

Running on Empty

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Rating: T

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"Oh my God, I'm going to KILL Perry," Lois grumbled, her palm striking the steering wheel with an aggravated slap. Her eyes were locked on the gas gauge as she made yet another futile attempt to start the car, knowing even as she did so that it would end in failure. "I told him this whole thing was a bad idea! There is no story here. Gun runners hiding in ghost towns in the middle of the desert, my ass!"

Clark wisely remained silent. He didn't dare mention that he'd suggested they stop at the last gas station they'd passed to top off the tank, especially after the road signs had clearly informed them that there were no other service stations for the next hundred and fifty miles. Lois had pointed at the gas gauge, however and assured him that they had plenty of gas. Well, that had been seventy miles ago and the gas gauge still registered as full. Except they were irrefutably out of gas. And if that wasn't bad enough, they were out of gas in the middle of the desert on a forgotten highway on a scorching day in August. Clark was thankful it was a rental car they were currently occupying, given the sheer amount of abuse Lois was inflicting on the vehicle. Not that he blamed her, of course, but he knew first hand that typically, violence never solved anything.

Lois had obviously never gotten that memo.

And he couldn't help but love that about her.

"God damn piece of shit car! And look, it only has four thousand miles on it! Remind me never to get one of these piece of shit foreign tin cans, would you?" Lois ranted. "I mean, what are the odds that we would run out of gas in the middle of the desert in a practically brand new car? How unlikely is that? And why do they space gas stations so far apart? What kind of morons are these people?" Lois stopped her tirade long enough to reach into her oversized purse for her cell phone. "I wonder how long it will take AAA to get here."

Clark wanted to point out that it wasn't entirely the car's fault that they were in this situation - human error had played a small part. But when he heard her heart rate escalate dramatically, he regarded her with concern. Lois held up her phone to show him the ominous announcement that informed that they were in a no service area.

"Clark, please tell me you have service on your phone," she whispered, the enormity of their current situation beginning to sink in. They hadn't passed a single automobile in hours and without the air conditioning running, she was beginning to feel every bit of the triple digit heat assaulting her.

And why the hell had she worn pantyhose? She planned to remedy that as soon as she could.

Clark took the phone out of his pocket and grimaced, holding the phone out so she could read it for herself. "Sorry, Lois. No service."

"Oh this is just fantastic!" Lois grumbled. "We're screwed. We're completely and utterly screwed. All those times cheating death and this is what is finally does Lois Lane in. An empty gas tank in the middle of the desert."

"Well, Lois. We are in... uh, Death Valley."

The glare she sent his way informed him that his comment was highly unappreciated.

Clark tried to look optimistic. "Um... it could be worse. At least we have... uh, water." He dug through the bag at his feet. "And... Ding Dongs."

"I hate Ding Dongs."

"Then why did you get them?" He looked puzzled.

Another glare was sent in his direction, managing to scorch him worse than any amount of heat was capable of. "Because they sounded good at the time ok? Geez. Don't you get it, Kent? We are at least seventy-five miles from any type of civilization. With no air conditioning. No phone. And no gas. Can this picture get any bleaker for you? And you want me to get excited about Ding Dongs?" Her face brightened suddenly. "Wait, I have an idea."

Clark watched curiously as she leaned her head out the open window, took a deep breath and yelled, "Help! Superman!" The sudden assault to his hearing had him cringing; his hands immediately reaching up to cup his ears. He'd forgotten how loud Lois could yell. She was something, all right.

"Uh Lois... do you think that's such a good idea? I mean... maybe he's busy," he said carefully. Boy, this was awkward. He might as well get it over with and tell her that there was no point in yelling for Superman since Superman was sitting in the passenger seat right next to her. But a selfish part of him didn't want to tell her just yet - not when Clark Kent had her undivided attention for the first time since he'd come back from Krypton. She'd refused to sit and talk to him in the days following his return to the Planet and well, he'd... missed her. Before he'd fled to Krypton, they had been friends. Then, of course, things had gone so horribly wrong while they'd been on assignment at Niagara Falls and it hadn't gotten any better. Well, not everything had gone wrong... They'd declared their love for one another and had made love... But he'd tampered with Lois' memories and that was inexcusable - although it had sure sounded like a good idea at the time. This current stilted friendship he now found himself in with Lois was only bearable because of one thing.

Jason.

His son.

Their son.

In the month since he'd returned and learned that he was a father, Clark had tried to reestablish the easy relationship he'd shared with Lois. They'd had an easy friendship back then - and Clark wanted - no, needed - that camaraderie back before he told her that he was Superman.

Yet, things were different now and she didn't really need Clark in her life anymore. She had Richard.

Geez, when had his life gotten so complicated?

'Oh, about the time you decided to put on tights and become a superhero,' he reminded himself.

