about to confirm any of that to anyone who might get Lois in trouble over it. And while he wanted to believe the best of his new acquaintance, he didn’t know Bobby well enough to judge.

“What’s this about?” Clark asked.

“It’s about her spending a lot of time with someone who isn’t on the up and up.”

“Luthor,” Clark guessed.

“Your girl is getting mixed up in something she shouldn’t. She’s already in over her head.”

“She isn’t my girl,” he corrected immediately.

“Really?” Bobby drawled.

Clark forced his face to remain impassive. “Well, uh, did you say you had a tip for me?”

“Yeah, I got a tip for you,” Bobby said. “Her high-rolling boyfriend was out this morning buying an engagement ring.”

“An—an engagement ring?!” he stuttered. “But they haven’t even been going out that long.”

“She’s been in his sights since the White Orchid Ball,” Bobby said caustically. “He’s just ramping it up now because it’s convenient for his business plans.”

“But—” Clark scrambled. “You don’t— Do you think she would say ‘yes’?”

“I think you better make sure she doesn’t,” Bobby warned. “You get me?”

“Yeah,” Clark said, still reeling.

“Good.” Bobby nodded, shifting into a friendlier demeanor. “I always liked Lois. Shame to lose her over this. But listen,” he said, suddenly gruff again, “you and I—we never talked, got it?”

“I got it,” Clark said, though he wasn’t sure if Bobby wanted to keep that information from Luthor or from Lois.

His head was swimming, and he pinched the bridge of his nose to help himself focus.

When Clark looked up again, Bobby was almost all the way down at the opposite end of the alley.

“Thanks for the tip!” he called.

Bobby waved over his shoulder as he rounded the corner out of sight.

Clark’s heart was racing.

Lois *couldn’t* marry Luthor.

What was he going to do?

* * *

He spotted her the minute he entered the building, and he took the stairs so that he could sprint to the fourth floor with super speed.

Moving toward her desk, he pushed his glasses just a bit down his nose, making sure the coffee in his hand was at the perfect temperature before he deposited it on her desk just in front of her.

“Hi, Lois!”

“Where have *you* been?” his partner asked accusingly, looking up from her rolodex. “I’ve been trying to scare up new leads for us for the last hour!”

“Well, actually, I ran out to grab us coffee, and I sort of ran into Superman.”

She threw her pencil down on her desk, only narrowly missing spilling the cup he’d just put in front of her.

“Well, that’s just swell. I’m sitting here, trying to shake down sources, combing through old notes, putting in real work, and you just happen to run into Superman!”

He shrugged. “And I brought you back a coffee.”

“Oh, gee, if you brought me back a coffee, then it’s alright that we have absolutely no story to chase.”

She absent-mindedly reached for the cup and took a sip.

Her eyes closed briefly.

“Wow, that’s a great cup of coffee,” she said, sounding surprised.

It should be. It was a strong, dark-roast from Naples that could take the roof off someone’s mouth, doctored with two packets of her preferred artificial sweetener. It was exactly the kind of coffee she liked.

“Thanks, Clark,” she said, voice softer now.

He grinned in relief.

“Why don’t I draft this Superman story really quickly, and then I’ll help you hunt for leads,” he offered. “The mayor’s office is scheduled to put out the first draft of the city budget tomorrow. Maybe we can get an early copy and see if there’s anything worthwhile.”

“I guess if that’s the best we can do,” she sighed.

He might have solved Lois’ immediate problem, but it didn’t solve the one Bobby had warned him about.

“And maybe after work,” he took a chance, “we can go out for hot fudge sundaes.”

She looked at him skeptically.

If he got her out of the office and relaxed, maybe he’d have a real chance to talk to her about Luthor.

“We can talk through whatever we find over chocolate ice cream,” he tempted her.

He could see a smile pulling at the side of her mouth, the idea of chocolate winning out.

“We may as well,” she finally agreed. “There’s nothing going on around here today anyway.”

They locked eyes, and the electric tingle he felt whenever she put all of her attention on him lit the fuse to a rush of giddiness that he could never quite tamp down around her.

He felt more than heard her pulse skip, and he couldn’t tell if the sudden depth in her eyes was real or just the product of his too-high hopes.

“It’s a date then,” he dared, keeping his voice light.

His pulse jumped again, and she opened her mouth to reply, a grin already pulling at her.

And then...

All hell broke loose.

The building shook massively beneath their feet, a tectonic, bombastic crack echoing upward toward them.

Lois stood in reaction to the jolt and immediately stumbled as the building trembled and swayed again. His arm wrapped around her waist before she could fall, and she leaned back into him to stay upright.

Mugs fell off the edges of desks. A chair crashed down to the floor. Reference books fell from the shelves above them, raining down into the bullpen. The French window that looked out over the masthead and skyline flew open, one pane somehow cracked all the way down.

Then the movement subsided, and everything was still for a moment.

Eerily still.

No one in the newsroom moved.

It was as if the entire building held its breath.

One arm still around Lois, Clark shoved his glasses down sharply and looked through the floor. The presses were on fire in the basement. The fresh paper supply near the south loading dock had caught, and the whole wall behind it was burning, already wildly warped from the heat. The brick above was crumbling. Near the center of the room, the ceiling had caved in above the presses, and the wooden concession desk from the lobby had fallen through, adding kindling to the inferno already melting the machines below. Worse than that, across both floors and all the way up the south side of the building, steel support beams were giving out at their joints.

And then the building groaned, a terrifying, treacherous noise like steel screaming when bent.

“Out!” he shouted above the building’s crumbling din. “Everybody out! Staircase, now!”

The Planet swung into motion.

He fell into the stream of scared, fleeing staffers and got as far as the door, pushing Lois ahead of him.

Stepping back, he pulled the fire alarm next to the staircase entry and started moving back in the direction he’d come from.

But Lois had grabbed the doorjamb to stop from being stampeded into the stairwell without him.

“Clark! Where are you going?” she cried out.

He had to get away from people to change into his suit, and he couldn’t afford to waste any time! But he couldn’t risk Lois coming back to search for him, either.

“I’m going to get Perry and check the other offices. I’ll be right behind you!”

Ralph barreled through the doorway just then, taking Lois into the staircase with him, and he took his chance, racing to the supply room. He spun into his suit and shot out through the window and down into the fiery bowels of the Planet.

* * *

Hours later, Clark stood outside the burned-out shell that had been his home for almost the last year.

Lois stood beside him, close, but not quite touching, her eyes stricken with a hollow look, unwaveringly staring at the wreckage.

It was late spring, but there was a breeze off the bay today, which hadn't helped Superman or the firefighters with the conflagration they had faced. He'd been lucky to stop the fire from spreading to other buildings downtown. There hadn't been any chance for the Planet, not when the basement was a tinderbox with a head start.

And now, that same breeze was winding around them, carrying a harshly acrid, charred scent that was leaving his partner chilled. Or maybe it was the sight before her that was leaving her cold and trembling.

She shivered, and he softly sent his heat vision down her back, not enough for her to notice, but just enough to make a difference.

Perry slowly walked up to them, back from the coffee shop across the street where he'd been making phone calls. Jimmy trailed at his heels looking forlorn.

"Well, kids," their boss intoned, "that's the ball game."

"What do you mean?" Lois asked, finally turning from the blackened wreckage she'd been staring at silently for the last hour.

Perry exhaled a sigh that came from deep in his body. "The Planet's been having financial troubles. Overextending our budgets, bloated upper management, sponsors bailing, you name it. The board is looking at this as their way out."

"No!" Lois said sharply.

"I'm sorry, darlin'," he said to her, looking older than Clark had ever seen him. "They aren't convening 'til tomorrow, but they're going to vote to close the Planet."

"But, Perry, can't you—" Lois said in a wavering voice.

"I can't do anything about it at all, Lois," Perry said in a low voice that sounded as close to heartbreak as Clark had ever heard from someone.

His arm went around her automatically when she dissolved into unrelenting tears.

* * *

This isn't going well, Clark thought with frustration, watching Lois put her hands on her hips. She'd been giving him a tour of LNN and trying to sell him on the television job Luthor had somehow talked her into.

When had that even happened? It had been almost a week since the awful explosion at the Planet, but with all the upheaval, he still hadn't been able to have a conversation with her about who Luthor really was. And now he was standing in the middle of the man's headquarters, trying to avoid being roped into a job that he knew would tether him to Luthor on a very short leash. His goal was to get her

further away from Luthor, not to help her shackle her career to him.

But everything had moved so fast!

So fast, in fact, that it was almost as if Luthor had had this all prepared already.

"The Planet meant as much or more to me as it did to you. But it's gone." She gestured to the sterile technology surrounding them. "This is good, exciting work."

He couldn't stop himself from telling her the truth. "I will never work for Lex Luthor."

"What about us? What about 'partners'?"

That was a sticking point. She was right. He would be her partner forever, even if they never worked together again.

"You're right," he agreed. "I do want us to be partners. Why don't we have dinner tonight, and we can have a real conversation about it."

It was misleading.

But it wasn't a lie.

"Really?" Her voice was halfway between skeptical and excited.