When Perry had suggested this undercover assignment to investigate the allegation of huge scale gun running in an abandoned desert town, he'd been enthusiastic, if not eager. He needed this time with Lois. There was too much he need to talk to her about and Clark was tired of lying to her. She needed to know the truth and quite frankly, he was tired of pretending

to be someone that he wasn't. Tired of keeping his true feelings for her in check when he saw her at the office daily. He knew Lois thought that she couldn't have a relationship with Superman - and she was right.

But she could have a relationship with Clark. Clark Kent could be a father to their son.

A stab of guilt assaulted him as his subconscious reminded him of Lois' fiancé's place in this twisted equation, but he beat it back down. Lois was more than capable of making her own choices and she needed to have all the facts presented to her before making a decision on which man she wished to share her life with. He'd initially decided to not interfere with the relationship that Lois had built for herself while he'd been on his fool's errand to Krypton - but nobility and good intentions could only go so far. Nobility didn't keep him warm at night. It couldn't comfort him when the guilt consumed him because he had not been fast enough or strong enough to save lives... It didn't laugh with him and keep him grounded.

And it sure didn't let Clark be the father to his son that he was desperate to be. He needed Lois in his life.

So it hadn't been a difficult decision to rebuke nobility and good intentions. Once he'd shared the secret that Lois had known at one time, she could make an informed decision - and ultimately choose the man she wanted to be with. It was sheer arrogance that had prompted him to make decisions for her all those years ago, thinking that he knew what was best for her. He wasn't about to make the same mistake twice. Clark could only hope that he hadn't let things get too far this time - and that there was still a relationship to salvage from this convoluted mess of his own making.

While running out of gas was a definite inconvenience, Clark couldn't have asked for a more ideal situation. Well, having Lois in a better mood could have proven to be more ideal - but stuck out in the middle of nowhere provided a serious lack of opportunities for her to storm off in that infamous Lane huff that he loved so much. Being stuck in the desert meant that there was no work for her to throw herself into so that she didn't have to face the unpleasant truth. Lois has nowhere else to go.

It was almost... cosmic.

Hearing Lois swear colorfully under her breath, Clark was hard pressed to smother the small grin that insisted on playing along his lips.

"You think this is funny, Kent?" Lois demanded, sending him a withering glare.

He pushed his glasses up his nose and ducked his head. "No... uh, of course not, Lois. I was just uh, thinking about that time that we broke down on the way to that Inauguration and we got picked up by those circus people." He sent a wide smile in her direction.

Lois groaned. "Oh, don't you dare bring up that reptile guy!"

"Well, he... uh, did have good taste."

"The man was a lunatic! He asked me if I was interested in a threesome with his boa constrictor!"

"And I'm sure he regretted it," Clark pointed out somewhat patronizingly. The man had been lucky to survive with all parts intact. Clark had never seen Lois so worked up - she had been a sight to behold.

Lois glanced over at Clark, the smirk on his face giving her pause. Since when did Clark Kent smirk?

God, she hadn't realized until now just how damn much she'd missed him. She'd been so wrapped up in her feelings with the reappearance of Superman and the revelation of Jason's

paternity, that she hadn't even given her previous best friend much thought.

"Clark?"

He looked at her warily, the smirk fading from his lips.

"I missed you." That wasn't what Lois meant to say, but it was what slipped out of her mouth. And as she said the words, it dawned on her just how true it was.

His smile was immediate. That toothy, wide, friendly, dorky grin that managed to put people at ease in an instant. It warmed her in a way that the profound heat around her couldn't even touch.

"I missed you too, Lois." His voice was soft and Lois had the feeling that Clark was packing a huge punch in those simple words.

Suddenly finding herself flustered, Lois cleared her throat and looked away, fumbling for her phone once more in the off-chance that service had been miraculously restored in the minutes since she'd last checked.

It hadn't.

"Jesus, Clark! What are we going to do?" The reality of their situation struck her once more. It was growing hotter by the second and she leaned over to adjust the air conditioner vent to hit her in the face, growling at the warm air that was pouring in her direction. "Ugh, this is almost worse than not having any air! How long do you think the battery will hold out?"

Clark shrugged. "A few hours maybe." He looked at his watch. "It's five o'clock right now... It'll uh, cool off once the sun goes down."

Lois threw herself back against her seat and closed her eyes. She could feel the sweat pouring down her back and chest and it wasn't a pleasant sensation. Peeling away her sticky blouse, she grimaced. Cracking an eye open, she looked in her partner's direction. "How can you still be wearing that jacket? God, it has to be a hundred and ten degrees!"

"Oh, um, right," Clark mumbled, his fingers finding the buttons of his thick coat. He shrugged it off, leaving his typical vest in place. He reached into the cooler at his feet and grabbed a bottle of water, holding it out to her. "Here, Lois. You need to drink this."