"Really," he said. "Come by my place around seven. I'll cook."

"Oh, Clark, I knew you'd see the light," she enthused, hugging him. "This is going to be great!"

"I hope so, Lois," he said, already wondering how he was going to get them out of this one. "I hope so."

* * *

The doorbell rang, and he peered through the wood to see her one last time before he made a singularly stupid decision.

"Hi," he said, keeping his voice upbeat, as he swung the door open. "Come on in!"

"Thanks," she said. She made her way down the stairs and tossed her purse on his couch before turning back to him, her eyes raking over him curiously, as if she were picking up on his nerves.

"Dinner's almost ready. Glass of wine?" he offered, sticking to his plan.

"Sure," she agreed.

He crossed to his kitchen and poured two glasses of the red he'd opened to breathe half an hour earlier. He took the glasses into the living room, reminding himself of his planned order of events tonight. Stay on track: drink wine, eat dinner, save Lois Lane.

...Or make her really, really mad.

With his singularly stupid plan.

"Thanks," she said again, glancing down as his hand brushed against hers.

He'd paused for half a beat too long, letting his hand linger.

She laughed nervously, and he broke contact, drawing his hand back to hold his own glass with both hands.

"So, what did you want to talk about?"

He'd wanted to talk over dinner, but trust Lois to jump right into it.

This is a bad plan, he told himself again.

But he would do it if it had half a chance of saving her from Luthor.

And since the Planet had crumbled, Lois had seemed... different.

Like she was somehow in danger of crumbling herself.

"So?" she asked again, clearing her throat. "You wanted to talk about the job at LNN?"

"Uh, not—not exactly," he faltered. "I wanted to talk about partnerships."

"Partnerships," she repeated.

"Right," he said, still wondering how to broach this, even after thinking about it all afternoon.

Lois was looking at him expectantly.

"Okay," she said, when he didn't speak. "Go ahead."

"Why don't we sit?" he hedged.

Her patience thinned. "Clark, what are you trying to say?"

"We've been partners for almost a year, right?"

"A little shy, but sure," she replied.

"And it was working. The partnership." He paused to give her a chance to agree. He only had half a shot here, but she had to be on board with the general premise, after all.

"You're the only person I've ever been able to stand working with," she said in a barbed, saccharine way.

He rolled his eyes at her. "Gee, thanks, Lois."

"Don't mention it," she said, taking a smug sip of wine.

"Seriously," he pressed.

"Seriously, it's why I want you to come be my partner at LNN. It sounds like what we both want."

"I don't want that, *exactly*. I told you, I can never work for Luthor."

"Clark, you're going to have to get over your arbitrary—"

"It's not arbitrary, and I won't." This was getting away from him even more quickly than he'd foreseen. "But that's not what I want to talk about. I was going to suggest a different type of partnership."

"A different type of partnership?" she asked. "Like writing something else? A novel?"

"Uh, no," he faltered again. "Although, I would be completely open to writing a novel with you, too."

"Okay, so what kind of partnership are you talking about?"

Stupid.

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

Too stupid to even say aloud.

He tried to come at it from the side.

"The Planet was like a second home to me." He looked at her earnestly. "I think, for you, it might have actually been your home, even second to your apartment."

She didn't agree or disagree, but he saw recognition in her eyes, and it made him think that he'd guessed right.

"Our partnership started there. Our friendship started there. Our relationship started there," he escalated. "And now it's like that relationship doesn't have a home. So, I thought I would offer to share mine with you."

He saw her mind sifting through his words.

"What does that mean?"

He took a deep breath, worried that it might be his last after Lois clobbered him for this suggestion. "I thought we could try moving our partnership from, well, work, to the rest of our lives."

She looked surprised for a moment, then shook her head, pressing him to decipher. "Clark, are you—"

"Lois, will you marry me?"

Lois froze, which was the best case scenario here, probably, he realized.

After a breathless moment...

She laughed.

So not *just* stupid. Monumentally stupid. Epically stupid. Galactically stupid. A stupid that was even bigger than measurable physics could quantify.

And it stung.

He had known this was a dumb idea, but he hadn't known it was *funny*.

"You're not kidding." Her voice had turned sharp, the laughter falling from her face. "Why would you— What on earth are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking that you seem *crushed*, Lois," he bit out, gaining steam as he remembered her sobbing into his chest outside the hollowed-out shell of the Planet. "I'm thinking that you seem uncertain in a way I've never seen you. Unmoored. It's like someone knocked you off your axis and you're spinning. You seem like you need someone to ground you, to catch you."

He was mixing his metaphors.

"I'm not some helpless damsel!" she flung at him.

"No, you're my best friend!" he all but shouted at her.

"And you're mine!" she threw back, just as hotly. "Which is why I don't understand why you would—"

"Because I love you, Lois. You had to have known."

"I—I didn't," she stuttered.

"Well, it's true. I know things seem upside down right now. But maybe we can get through this together. You and I are a great team. We were great as partners at the Planet. We balance each other. We trust each other. We can make a new home. Maybe I can offer you the security you don't feel like you have right now."

"No," she said, her voice tight.

"Please, just—just consider it."

"Absolutely not," she said, abandoning her glass on his coffee table. And he recognized now that her voice was shaking in anger. "I thought we were friends, that I could trust you, that you were the one man who wouldn't—" She faltered, and the pitch of her voice went up. "That wouldn't try to take advantage of me when I was low. I'm disappointed in you, Clark."

"Take advantage of you?" he sputtered, shocked. "Lois, I would never—"

"Then what do you call this?" she accused. "You waited until you thought I was totally lost, 'unmoored,' 'uncertain,' to tell me you were in love with me? Were you waiting until you thought I was so vulnerable I would have to say 'yes'? I don't know if this is how you hit girls over the head in Smallville before you drag them back to your Kansas cave, but I'm not falling for it."

"You won't fall for that, but you'll fall for Luthor?"

It was out of his mouth before he could stop it.

"Lex, again?" she gasped. "This is just jealousy, Clark. I don't understand why you have such a bad opinion of him!"

"Because he isn't a good person!" he said with equal heat. "And I know you can tell the difference because you fell head over heels for Superman as soon as you saw him."

It was the wrong thing to say.

"I thought I could tell the difference, too. But I thought *you* were a good man. And you're just as much of a controlling, misogynistic jerk as the rest of them."

Straightening, she turned on her heel and stomped to his door before throwing it open.

"Lois, please—"

She spun to look at him with a glare so forceful it made him take an involuntary step backward.

And then she was through his door, slamming it so hard that the window all the way in the kitchen rattled.

He hadn't really thought that this stupid plan would work. But he'd thought, maybe, she'd see through to the honesty of it, at least—see that his intentions were good.

Boy, had he been wrong.

Lois was as furious as he'd ever seen her, and he guessed that they were no longer on speaking terms.

But maybe, he fervently hoped, his doomed, stupid proposal would at least make her stop and think more seriously when Luthor proposed, an eventuality that was coming her way, even if she didn't know it.

If not...

Oh, god, what would a proposal from Superman even sound like???

* * *

Clark Kent was an idiot.

She hadn't thought that he was at first. Well, she *had*, but once she'd had a chance to really examine him, she'd judged that he wasn't. He was awfully quick, disconcertingly loyal, and terribly reliable in a pinch—for someone who was an idiot.

But idiot he was, because that was the only type of person who would consider *proposing* to a woman he hadn't even been out on a date with.

It was true that they had gotten closer over the last year. A lot closer. Closer than she'd gotten to anyone else—ever—in fact. And she did spend the vast majority of her time with him. And they did tend to share most of their meals together. And they'd hang out watching movies more often than not these days.

Plus, he did tend to come through in bigger ways, too, she thought, remembering Mr. Make-Up's hands around her throat before they were replaced by Clark's comforting arms, pulling her back from the suffocating nothingness she'd been slipping toward into the safety of his embrace.

But he was still an idiot.

Or insane.

Maybe that was it. Maybe the loss of the Planet had hit *him* harder than she'd realized.

Harder, even, than it had hit her.

Because he'd been right about that, at least.

She did feel completely at sea.

It made her want to scream. Or sob. Or go out and track down a really amazing, city-shaking conspiracy story about some untouchable, shadowy crime lord, just to prove that she still could.

Not that she had anywhere to publish something like that if such a person existed in Metropolis.

Because if they did, surely she'd know.

But as it was, the Metros were in disarray, and the other smaller gangs were still nipping at their heels, all trying to sort out whether this was an opportunity for a new dynamic and power shift in the murky hierarchy that existed among them all. Somehow there didn't seem to be any real action, as if not much had really changed with Johnny and Toni playing mobster musical chairs. Which was odd, but definitely not newsworthy.

She brushed the thought away, her mind agitatedly flicking back to Clark.

Her best friend.

And total slimeball betrayer.

Because he'd known—he knew her well enough to absolutely *know*—that a loop like the one he was throwing her would be too much for her right now. She didn't need to be responsible for his vulnerable feelings—his stupid, overwhelming, grand, upsetting feelings, which were not *her* problem at all—while also sorting out her entire life.

Because on one hand, she was *right* and he was crazy.

On the other hand, losing the Planet and helplessly washing off its ashes made her realize that she wouldn't mind not carrying the entire weight of her world for a day.

And wouldn't it be nice to just have that sort of thing on offer, all the time?

She could quite easily envision living forever with Clark by her side, her partner at work and her best friend the rest of the time.

She felt a tension headache just starting to wrap around the back of her head. They were *friends*, and besides that, she wasn't sure she ever even *wanted* to get married—her focus was on her *career*, where she actually had some control.

...Until last week, of course.

Maybe Clark wasn't so far off.

Or maybe she should hit him over the head.

She'd gone back and forth on this all night and all day since their blowup.

In fact, her brain had been so overwhelmed with Clark that she had nearly forgotten her dinner date with Lex that evening.

Then "dinner" had turned out to be a many-hour trip to *Italy*, for heaven's sake.

Lex could be so spontaneous that sometimes it made her feel like even Superman gave her more notice that Lex did.

Now, sitting aboard Lex's private jet on the way back to Metropolis, Lois peered out the window, trying to stifle her overall irritation. Because dinner should have been lovely.

It was lovely, she told herself.

Except...

Something about it had been distinctly off. She hadn't fallen under Milan's romantic spell on what should have been unquestioningly the most romantic date in her life, whisked away for an impulsive dinner in Europe.

This was *all* Clark's fault, she silently railed again.

He was the reason she was on edge, the reason she'd been on edge since his stupid proposal.

It was just that if Clark ever proposed, she had always imagined that it would be, well, like Clark: sappy and sweet and gentle and earnest. He'd tell her that he was in love with her, had been in love with her for a long time, that he'd barely been able to hide it. That he couldn't imagine his life without her and now that their partnership at the Planet had been forced into an untimely end, he couldn't bear to lose her and wanted to keep her in his life forever. It would be joyous and adoring and exciting.

Not that she was sitting around imagining what a proposal from Clark Kent would sound like.

But it wasn't supposed to be as lackluster and patronizing and logical—and *argumentative*—as it had been.

It hadn't even sounded like he'd *wanted* to propose, like he was doing it *in spite* of his own desires instead of to fulfill them.

His voice was haunting her now, even at thirty thousand feet.

"...*Because I love you, Lois.*"

But there had been something else behind his eyes, too. Something she couldn't quite pin down.

Had it been possible that he really hadn't meant it?

And if not, what game had he been playing?

A champagne cork popped and broke her concentration, dragging her back to reality.

"Champagne, my dear?"

She glanced down the aisle, and Lex came into focus, holding a bottle of champagne and offering her a flute.

"Sure," she said, with an attempt at a smile. Knowing that she seemed off-kilter, she tried to compensate. "When you said 'Italian,' I had no idea we were actually *going*."

"My favorite restaurant in Milano," he said. "Magnifico."

She nearly rolled her eyes. Lex was intelligent and urbane and cultured, she knew. But did it seem like he was always going out of his way to *make sure* that she knew it? She belatedly tried to inject some fondness into her tone as she asked, "What am I going to do with you?"

"Spend the rest of your life... I hope."

Oh, god was the first thing that ran through her mind.

Not again was the second.

"Lex," she tried to laugh off.

"I'm serious," he insisted.

She was stunned as she watched him drop down to one knee, pulling a ring box from his jacket coat. Okay, so he'd planned this out further than Clark had. That, or he was just a man used to getting what he wanted and therefore expected to be met with the answer he planned to receive.

He flipped the box open to reveal an enormous diamond that she wasn't even sure her hand could support.

"Lois Lane, will you marry me?"

If she hadn't said "yes" to *Clark*, her devoted but thoroughly misguided best friend, she certainly wasn't going to say "yes" to *Lex*, a man she'd barely been out on a dozen dates with!

But jeez, she couldn't say *that* out loud!

"I don't know what to say."

"There are only three possible choices," said Lex. "Yes. No. Maybe."

Then again, she hadn't known what to say before she'd realized that condescension would be on the menu tonight.

"It's not that simple," she started, having a feeling that turning a guy down gently wasn't going to be her strong suit. The last time she'd been in this situation, somehow *just two days ago*, she'd said the first things that had come to her mind, and that had turned into a federal disaster. So she tried to pivot. "Why do you want to marry me, Lex?"

"Why does any man want to marry a woman?" he asked grandly. "Because she is the Aphrodite to his Adonis. Because she's beautiful and vivacious and intelligent."

The compliment mollified her to an extent.

...But then he kept talking.

"I know that losing the Planet was hard on you," he said sympathetically. "I know that the loss of a career to a woman like you must leave you with a terrible hole in your life. I want to offer you a place in the world. At my side, you'll never have to be worried about security or belonging or a career not taking off. You'll have a place in the world."

"A place," she said, seeing red at the implied misogyny but still fighting her usual tendency to go nuclear. "At your side."

She found herself rubbing the bridge of her nose in an unconscious mimicry of Clark.

"How would I make an impact, exactly, if I weren't a journalist?"

"I mean that as my wife you could have influence. You write with such a passion, and you're always rooting out little injustices and championing the Everyman. Instead of reporting what went wrong, you could help shape things behind the scenes."

"I don't just report what went already wrong," she quibbled. "I make things change. The stories I write make a difference in people's lives."

Suddenly, her logic leapt to her defense, and she could see the whole playing field much more clearly.

"Would I be able to stay on at LNN as a 'mere journalist' if we were married?"

He nearly blinked, then.

Ah-ha, she thought, listening carefully.

His tone was still smooth when he empathetically said, "Well, I'm sure there are those who would suggest that might be a conflict of interest. But I trust we would make

those decisions about your job together, not just submit to the naysayers.”

She could easily interpret that. After they were married, she’d end up resigning because of that “conflict of interest.” Lex was just another guy who wanted to step in to make her decisions.

And the realization made her snap.

“You know, I’ve been making decisions on my own since I was a teenager. And I’ve done pretty well for myself. I’m proud of my career as a ‘mere journalist,’ even if you look down your nose at it.”

She closed the ring box still in his hand.

“I don’t think we’re a good match, Lex. I can’t say ‘yes.’ Or ‘maybe,’” she spat, thinking of his condescending comment earlier. “My answer is ‘no.’”

“Lois, darling, don’t be unreasonable.”

“I don’t think I am being *unreasonable*,” she threw back at him. After all, she hadn’t thrown him off the plane at thirty thousand feet, had she? So she hadn’t even come close to “unreasonable,” yet.

“Then you should be thinking of your future,” he said pragmatically, all trace of the wooing suitor gone. “I would think a partnership like this one would be exactly the steady anchor you’d be looking for right now.”

“Why do you think I’d need an ‘anchor’?”

“Right now, you have no job, no prospects, and no support.”

Her jaw dropped at his frankness.

“And, if you’ll excuse my saying so,” he said, slipping back into a more dulcet tone, “you’ve seemed rather unmotivated these past few weeks. I thought something like this might give you back your equilibrium.”

“Unmotivated?” she repeated.

“Perhaps even depressed,” Lex amended more gently.

“Even crushed? Knocked off my axis? Spinning?” She used Clark’s words, feeling them even more keenly after the last two days without him, in spite of how angry she still was.

“If you wish,” Lex agreed.

That was *it*.

Damsel-in-distress Lane had had just about all she could take.

“Did you guys get together and plan this?” she asked acerbically. “Is it ‘make a fool of Lois’ week?”

“Excuse me?” Lex’s tone was ice, albeit confused ice.

“It seems like there’s an awful lot of men walking around Metropolis thinking it’s their job to rescue Lois Lane,” she said sarcastically, her temper getting the better of her. “Well, I don’t need help. I don’t need anyone to be my *anchor*. You’ll just weigh me down.”

“I think one day you’ll regret that,” Lex said flatly.

He picked up the second flute that he’d filled with champagne, clearly in anticipation of celebration, but hadn’t touched.

“No reason to let this go to waste,” he said.

Lifting the glass, he toasted her challengingly and then tipped it back, draining it.

“Exquisite,” he judged, eyes on the last drops sliding down the inside of the glass as he rotated it in his hand.

Then he inclined his head to her and made his way back toward the opposite end of the plane.

She’d been wrong yesterday, when she’d assumed that she’d hit her maximum for insult and betrayal this week.

Unexpectedly, Clark’s proposal *had* been better than this one.

After all, Lex hadn’t even said that he loved her.

She stared into her champagne glass as the fizzy little bubbles popped one by one, watching the “exquisite” liquor go flat.

It was a long flight back to Metropolis.

* * *

Clark stared at the blank piece of paper inserted into his typewriter, becoming less and less enamored with the idea of finally writing that novel he’d been carving out in his mind since his early twenties. It didn’t help that the main antagonist was a woman and that she had morphed to become independent, fiery, and a brunette.

He heard a clicking noise nearby, and before he could pinpoint it, his front door flew open.

“What in the hell is wrong with men?”

“Lois!”

He hadn’t heard from her yesterday, and after their explosive conversation the day before, he hadn’t expected to hear from her any time soon. So he *certainly* hadn’t expected her to let herself into his apartment, mid-rant, and start pacing up and down his living room this afternoon.