Lois took it gratefully and removed the cap. She threw her head back, lifted the bottle to her mouth and took long, greedy gulps.

Clark was transfixed at the sight, watching the muscles of her throat move to swallow the refreshing liquid. He gulped loudly, unable to tear his gaze away.

When Lois had finished half of the bottle, she took it from her lips and sighed. "You're right. I did need that, Clark." She looked down at her watch, then turned to study the sky.

"Dammit, where is he?"

"Who?"

"Who do you think? Superman! Oh wait, maybe he didn't hear me." Cracking the window once more, Lois proceeded to shout for her own personal Superhero.

Clark sighed again. This pretending to not be someone he really was definitely was starting to grate on him. "I'm not, uh, sure if you should always count on him to come rescue you, Lois."

They were back to the withering glares and Clark flinched.

"He owes me," Lois finally muttered, checking the sky one more time.

"He *owes* you?"

She waved him off with a quick flick of her wrist. "It's a long story. And I don't really feel like going into it. It's kind of... personal." She sighed deeply before muttering under her breath, "Always around? Yeah right. Not when it really counts, at least."

Clark wisely remained silent, waiting for her to continue. He knew her well enough to know that when she said she didn't want to talk about something, it usually meant that the floodgates to her mind would soon open and she would talk about nothing else.

This instance proved to be no different.

"It's just that... why can't things be like they were? Why does everything have to change? Why can't my life ever just take a simple course? Why does it have to always be so complicated?"

Clark shifted uncomfortably. "Uh... what are we talking about?"

She shook her head in consternation. "Forget I said anything." She was silent for a moment. "It's just... have you ever had to make a huge decision that was bound to hurt people, no matter what choice you make?"

'*Oh Lois, you have no idea...*' he thought to himself. "Gee, Lois. It sounds serious," he managed to say, fidgeting uncomfortably.

Lois uttered a humorless laugh. "It might be." She checked her phone again, sighing at the continued lack of service. "Well, if Superman doesn't swoop in to save the day, at least I know that Richard will be worried when I don't call tonight. I'm sure between he and Perry, we'll be rescued by tomorrow. If nobody comes along this godforsaken road, anyway."

"I hope so, Lois," he added optimistically.

A heavy silence filled the air. "Clark?"

He turned to regard her. "Yes?"

"What do you think of Richard?"

'*I think he's the luckiest bastard on the face of this earth,*' he immediately thought. "Uh... well, that's kind of a hard question to answer, Lois," he replied instead, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose. "You know him better than I do. But uh, from what I've seen and heard, I think he's... swell."

Lois rolled her eyes. What was it with Clark and that word? "Why do you always say swell, Clark?"

Clark managed to look offended. "I don't know what you mean."

"Yes, you do. You know exactly what I mean." She threw her hands in the air in irritation. "God, it's almost like you try to sound as dorky as possible. Like you're playing a part, or something. Like you don't want people to really look at you or hear what you have to say. I'm beginning to think that you say 'swell' to throw people off so they won't take a closer look at you." She peered into his face, not missing the slightly guilty look or the incredibly blue eyes that refused to meet her own. Something niggled at the fringes of her mind. She knew the answer to this - yet somehow it was eluding her. "You do, don't you?" she accused. "Clark, what are you hiding from me?"

He took a deep breath and held it. If ever there was a perfect opening to come forth with the truth, this was it. He couldn't lie to her anymore. Couldn't deny that he was, in fact, hanging onto a life-altering secret.

"Ok, fine. I'm Superman," he blurted. '*So much for subtlety,*' he thought to himself.

A glimmer of anger sparked in her eyes. "That's not funny, Clark. Why would you even joke about that?"

He turned to peer intently into her eyes, willing her to see him for who he truly was. "Do I look like I'm joking, Lois?" He allowed his voice to drop to its true timbre, hoping she'd finally see the truth.

Lois carefully studied his familiar features, recognition slowly dawning.

'Here it comes,' he thought, tensing for the onslaught. Not that he didn't deserve it. He did. He deserved her wrath and so much more. Before she could launch into her anticipated tirade, however, Clark became aware of a loud drone that served to interrupt the intensity of the moment. With a slow trepidation, Clark directed his focus from the woman at his side to the interruption outside his window, groaning loudly at the approaching helicopter. It was still far enough away to not be visible to the naked eye, but the silence was so profound in the desert that the noise of the engine sounded like a grenade to his sensitive hearing.

With the luck he usually seemed to have, he couldn't expect it to be any type of cavalry riding valiantly to the rescue. No, it couldn't ever be that simple because if there was one thing that he had quickly learned - the bad guys always had the worst timing imaginable. Worse than Jimmy, even. Focusing on the sounds beyond the loud drone of the rotors, Clark easily tapped into the conversation currently taking place on board the helicopter. "Oh swell," he muttered. "We have company."