“Is it genetic, or do they teach you how to be morons in school when the girls are shuttled off for home ec?”

“Um, I don’t—”

“What is it that makes men so absolutely entitled to think that they know what’s best? That they can just step right in and take control of your life? That you need help, and they’re the one to give it?”

“I don’t think *all* men—”

She whirled around, passing him by as she paced.

“Of *course* you don’t. Because you’re one of them. Honestly, it’s like you think you know a guy, and then he’ll say something diabolically out of left field. Especially since you *thought* you knew him and had formed a relationship with him because he was an enlightened member of his species and not some bottom-feeding, misogynist troglodyte.”

“Should I ask if something happened today, or if this is just about me?” he chanced when she paused to inhale.

“Lex proposed,” she said brusquely.

His eyes shot to hers, begging her for any sort of reassurance that she hadn’t agreed to leave him forever to chain herself to a monster.

When their eyes met, there was an unexpected spark of understanding.

“I didn’t say ‘yes,’” she said in an annoyed way.

But her body language had softened. She wasn’t willing to say it out loud, but she was choosing to reassure him, and he nodded briefly in thanks.

Feeling the rigidity leave his shoulders, he sought a deep breath.

But while he regained his equilibrium, Lois had gone quiet—never a good sign.

“Lois?”

“What?” she asked in a displeased sounding way.

“Penny for your thoughts?”

“Is that all they’re worth?” she sniped back. But he could tell she wasn’t really as annoyed as she sounded. Still, it seemed like there was more than just her annoyance with him at play.

“Lois?” he asked, not able to mask the concern in his voice.

“Do I really seem like such a mess right now?” she asked, suddenly sounding unexpectedly self-conscious.

“You don’t seem like a mess to me,” he said truthfully.

“Well, every guy I know seems to think I’m such a disaster that I need to be saved from myself. That the little woman can’t find her place in the world without a

big, strong man to figure things out for her. Next thing I know, Jimmy will show up at my apartment door on one knee, or Perry will jet back from Florida with an Elvis-clad officiant, even Superman will descend from the clouds—all to *propose*, just so that they can justify telling me what to do with my life.”

“Why don’t we sit,” he offered. “It’ll be more comfortable, and you can tell me whether you’d prefer Jimmy, Perry, or Superman to propose first.”

She snorted but didn’t move.

Instead, she looked up at him through her lashes, her eyes really seeking his for the first time since she’d arrived. And he was arrested, pinned by her gaze, held by the electricity that always seemed to pulse when she looked at him.

“Did you mean it?” she asked, suddenly serious.

“Did I...?”

“When you said you were in love with me.”

What little air was left in his lungs deserted him.

“Oh. That,” he stumbled. “Yeah. Yeah, I did.”

She sighed, tossing her purse on the couch and collapsing onto it herself.

“Perry, I guess,” she said with a huff.

“What?” He could usually keep up with her, but she was spinning faster than he could follow.

“If I had to pick one of them to propose.”

He grinned, taking a seat on the cushion next to her. “Why *Perry*?”

“I think he’d take it the best,” she said matter-of-factly. “And it would be easiest to dissuade him—just one call to Alice and he’d be on a plane *back* to Florida faster than Elvis could... well, I don’t have a blue suede metaphor here, but Perry would.”

They both chuckled at that.

Lois sobered first.

“Plus, it would be nice to see him,” she said sadly.

“I miss him, too,” Clark told her.

Her eyes fell to the floor, and he took the opportunity to ask the question he really wanted the answer to.

“Not Superman?”

Lois responded by examining her nails.

“You wouldn’t want Superman to propose?” He couldn’t keep the surprise or the skepticism out of his voice.

“Not after *this* week,” she grouched.

“You wouldn’t say ‘yes,’ if he asked you?”

Why was he torturing himself? He was a glutton for punishment, because *of course* Lois would say “yes.” He needed to stop asking questions he didn’t want the answers to.

“I think it might kind of ruin it,” she said to the floor.

But that didn’t sound like her saying “yes.”

“I thought you were in love with him,” Clark led. “Why would proposing ruin it?”

She sighed, rolling her head back and letting it come to rest on the back of his couch. “I don’t know... He’s just so, I don’t know, removed... He *is* a complete fantasy, but I’m starting to think marrying him would be just as bad as marrying Lex.”

Of all the things he’d expected her to say...

That wasn’t even in the ballpark.

“Why do you think that?”

“I wasn’t enough in love with Lex. And I’m too in love with Superman.”

Thank goodness she wasn’t in love with Lex. That left him with one less problem. Still—

“I don’t think you can be *too* in love.”

“Have you ever *seen* me around Superman?” she asked with caustic sarcasm.

He couldn’t answer her directly without lying. And he didn’t need her going down that road to look for a specific occasion to dissect.

“You’re... more flirtatious when he’s around,” he offered tactfully.

“Please, Clark,” she said, cringing. “I’m myopically focused on the man when he’s there. I can’t help but make a fool out of myself. And I’m really starting to hate it.”

That was entirely new information. Where was this coming from?

“Why?” he asked, genuinely curious.

Her fingers tapped along the arm of the couch in agitation. “Whenever I was with him, I’d be a simpering idiot. The power dynamic is so completely off for any kind of real relationship. And with Lex, I’d be a useless, decorated party hostess. Married to either of them, I’d end up doing whatever they planned for me. It would be the exact same outcome. One would be as bad as the other.” She huffed in frustration. “Where is it written that men get to be the ones in charge of a partnership? Shouldn’t it be equal?”

“I think it should be,” he said earnestly.

He wasn’t sure how, but he’d just stepped right into an entry point into the conversation that he’d wanted to have with her all week.

“No, you don’t,” she countered smartly. “You did the exact same thing Lex did. You saw a girl that you thought was in trouble and offered her a traditional, well-worn way out—one that would have had plenty of strings and let you pull all of them, like some kind of modern relationship puppet-master.”

“That is *not* what I offered,” he corrected, surprised that was what she had taken from what he’d said. “I offered you a partnership, equal on both sides.”

She rolled her eyes at him. “Ha!”

“Lois, that’s how I view marriage—two people living together as equals,” he tried to impress on her.

She crossed her arms over her chest, and he recognized a Lois Lane ante when he saw one coming.

“You know what, Clark, you’re out of a job now, too. How would *you* like to be rescued like a damsel in distress?”

“Huh?” Her question had caught him off guard.

“Right now you have no job, no prospects, and not a lot of contacts in the city,” she said bluntly. “But I know everybody. I’ve been in the industry for years. Plus, you seem a little, oh, I don’t know, unmoored, uncertain somehow, asking a girl to marry her when you haven’t even dated her. You seem like you could use someone to catch you in the freefall. So how would *you* like to get married and let *me* take care of *you*?”

She was mocking him.

But she was only doing that to make him mad.

Because underneath it was a challenge.

A dare that she counted on him turning down.

Usually, he would disarm this sort of thing as soon as he saw it coming.

But hearing her spin his entirely heartfelt proposal in such a belittling way got under his skin.

“Sure,” he replied, just as confident as she had been.

“What?” she asked, doing a double take.

“I accept.”

“Oh, you do not,” she said irritably, waving him off.

“Why not?” he asked swiftly, before she could send the conversation in a new direction. “You were right. I *have* been feeling at a loss since the Planet went under. This sounds like a great new start. You can help me with my novel. You can give me career advice, and we can look for

work together. We can move in together and save on rent. And I'd have a partner to take care of me when I felt lost. I accept."

She fidgeted.

"You're kidding."

"I'm not," he assured her.

"You'd let me tell you exactly what I think is wrong with your novel, move you into my apartment, and tell you where to look for work?"

"Why not? You're really good at this stuff," he said unflinchingly. "My place is bigger, but if you really love yours, I'm happy to move there if you think that's best for us. But I think I should be the one to do the cooking."

"I don't believe you."

"Lois, we've both tried both of our cooking, and even you agree—"

"No, not about the cooking, you dolt. I mean I don't believe you about getting married," she said.

"I mean it."

"Prove it, then," she upped the ante.

"Fine," he called her bluff. "We'll need to start with a marriage license, right?"

Standing, he crossed over to the little table near the banister and picked up his wallet. Throwing his coat over his arm, he headed up the stairs to open the front door for her, feeling her watching him the whole way.

"After you," he said.

She didn't move.

Her eyes moved swiftly to the open door and then back to him.

Then a knowing look landing on her features. "Don't you need a birth certificate to get a marriage license? Or was that your plan to get out of this once we got there?"

"You're right," he said, moving back down the stairs and toward his bookshelves. "See? You're already making my life better. Now we don't have to come back for it." Having pulled a manila folder from a pile of paperwork stashed on the bottom shelf, he made his way back to the door and held it open for her again. "We can stop by your place to pick up yours on the way." He held out his free hand, as if to usher her through.

The skeptical expression on her face didn't change. But she stomped across his apartment and walked through his door without looking at him again.

As he closed and locked his door, he realized that he'd unintentionally taunted Lois Lane into a game of chicken. He'd honestly meant what he'd said, but he knew Lois well enough to know that she'd taken it as a dare.

He shook his head ruefully.

Really, the last thing he'd wanted was to do anything else that threw up more walls between them or triggered her defenses.

Instead, he'd done exactly that.

"Hurry up, Kent!" Mad Dog Lane called back to him.

Or maybe *he* was the one he should be worried about.

He pulled his key from the lock and jogged across the pavement to catch up with Lois.

* * *

"Hi," Clark said with a smile, stepping up to the counter. "We're here for a marriage license."

"Okay! Yay! Congratulations!" chirped the chipper young clerk behind the glass partition. This was someone who was clearly meant to be in her job. Clark was at once sure that she was earnestly happy for every couple that came to her window. She slid two clipboards out to them on the desk beneath the glass. "Just fill out these forms and bring them back when you're done!"

"Thank you!" he said back with a smile.

He handed one clipboard to Lois, who took it with an eye roll.

They sat down in the first bank of seats, and he started filling out his form.

After a moment he realized that he was the only one writing.

He looked up to see Lois stationary, staring at him.

"Did you need a pen?" he asked, holding out his.

"No, I don't need a pen," she snapped, reaching into her purse and fishing one out.

She put it to use, and seconds later, she was scratching away. It somehow felt like he was now in a race to see which of them could finish their form first.

"Did you have a date in mind?" she asked, scribbling away at her clipboard.

"I think we have to wait three days before we can use this," he said.

"So you want to get married three days from now?" she asked, sounding surprised.

"You're calling the shots, aren't you?" he asked back, knowing it would needle her.

"Fine," she said with forced confidence. "Three days."

He almost sighed. Lois Lane was the most stubborn woman he'd ever met. And the most brilliant. And the most beautiful. And she had the most captivating way of, well, entirely captivating him. He sheepishly went back to the paperwork, adding the proposed wedding date to the bottom.

"Done?" Lois asked, looking over at his clipboard just as he was signing the form. "Great, let's go."

Without waiting for him, she marched back up to the front desk, and he trailed along behind her.

"Back already?" the clerk at the counter chirped. "I can take those!"

Lois slid hers through the space below the glass partition, and Clark placed his alongside hers.

The clerk spun the forms around to face her and then scanned down them.

"Okay! Lois Lane," she said, typing the information into the computer on her side of the counter. "And Clark Kent."

She grinned up at them. "Aw! You even sound like you belong together!"

Clark smiled back at her, while Lois glowered.

"Birth certificates and IDs," the clerk chirped.

They handed them over, and the clerk typed a couple more lines into her keyboard while they waited. She paused when she got to the bottom of the form.

"Oh, wow, your wedding is in three days!" the clerk all but squealed.

"That's right," Lois confirmed, giving Clark a pointed look.

"Well, it's a good thing you came in today! Or else you'd have had to wait."

"Good thing," Lois echoed blithely.

"Alrighty," the clerk said, clacking away on her keyboard again. "Just give me a sec, and I'll get this printed up for you! Back in a jiff!" She hopped off her stool and headed into another room out of sight.

Lois was tapping her foot next to him.

"Cold feet?" he asked lightly.

"I think the part of the ceremony I'm most looking forward to is where you promise to obey," she taunted.

"Love, honor, and obey," he reminded her. He took the idea of marriage vows seriously, even if Lois was using them as ammunition against him right now.

"Even better," she said glibly.

"I just want to make sure this is really what you want," he tried again.

"Isn't this what *you* want?" she asked pointedly. "Someone to guide you, make hard decisions for you, protect you when things get tough? Isn't that what you said? Isn't that what *you* offered *me*?"

He *had* said that, but she'd been getting under his skin when he'd agreed. He had reacted to her the way he usually did during one of their spats, and he'd been certain she would tell him off. Instead she'd dared him to accept the one thing in the world he wanted most.

"I just want you," he said quietly, without facade.

The wind went out of her sails at once, the emotion in her eyes immediately shifting.

"Clark?" she asked, her voice softer now.

He shrugged his shoulders, unable to defend himself for being too weak to resist her when she'd dangled a lifetime of them being together in front of him.

She stepped closer, and when her voice came again, it was still soft, tinged with the vulnerable sound of apology. "Look, Clark, I—"

"Alrighty then, here you go!"

They both looked up to see that the perky clerk had returned and was sliding a stack of paper toward them beneath the glass partition.

"Here's a copy of your applications! And your birth certificates back! You can pick up your license in three days. You'll need to sign it after the ceremony—the two of you, two witnesses, and your officiant. Then we'll need it back here within ten days of signing so that it can be filed with the state."

"Got it," Lois said, taking the applications and heading for the door.

Whatever moment had almost happened between them had clearly passed with the clerk's reappearance.

"Thank you," said Clark belatedly, once he realized that Lois considered the conversation over.

"Have a good day! And congratulations!" the clerk called, ever cheerful, as he trailed Lois out of the office.

He caught up with her halfway down the hall. She didn't seem inclined to talk as she stormed toward the main doors and her exit, but he had to keep trying anyway.

“Lois—”

“We have a lot to do.”

She threw open the large double doors, and a moment later, they were standing in the harsh midday sunlight.

“Are you seriously still suggesting we go through with this?” he asked plainly.

“I’m thinking a courthouse wedding is going to be the most expeditious, don’t you?”

“It would be expeditious,” he cautiously agreed with her.

“Great. Then that’s settled.”

“Lois—”

“One of us will need to pick up the license.”

“I’ll do that,” he said quickly.

He wasn’t getting anywhere by talking to her now, but he knew Lois well enough that she’d dodge a tough conversation until she was backed into a corner. Which meant that, having pushed it this far, he couldn’t risk Lois coming up with a convenient out like misplacing the marriage license, thereby avoiding the situation and conversation altogether.

“Fine,” she summoned him back to the present. “Well, like I said, I have a lot to do, so I’ll see you in three days, at the courthouse at one o’clock. That should give you plenty of time to find yourself a witness.”

His face must have conveyed some of his uncertainty because she said patronizingly, “Don’t worry, damsel. You’ll be married and out of distress in three days.”

And then she turned on her heel and left him standing there.

Three days.

Surely that would be enough time for Lois to come around.

Wouldn’t it?

* * *

“What if he doesn’t show up?”

“He’ll show up. He always shows up,” Lois snapped at her kid sister.

Although she wasn’t really sure of that this time. She’d dodged Clark’s calls over the last three days, so she wasn’t exactly positive what he was thinking at this point.

And honestly, after three days being alone inside her own head, tossing around the *actually* crazy idea of what it would be like to *legitimately* marry her partner, she didn’t have any idea what *she* was thinking either.

“Are you nervous?” Lucy asked her.

There was nothing to be nervous about, she insisted to herself. If Clark decided to show up, she’d call his bluff, and they’d move on. She might even frame that marriage license application so she could continue to tease him about it for years to come.

“I’m fine,” she told her sister. She looked down to see that she was unconsciously tapping her foot and stopped, holding it still.

Lucy chuckled. “Whoa, you’re freaking out.”

“I am *not* freaking out.”

“Don’t you want to marry Clark?”

That, it turned out, was the million dollar question, wasn’t it?

“It doesn’t matter,” she told her sister, sidestepping the question of wanting to marry Clark entirely. “He’s not going to show up.”

“Then why are we here?”

“I’m proving a point.”

“Lois, I know *I’m* the kid sister, but isn’t that kind of immature?”

“That’s rich, coming from you,” Lois bit back.

“Seriously, Lo. Clark’s such a nice guy. What point are you trying to prove?”

“He is nice,” she agreed, responding to only the part of the conversation she wanted to. At least, he was nice when he wasn’t tilting at windmills and indulging in his hero complex, slating her in as his damsel-in-distress.

“I always hoped you’d find a nice guy,” Lucy said, nudging her sister’s knee with her own. “A super guy, even. Don’t you think Clark is super?”

“I think Clark is…”

What a loaded sentence. How to even finish that?

Complicated? A neanderthal betrayer? Her best friend? Her anchor? Her ballast?

“Yeah?” Lucy prodded. “You’re marrying the guy. Don’t you know who he is?”

Five days ago, she would have said yes to that, unequivocally. Three days ago, she would have said that she didn’t know him at all. But after three days without him—not that she would ever admit it to him—she’d started to miss being on the receiving end of some of his better qualities.

Clark was steady and stable. Sensible, especially where she wasn’t. Wholesome in that easygoing Midwestern

kind of way. Endearingly naive—she was never quite sure whether she was actually getting one over on him or whether he was just happy to go along with her plans. He was comfortable in the lean-against-him-on-the-couch-during-a-movie-and-fall-asleep-tucked-into-his-shoulder kind of way.

“You *do* think he’s super.” Lucy’s teasing crow snapped her out of her thoughts. “Look at your face, Lois! I say his name, and your smile turns all ooey-gooney.”

Oh, jeez, had it?

“I’m happy for you, sis,” Lucy said. But her own smile had turned watery. “After everything with Daddy, and the whole divorce, and Mother’s endless monologues about men, and then you turning out so, well... *you*, and going on all those awful dates you went on... I’m glad you finally found a nice guy to marry.”