Lois shook her head dismissively, the look in her eyes growing increasingly irate. "Clark, don't try to change the subject here. I want to know why you would say something like that me. Do you think you're being funny? Well, let me assure you - you're not."

Clark sighed heavily. "I'm not trying to change the subject, Lois." He pointed out his window to the fast approaching speck in the horizon. "There's a helicopter headed our way. Our friends, the gun runners. Guess Perry was right. There is a story here."

She tossed him a disbelieving look. "Oh please. How could you possibly know that? It's probably... the police or something."

The unmistakable sound of weapons being loaded assaulted Clark's consciousness and his heart sank. They had no time. These men planned to shoot first, ask questions later. "Oh believe me, I wish it were, but it's not, Lois. We have to get out of here. Now." Clark reached for his door handle, twisting the metal in his haste to exit the vehicle.

Not leaving Lois any time to fully process the bomb he had just dropped in her lap, Clark threw his door open and sped to the driver side door. Seeing Lois hadn't moved, he turned his eyes upward for a brief second. This was just so... Lois. Always needing the proof right in front of her before she'd act. "Lois, come on, we have to get out of here." He opened her door to assist her from the car.

Her eyes blinked disbelieving as she stared up into his face. "How did you do that? You know, to the door handle?"

"Lois," Clark uttered in a low voice. "Get out of the car. These guys aren't fooling around, I can assure you. They have guns and they plan on using them."

"You don't know that," she insisted, her typical stubbornness not allowing her to accept his words. "You can't know that."

"Yes, I do." Clark reached into the car and removed her from the seat, cradling her easily in his arms.

"Hey! Put me down!"

"No." Clark spun and launched himself in the air, being forced to go faster than he would have liked while carrying Lois, but those precious seconds dealing with Lois' stubbornness had brought the helicopter that much closer. Their vehicle had been spotted and Clark heard the order 'to take care of it.' He didn't know exactly what that meant, but he figured it meant nothing good.

Clark slowed and brought them to halt once they were hidden from view above the cloud cover. He turned wary eyes upon the still figure safely encompassed in his arms.

"Oh God..." she whispered, the color quickly leeching from her face, leaving her pale and shell-shocked as she stared into his still bespeckled face.

"I'm sorry, Lois," he quietly informed her. "This wasn't how I wanted you to find out."

Before Lois could respond, the sound of a loud blast washed over them. Unconsciously clutching Clark even tighter, Lois darted her gaze to the ground below and gasped. Through the cloud's wispy cover, Lois realized that the vehicle they had just occupied was now fully engulfed in flames. Clark had been right. It wasn't the cavalry.

Why did these things always happen to her?

She had almost died. Again.

She turned to look at her partner, whose expression held a profound wariness that twisted something deep inside of her. There was no doubt now that the words Clark had spoken were the truth. He was Superman. Clark Kent was the father of her child.

Why did she feel like she should have known that?

And he had saved her life, yet again. The look of dread in Clark's eyes cut through her. He was scared. The most powerful man in the world was scared of her.

It was humbling.

The corners of her full lips curved into a slight smile as she regarded him. She knew she should be angry, yet Lois couldn't seem to muster up the emotion. There would be time for that later.

"I guess you were right," Lois began.

The look he sent her was questioning.

"You are always around."

A hopeful gleam shimmered in his gaze. "I'll always be around, Lois."

"I know."

They were silent for a moment. "Are you mad?" he couldn't help but ask.

Lois sighed. Was she mad? Yeah, she was. Or she would be, eventually. Too much duplicity had gone on for her to just give up and forgive him without a few choice words. "Honestly? I'm pretty much just numb right now. Can you we talk about this later? Like when we're not hovering hundreds of feet in the air?"

Clark offered her a small, tentative, hopeful smile. Maybe something could still be salvaged from the convoluted web he'd allowed himself to spin. "Whenever you're ready, Lois."

"Can you get us to a payphone? We need to call the police and nail these guys," Lois said, mourning the loss of her cell phone that had been left behind in the front seat of their car.

Clark nodded. "Let me just... uh, make sure these guys aren't going to go anywhere." He gestured below to the helicopter that had set down next to the burning wreckage of their rental car. Sending a few bursts of heat vision, Clark managed to warp the rotors, effectively grounding them. A sense of satisfaction stuck him as the heated words of the pilot reached his ears. These men had intended to kill them, regardless of who or what they were doing on that road. They weren't going anywhere - not if he had anything to do with it.

Shifting her in his arms, Clark asked, "Are you ready?"

Finding herself snuggling against the thick tweed of the vest he still wore, she gave a quick nod. At least it was cooler up where they were, that was at least something.

"Clark?" Lois asked as they began moving.

"Yes, Lois?"

"Can we get some more Ding Dongs?"

Clark gave her a crooked, happy smile. "Anything you want, Lois. Anything you want."
The End.