Lois’ brow furrowed. She had to tell Lucy that this marriage was basically a dare, not the fairy-tale ending she was envisioning.

“It kind of makes me think there’s still hope for me,” Lucy said, her voice small. “And I could really use it. I’ve had a lot of bad boyfriends lately.”

Well, she couldn’t tell Lucy *now*.

That the thing that propelled them here was a *dare*, just Clark trying to teach her a lesson as they tried to out-stubborn each other.

“Hi.”

Her eyes flashed up and met Clark’s.

Her breath hitched.

She felt herself lean toward him automatically.

What the hell? she thought, physically holding herself in place.

Was this her body’s response to three days away from him? Sure, they were charged days, but she’d spent days away from him before, and this wasn’t what had happened. Or had it? Had she just not realized it? How could she have not noticed this whole-body response to him?

No, no, no. It wasn’t anything special. It was just the situation getting to her.

“Hi, Clark!” Lucy welcomed him, still watery but happy.

His eyes moved away to smile at her sister but snapped right back to her.

“Hi, Lois,” he said in a low voice that she recognized from the newsroom when he only intended his words for her.

“Hey,” she replied, carefully keeping her voice even.

“You look beautiful,” he said, and while she wanted to wave him off, her heart unexpectedly stuttered.

Oh, *man*, she needed to get a grip. She wasn’t *actually* getting married today.

But she heard herself say, “Thanks. You, too.”

And he *did* look good. He was wearing a deep charcoal grey suit, almost black, but not quite with stiff lapels. It felt formal, but it still looked like him.

“Oh, here,” he remembered.

He brought one hand out from behind his back and handed her a little white bouquet.

His hand lingered when it met hers, and for a second, they both stilled. This happened between them sometimes—like when he’d handed her the wine glass just before his proposal and the look in his eyes had given her butterflies that she’d had to quell with the wine.

But that was just something that happened, right?

No, she realized with sudden clarity. That frothy, heated little surge in her blood only came from Clark. She’d just been shoving it down since that first week she’d met him, and it had become a habit she hadn’t ever acknowledged.

Oh, god, what a realization to have moments before she had to decide if she was going to marry the guy!

Not that she was going to marry him, she reminded herself.

She cleared her throat and disengaged their hands.

“These are for me?” she asked.

“I thought you might like them to walk down the aisle. Every bride should have a bouquet,” he said with a smile. “I mean, if you want one. I don’t really know what your dream wedding would have looked like.”

Neither did she. She hadn’t really spent years dreaming about her wedding day, what she’d wear, how many tiers the cake would be, what song she’d dance to, how her groom would look at her when she walked down the aisle. She’d been dreaming of a Pulitzer.

But the gesture of bringing her a bridal bouquet struck her as sweet.

And the bouquet was actually pretty, too. It was the perfect petite size and not overly fussy. There were some white roses in the mix, but, as far as she could tell, it looked like a smattering of what might be wildflowers overall. Or things that might grow in someone’s garden. There was a slim, light-blue ribbon around the stems, which she identified as a piece of lace.

“Something blue,” she realized, fingering the tiny bit of lace.

“It was my mom’s when she was younger,” he said. “She wore it in her hair at her own wedding. I didn’t really think that was your style, so I thought this might work.”

“So it’s something borrowed, too,” she said. “It’s nice.”

They made eye contact, and it felt charged enough for a blush to rise.

“Now we just need something old and something new,” she forced out.

“I think the ribbon counts as ‘old,’ too,” Clark said. “And some of the buds in there are brand new. A couple of them just opened this morning.”

“Wow, it’s an all-in-one bouquet,” she quipped.

“It’s tradition in my family,” he said with sheepish sentimentality. “My parents did it at their wedding.”

“You didn’t want them here today?”

He squirmed. “I... did. But I wasn’t sure that you would want an audience. Guests didn’t feel... expeditious.”

She recognized the callback to her description of the courthouse wedding and winced.

“You could have asked them,” she said, suddenly feeling bad about not having thought through that unlike her, *Clark* might have envisioned a dream wedding.

“They probably would have talked me out of it,” he admitted.

“I know what you mean,” she said conspiratorially. She’d corralled Lucy here because she needed a witness, but she hadn’t asked her parents to come because she still thought she’d end up calling Clark’s bluff today, and there wouldn’t be any marriage to see. But they would definitely have tried talking her out of this. If they showed up at all.

But speaking of witnesses...

“Did you bring your witness, by the way?” she asked, unable to keep some of the accusation out of her voice.

He gave her a look that was part affection and part challenge. “He’s meeting us here.”

“Who did you get to go along with your crusade of flipping the gender norm?” she asked, trying to suss out whether he was really serious about this.

Oh, mercy, please let it not be Jimmy.

Or anyone at all from the Planet.

“Clark, Lois,” said a rough voice off to the side.

She and Clark both turned, and she was floored to see her most reliable snitch shake hands with Clark. Why on earth had Clark asked Bobby Bigmouth of all people!? Jimmy or Perry would have been awkward, but Bobby would never let her live this down!

“Lane,” Bobby intoned, tipping his head toward her with a smirk. “White’s your color.”

She smoothed her hand down the simple satin slip dress she’d worn and tried not to notice Clark’s eyes following her motion. She resisted another blush, turning her ire on Bobby instead.

“Bobby, how did you get here? Did Clark have to bribe you with an entire wedding cake?” she asked caustically.

“There’s cake?” Bobby’s eyes lit hopefully.

She opened her mouth to respond with a suitably sarcastic reply but stopped when she heard her name called from down the hall.

“Lane and Kent?”

An older woman in a black judge’s robe popped her head out of the now open door a few feet away.

“Lane and Kent?” she called again.

“Here!” Clark responded.

“Lane and Kent, good. You’re my next appointment,” she said with a welcoming smile. “Come on in.”

Bobby and Lucy headed toward the office door, and Clark turned to her, offering a hand to get up from the bench.

Bouquet in one hand, she took his hand with the other, letting him help her up.

Once she was standing, though, he didn’t let go.

They walked hand in hand toward the judge’s office.

Her butterflies erupted again.

She felt his eyes cut toward her.

“Last chance to stop this, if you don’t want it, Lois,” he murmured. “You don’t have to rescue me, just because I don’t mind that you do.”

“In your dreams,” she tossed back, her bravado taking control without her consciously summoning it. “If you want to get out of accepting my offer, you’ll have to be the one to turn it down.”

He cast a look at her that was partly worried, partly curious, and partly something that she couldn’t interpret.

And then they were walking through the door and up to the judge, and Lucy was taking her bouquet and moving back behind her.

“Dearly beloved,” the judge began. “We are gathered here today...”

Time was speeding up, and she hadn't stopped this game of mutually assured destruction when she should have. Even though she was used to cutting it close, they were really nearing the point of no return now. But she didn't want him to win this when she'd made such a stand, and when the stand had been an important one.

She shifted her weight nervously, and Clark glanced over at her, subtly giving her an inquiring look.

This was the exact moment she needed her partner, but this time he was the one who had gotten her into this mess.

What are we doing?! she tried to ask him without speaking.

The expression in his eyes shifted, and she could see his concern blossom anew.

He would stop this if she truly panicked, she knew. He'd been the one to call for a truce to tons of their earlier competitions over the last year.

But truth be told, she wasn't sure what she actually wanted anymore. Her nerves were frayed from the whole week. Getting married to her partner, whom she hadn't even been dating, in the midst of an emotional career upheaval, seemed insane.

But...

A stray thought snapped along her synapses.

Did she *want* this??

She clearly hadn't been listening to her mind or her body where Clark was concerned, information which her traitorous brain had finally decided to parse just minutes ago.

Ugh, why couldn't she process her emotions in a linear way like most people did?!?

All she needed was a few minutes to analyze this.

And she *had* exactly a couple of minutes.

She had always been good under pressure.

So she schooled her features, giving Clark the message that she didn't need him to save her.

And she saw him sit back on his heels minutely, acknowledging she'd released him from the alert she'd sent his way.

It struck her that he'd read and reacted to her perfectly as she sorted through her messy emotions.

Had he always been able to do that?

“If anyone has any objections as to why these two should not be married, speak now or forever hold your peace.”

The judge dutifully paused for a moment.

No one objected.

This was the moment she'd assumed the ruse would end.

But no one spoke.

Not even her, she realized, once the judge had continued on.

What was she doing!? Was her pride in this much control of her that she couldn't back down? Or did she not want to back down for some other reason that she hadn't been ready to confront?

Clark caught her eye and subtly raised an eyebrow.

He had thought she would object, too.

She gently shrugged, and light surprise colored his features.

Meanwhile, the judge had continued on, and the older woman's voice broke back into her thoughts.

“Do you, Clark Kent, take Lois Lane, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until death do you part?”

He made eye contact with her again, and she could feel him searching her.

After a moment, the look in his eyes changed. He dipped his head and solemnly said, “I do,” a small smile pulling gently at the edge of his mouth.

He *did*?

Even now, she couldn't figure out his angle, why on earth he *would*.

“Do you, Lois Lane...”

She started at being addressed directly and immediately felt a sudden panic overtake her. She was out of time to think this through. Regardless of where her shifting emotions landed, this *was* crazy. She'd called Clark's bluff, and he hadn't backed down. She didn't think he was quite as stubborn as she was, but apparently, he was dethroning her as the new champion of stubborn! They'd taken this far enough. Otherwise, what was next—seeing which of them was the first to bring up the annulment papers?

“...until death do you part?”

She looked to Clark.

He'd already said his “I do.”

“I...”

And apparently he wasn't going to stop her from saying hers.

She didn't want him to win whatever this crazy game of chicken was, but she didn't want to end up married because of it!

"Can I talk to you for a minute over here?" she improvised, nodding toward the door.

"Uh, sure," Clark agreed.

Making her way back down the very short aisle, she clocked Lucy making a face like she was telling Lois not to screw this up and Bobby with raised eyebrows like he was watching a public street fight breaking out. She fought the urge to roll her eyes and opened the door, motioning Clark to proceed her through it.

"Just a second. We'll be right back," she said to the peanut gallery, closing them inside.

In the hall, she rounded on her partner.

"Alright, Clark, enough's enough. You've proven you'll go through with it, but I don't get what's in it for you. Why on earth would you *want* to go through with this?"

"I told you that day at my apartment, Lois. I love you," he said earnestly.

She shook her head in frustration. There was no way it could be that simple.

"But *why*?"

It was the question she had asked Lex. And he, a shallow man, she'd since decided, had given her a rudimentarily shallow answer. So now she was using this same question as a litmus test on Clark.

"Because you're the best person I know," he said, as if that were obvious.

When she narrowed her eyes, he elaborated.

"Because... you have such an enormous heart, Lois. And you can't stand to see someone treated unfairly. You go out of your way to stick up for the people who can't stick up for themselves, and you've dedicated your whole life to telling their stories. You throw yourself wholeheartedly into every single one, and you can't ever help getting involved in them, even if it breaks your rules, because you know it will help someone. You're brilliant, and savvy, and so, so smart. You're confident and brave and always have a plan. You're fun to be around and I—I always want to be around you," he said in a rush that could have rivaled her for speed of speech.

"And that's why I want to marry you. I think... I think we make each other better people. And I know you make me better. You make *everything* better."

His voice was low and quiet now, but it was the look in his eyes pinning her in place.

That was what he should have said during his proposal, she thought dizzily.

It left her speechless.

* * *

"Look, Lois, you don't really have to go through with this," he assured her. "I do love you, and I think I always will. And I know that you don't mind the unorthodox, but this is a huge step, and I would never want to trap you in something you don't want."

Her brow furrowed, but she still didn't say anything.

"We can even say that I lost this bet," he offered. "That I couldn't handle the idea of the partnership you wanted, if that's what you want."

"I think that maybe you're right," she said slowly, not looking at him.

"What?" he asked.

Her eyes were cast downward.

"I've been thinking a lot the last three days. Maybe more than I should. Or maybe as much as I should have been thinking months ago," she admitted with a self-castigating chuckle. "But the truth is, if your proposal hadn't made me so angry, I don't know what I would have said to Lex when he made his offer. And I think... I think I might have made the wrong decision there. But with you..."

Her eyes finally met his.

She hadn't ever looked at him like this before, not outright.

"Anyway, maybe this'll be enough to stop me from making any other stupid decisions."

"Lois, that's not a good enough reason to get married."

Her face fell at his reply.

Was she... was she *disappointed*?

That could *not* be true.

But he knew what Lois looked like when something had disappointed her.

She looked like this.

His brain sputtered over the thought.

"You were right," she said then, the sudden vulnerability in her voice tugging at him. "I have felt... lost. Without the Planet. I don't feel like I belong anywhere anymore. I—I think I'd really like to feel safe right now."

“And *this* would make you feel safe?” he asked incredulously, blindly gesturing to the judge’s door behind them, not taking his eyes off her.

“*You* make me feel safe,” she said, and he recognized that she was doing her best to articulate in a small way something that felt incredibly big.

Something in her had shifted.

And it had shifted toward him.

“*You are* safe with me,” he promised.

And if she was asking him to keep her safe for the rest of her life, he would vow to do that.

For better, or for worse.

For richer, or for poorer.

In sickness and in health.

For as long as they both lived.

Time stilled for just a second, and he felt something in that subtle shift solidify, the distance lessening between them.

This was not how he’d pictured it. But if this was the path Lois wanted them to take, he would follow her down it, even to the edge of the world.

“So...?” She gestured to the door.

“Lead the way, partner,” he said.

* * *

The next few minutes went smoothly once they got back in. The judge, apparently on a time crunch between civil ceremonies today, was happy enough to jump right back in where they’d left off.

And when Lois said “I do,” she felt certain for the first time in a long time. Because unless Superman was going to descend from the skies to confess his love and propose, which she never truly thought would be a possibility, she wasn’t really sure that the typical fairy tale was something she was capable of. But a life with Clark—not with his wealth or his status or his polite distance, but with his morals, his kind nature, his insistence on equality, the way he made her laugh, the way he kept up with her, the way his eyes took on a look of unadulterated adoration when he told her that she was safe with him—well, that was a life she could see herself living.

“You may now kiss the bride.”

Oh, god, right, that was her part again.

She’d gotten caught up in sorting this out in her mind, and the ceremony had sped by!

And now they were supposed to kiss.

In front of people.

On purpose.

How had she not remembered that this was part of literally every wedding ceremony ever?

Nerves shot through her, but she turned back to Clark, as everyone clearly expected.

She’d only kissed Clark before as part of a ploy, not because she’d really meant it. It was always just a convenient tactic, to use him as a prop. But this wouldn’t be a ploy or gambit or any kind of undercover facade. This was supposed to be honest.

And while she wanted to try that—to kiss him with honesty—their situation was just so take-the-cake-odd that she had no idea how to do it.

She looked up at him, seeing that he was watching for her, waiting for her permission. Waiting, as ever, it seemed, to follow her lead, just as he’d promised.

But this wasn’t a place she was eager to be the leader. So she gave him a look that clearly translated as “help” and watched as he grinned.

Apparently, he was happy to help her with this.

He took her hands in his and moved closer, still watching for any hesitation from her.

But she was being careful not to give any sign of hesitation whatsoever. She was ready to get this over with and figure out whether the next part of this was supposed to be. Because along with the realization that she’d missed any anticipation of this kiss was the realization that she hadn’t anticipated anything else either—where they would live, where to look for work, if they had any real concept of how this partnership was supposed to work now that they had added a marriage to it.

Clark’s hand pulsed, pulling her attention back, and she tilted her face up, finding him suddenly quite close.

He gave her a clear look that said he was going to kiss her, *now*, and she felt herself brace.

...And she also felt the involuntary reaction of her body—breath hitching, pulse pounding more insistently through her veins, butterflies in her stomach tracing patterns of suddenly searing heat through her abdomen.

It caught her off guard. Was this the reaction she’d been stifling every day?

He bent down toward her, and his lips gently met hers.

As soon as they touched, the electricity that had teased her in the hall coursed through her veins full-throttle.

Her hands tensed around his, and the kiss intensified. She wasn't sure if it had been her, or his response to her, but either way, it was making her adrenaline surge.

Something about it felt familiar.

That made sense; she'd kissed Clark before as a cover.

But overwhelming that familiarity was the white hot excitement of kissing Clark Kent.

Because, she thought, as he lightly, slowly caressed her lower lip with his, he was a devastatingly good kisser.

She felt herself lean in, and his weight shifted against her, one of his hands releasing hers to come up to her cheek. Feeling her cheek heat under his palm, either from his body heat or her own blush, she dropped her hand to his chest and was reminded that her new husband was built.

Her mind was unspooling, her focus raw and narrowed down to the man running his hand up her now arching back. She couldn't catch her breath, she realized, as Clark kissed her into a blank, unworried bliss.

A giggle broke through into her consciousness, and, suddenly self-conscious, she turned away from the unexpectedly heated kiss to shoot a glare at her sister, who was doing an awful job of covering up her smirk.

When she looked back at Clark, though, all thought of her sister evaporated. He was looking at her like she held the moon and he was starving for light, like she was precious air in a sealed tomb, like he'd trudged through dusty days in a desert to devour whatever she offered.

And with an unmistakable, delicious thrill, she realized that in spite of his earlier promise, she didn't feel safe *at all*.

She shook her head against the hyperbolic route her thoughts had taken as the judge executed the license they'd tasked Bobby with remembering to get signed when they'd entered. Bobby and her sister signed, too, and then Clark.

When he moved to hand her the pen, she realized that she was still holding his hand.

Disentangling, she took the pen he offered and signed the document.

It was official now.

* * *

Several minutes later, they sat on a bench outside the judge's office.

Silent.

And married.

Bobby had departed swiftly after wishing them luck, already untucking a wrapped sandwich from somewhere

in his coat, and Lucy had left after a giggly but heartfelt congratulations.

Then Lois had sat to fix the strap on one of her shoes, and Clark had sat down beside her.

And they hadn't moved.

A sort of unexpected shock had settled over them, like the calm after a storm.

An awkwardness had crept in.

A silent awkwardness that rendered them both mute.

Several minutes had ticked by.

Clark was stunned, having, for the first time since he'd met Lois, absolutely nothing to say to her. The woman he'd just *married*.

He was about to tell her that despite of everything he'd said out here just minutes before, despite of the unexpected fireworks in that kiss, despite his promises to follow her guidance in this marriage, he would be happy to offer her the safety he'd promised by annulling the marriage tomorrow, and doing, really, whatever she wanted, without the legal entrapment she'd somehow baited them into.

"What now?" She interrupted his thoughts.

After the entire premise of their union being based on her making the decisions for them, she was asking *him* what was next?

He looked at her.

She didn't look panicked.

She didn't look like she was ready to run.

She did look as stunned as he was, though.

"Ah, well, I guess we should pick whose apartment we're going to live in."

"Yours is bigger," she ceded.

He nodded. He'd have agreed to anything she'd asked.

"Can we keep my couch instead of yours?" he asked hesitantly.

She shrugged, clearly not caring about the sofas.

"I need somewhere to put my fish. I don't want to move them to a smaller tank; they deserve the big one."

He nodded in agreement, and they fell back into the stunned silence.

After a moment, he turned to her more fully.

"Lois?" He took a breath, not knowing any other way to ask this. "Is this real?"

“I— Well, I do everything else backwards and sideways and not the way anyone else does it. So why not this?” she said glibly.

“Lo-is.”

She looked at him squarely. “I don’t—I don’t know. I think so. I do love you, Clark. You are the best friend I’ve ever had. I don’t think I’ve ever had someone in my life that I didn’t want to live without before. But I want you in my life forever. That’s real. Is that... enough?”

For Lois, that *was* real.

And for him, it was a place to start.

He nodded, ready to start forging a relationship that could lead to what it seemed like they both wanted and had jumped into but hadn’t been prepared for.

“Then, I think we need to maybe figure out how to talk to each other a little more openly,” he suggested.

She swallowed thickly, then said candidly, “That’s not exactly my strong suit.”

“Maybe I can help with that? We can practice. We can both get better at it together.”

And he really needed to start practicing that *tonight*.

Because he’d been so distracted by Lois’ whiplash challenge of a proposal, worry of potential retribution from Luthor, and his supposed fiancée’s three-day disappearing act that he’d completely forgotten to consider the fact that he’d just married the person who was supposed to trust him most in the world, without telling her one important detail.

A *super* important detail.

“Kind of more than I expected in that kiss back there,” she said, interrupting his thoughts as she glanced at him from beneath shuttered lashes and surprised him by offering the first overture in speaking openly.

“*That* was real for me,” he told her, feeling a blush dust his cheeks.

“Me, too,” she shyly admitted.

Her hand was just beside his on the bench, and he slid his finger a little closer. He felt her freeze for a second at the near-touch, but then her hand nudged closer to him. So he slowly covered hers with his, wrapping his fingers around hers.

She was staring straight ahead, but he knew that her entire focus was on their joined hands.

“So this *is* real,” he checked again, feeling a little more confident about it.

* * *

“This is real,” she confirmed.

God, that was terrifying to say.

But also somehow okay?

Inexplicably, she felt a lot better now than she had in weeks, sitting on a hard wooden bench holding her partner’s hand. She should feel caged, wild at the situation she’d just shackled herself to. But instead it felt like something had clicked correctly and reassuringly into place.

Because Clark wasn’t an anchor.

He was a buoy, a lighthouse in a tempest.

Plus, she wouldn’t mind if he ran his hands along her jawline again and leaned in close to brush his lips along hers the way he’d been doing when Lucy had interrupted.

Surely there were marriages built on less than all that?

She suddenly had a hunch that this was going to work out.

“Well, in that case, Lois, I have something I really have to tell you.”

...Or maybe not.

Clark exhaled shakily, but his voice had been certain.

She felt her eyebrow raise, fighting the trepidation of the shoe Clark seemed about to drop fifteen minutes into her binding herself to him.

“Okay,” she said, waiting.

“Uh, not here,” he said, and stood.

She picked up her bouquet but hesitated before she followed him.

“Where, then?”

“Do you trust me?” he asked.

He held out his hand, and she looked down at it, considering.

She was along for this ride now, she supposed.

And surprisingly, that felt okay, too.

Because when push came to shove, she really did trust him.

“I do,” she said.

And she reached out and took his hand.

* * *

“Hi, you two! How was the big day?” The squeal met them before they’d fully entered through the office door.

Lois gave the gratingly chipper clerk an indulgent smile as they made their way over to the desk.

“It was nice,” she said sedately, hoping to keep this interaction efficient.

But then her husband’s arms went around her waist, and she smiled automatically, feeling herself lighten at his touch.

“It was lovely,” he edited, with a sweet and goofy smile.

She looked up at him over her shoulder.

“It was a civil ceremony,” she said, rolling her eyes but unable to shake the matching smile from her own mouth.

In fact, she couldn’t seem to stop smiling when Clark was anywhere near her.

“Every wedding is special in its own way,” the clerk chimed in dreamily. “I bet yours was just as lovely as your new husband says.”

The day itself hadn’t been much of anything special, except that her nerves had been at an all-time high and she’d felt like she was losing her mind all day, for one reason after another.

But the days after...

They *had* been lovely.

Once they’d left the courthouse, she’d been all for action, in lieu of thinking rationally or dealing with the emotional consequences of her actions. She’d been gung ho on calling their folks and packing up her apartment, right up until they realized that meant they’d have to sort out sleeping arrangements. Then she’d frozen.

Clark had suggested that they take the night to just have dinner together and relax, to take the opportunity to talk through some things.

They’d covered an immense amount of ground that night.

A *super* amount of ground, actually.

Very shortly after that revelation, the marriage had nearly been furiously annulled.

But hearing him describe how watching her fall head over heels for his alter ego had at once elated him and crushed him had given her a different perspective. He’d been walking a tightrope he didn’t want to balance on for months, partly to save her pride and partly to protect everyone involved. After a long series of questions on her part, she’d decided that an annulment would be a hasty decision.

And then, over dinner, they’d had a much more important conversation, one that Clark had admitted he’d been trying to have with her since all of this had started. He’d asked what she really wanted out of her partner, what part of married life she thought would make her most happy, what she saw for her future and theirs.

Discovering that they were aligned on so much, they had started to plan.

And the planning became dreaming.

And the dreams became more and more possible the longer they had talked.

In the midst of the evening, Lois had realized that she was now married to a man who was honest to a fault, who was willing to listen, willing to give, willing to stick around and grow with her and be challenged and love her through it all, even with all of her own flaws and baggage. In spite of a truly terrible beginning, she had accidentally found herself right where she wanted to be.

And after they’d sorted out those things...

Her gaze flicked from her husband’s eyes to his mouth, and he grinned, an intimate smile that she’d never seen on him before this past week. His thoughts were apparently following hers.

“So are you lovebirds here to drop off your license?” the perky clerk interrupted.

Lois disengaged from her husband’s embrace, reached into her bag to fish out the signed marriage license, and slid it under the glass.

“Alrighty, this looks good!” said the clerk a moment later, fussing with other papers on her desk. “Just a stamp”—she lent action to speech and stamped the page in front of her before sliding the document back toward them on the counter—“and you’re good to go!”

Lois read the marriage certificate in front of her. “Lois Lane and Clark Kent.”

She couldn’t help but melt a little seeing their names side by side.

Clark caught her eye, and his smile turned sentimental in response.

“Awww,” the clerk chimed in.

Lois looked up with a raised eyebrow.

“You two are lifers,” the clerk said sappily. “I can always tell.”

“Right. Well, thanks for your help,” Lois said, and pulled Clark toward the door of the office.

“Aww, she thinks we’re lifers,” he teased in her ear as soon as they were out of the clerk’s hearing range.

Lois elbowed him.

“I bet she says that to everyone that comes in,” she scoffed.

He caught her hand in his, pulling her closer as they walked.

“You don’t think she gets it right some of the time?” he asked.

“Well...” She stalled in movement and speech as Clark lifted her hand and slowly kissed the inside of her wrist.

She let the welcome shiver move up her spine.

“Maybe some of the time,” she allowed.

“This time?” he asked.

His voice was teasing, but his eyes were soft and searching.

She was about to make a teasing comment about waiting and finding out. But she remembered that this was still new between them. That he’d asked for reassurance that she really wanted him, now that she knew all of his secrets. That the marriage they were in was real, not something he’d dared her into or something that she regretted or a wild figment of his imagination. And in the spirit of communicating to her partner something she knew he needed, she revised her response.

“This time,” she repeated, seeing that she had his full attention, “I think she got it absolutely right.”

A smile lit his face.

“You think so?”

His voice was hopeful.

“I’ve got a hunch about it,” she said.

“I think you’re right,” he said happily.

She slid her arm around his, and he followed her through the outer doors of the building, where they walked side by side into the sunshine and all the days to come.

THE END