

Promises

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Rating: K+

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Superman was bone weary. It had been a long week and it was only his first week back. Luthor's kryptonite island was safely in orbit near the asteroid belt. Lois Lane had more or less forgiven him for leaving the planet for so long. But it was as though every criminal and small time punk on the east coast was testing the fact that he was back. His back still hurt from where Luthor had stabbed him.

The world finally calmed down enough for him to meet Lois on the roof of the Daily Planet for her second long delayed interview with the Man of Steel and the first one following the earthquake that had devastated Metropolis.

The interview went quickly - it helped that he already knew what questions she had planned. He had suggested several of them as he sat across from her in the newsroom, not that she knew that.

It was almost like old times if he didn't think too much about the complications of Lois Lane's life. She had a son and a fiancé. She didn't need him even if he was the father of her son. She didn't need Superman. She had won a Pulitzer for proclaiming that in print.

She closed her notebook and turned off her recorder. The interview was over. She looked at him, frowning slightly as though she were trying to come to a decision. He waited a moment for her to speak, but she didn't.

He turned to leave the roof.

"Wait," she called.

He paused.

"I still love you... and I will leave Richard." She uttered words of promise, but promise was no longer enough. She had promised to love him until he released her from that by erasing her memory of their time together. She had given herself to Richard and promised to marry him. Now she was planning to leave Richard for... Superman?

"It's easy to love without commitment, Lois. People do it all the time. It's easy to give oneself for a while, but commitment is the glue," he told her before flying off into the night sky.

Lois had some thinking to do. And so did he.

It was too late to fly to Kansas. His mom would be asleep and although she would tell him it was okay, that she didn't need much sleep and she was always there to listen, it wasn't fair to her, or to her boyfriend. Clark wasn't sure exactly what their relationship was. His mother would only tell him that Ben was a good man.

That was how Lois had described Richard the first time she mentioned him to Superman. There was one person he could talk to who would be up at this hour. Superman headed for Gotham City.

A fly-over of the city failed to show where Batman was hiding, but Gotham was nearly as large, area-wise, as Metropolis and had even more nooks and crannies. Clark also suspected Bruce was playing games with him. It wouldn't be the first time. "I hate Batman's version of hide 'n seek," he muttered to himself.

He landed on one of the verandas surrounding Wayne Manor and switched into trousers and a white shirt. He reached up to knock on the door but it opened almost before he touched it.

Alfred Pennyworth was standing in the open doorway dressed in pajamas and a silk dressing gown. He didn't seem surprised or annoyed to see a visitor at this time of night.

"Ah, Mister Kent, how nice to see you," the old man greeted him and moved aside so Clark could enter. "Mister Wayne has just gotten in."

"Bad night in Gotham City?" Clark asked.

"Don't even start," Bruce Wayne warned. He was wearing a pleated formal shirt with the tie undone. He looked tired, wiping his hand over his face. "I hate these damned debutante parties." He eyed Clark as Alfred poured coffee and laid two aspirin on his saucer. "Aren't all good boy scouts in bed by now?"

Clark shrugged and took a sip of the coffee Alfred had poured for him. After a moment, "I figured you were up. Bats are nocturnal after all."

"And why are you cluttering up Alfred's kitchen at this time of night?"

"Lois..."

Bruce eyed Clark again but waited for him to continue.

"She's offered to leave Richard so we can be together," Clark went on.

"And?"

"She made the offer to Superman."

"And how is that a problem?"

Clark just stared at him a long moment. "Aside from the fact she's willing to throw over her fiancé for a guy whose name she doesn't even know?"

"And whose fault is that?"

Clark didn't answer. He didn't have to answer. He knew Bruce knew what he had done to Lois's memories. She hadn't been able to handle sharing Superman with the world. She hadn't been able to deal with the reality of Superman being a disguise for her barely tolerated co-worker. To ease her pain, he removed her knowledge of their time together. He still wasn't sure how he had managed that.

"Didn't your mother ever tell you that love without trust was a really stupid idea?" Bruce asked.

"And when she realizes exactly who it is she's proposing to?"

To Clark's surprise, Bruce chuckled. "You think she doesn't know?"

Again, Clark didn't answer.

Bruce shook his head. "You know, about three months after you took off, Lois Lane had the nerve to have Jim Gordon get hold of me so I could find you."

"She contacted Batman to find Superman?"

"No. She knew where Superman had gone. She contacted Batman to find out where the

hell *Clark Kent* had disappeared to. She wasn't very happy when I wouldn't tell her where you'd gone off to."

"I hadn't realized she even noticed."

Bruce chuckled. "Clark, for a bright guy, you are sometimes very dense. She knows. She may not know she knows, but she knows."

"How'd it go?" Richard White asked when Lois finally got home to the house they shared. She pulled off her shoes. "Good... He looks tired, but he actually stuck around long enough to answer questions."

"Perry will be happy," Richard told her. "Superman sells papers."

Lois shrugged. "That's what the bean counters say."

A long silence. There had been more and more of them in the past few months. Spaces begging to be filled but neither one of them willing to do it.

"Did Jason go to bed okay?" she asked finally. Anything to fill the uncomfortable silence between them.

"No problem," Richard told her. "He got excited when I told him you were interviewing Superman. He wanted to know when he was going to visit him again."

"What did you tell him?"

"What *could* I tell him?" Richard asked. "Nobody told me Superman was visiting Jason."

Lois looked up to see Richard studying her carefully.

"You told me you didn't love him," Richard said softly. "When were you going to tell me the truth?"

"Richard, it was a long time ago," Lois told him.

"But now he's back," Richard reminded her. "And Perry's expecting you to be his press contact again."

Lois snorted. "Anything to make the bean counters happy."

"Lois, I saw the piano, the one in the yacht," Richard told her. "Was that...?"

"Jason? Yeah... Surprise..."

Richard seemed to consider her words. "Does he love you?"

"I told you it was a long time ago," Lois said.

Richard sighed. "You know it's funny but I honestly thought it was Clark I was going to have to worry about."

"Why would you be worried about Clark?"

"You know... the ex-partner with the terminal crush on you. The one you never talked about. The one *nobody* ever talked about in front of you, even though you went undercover with him as a married couple and I know what the gossip mongers are still saying about that."

"I try not to pay any attention to what the old hens say about me," Lois reminded him. "Besides, before Jason was even conceived they were all speculating I was sleeping with Superman. Then he left and I found out I was pregnant. They all decided that was the reason Clark ran off."

"Was it?"

"Clark didn't know I was pregnant," Lois told her fiancé. "Heck, if he hadn't left, I'd probably be having this conversation with him instead of you."

"Somehow I doubt that," Richard said. He looked at the clock on the kitchen wall. It was very late. "We can talk more in the morning," he promised.

Breakfast was difficult. Lois hadn't slept at all and Richard sensed that she wasn't ready to talk to him. The problem was, she might never be ready to talk to him, especially about Jason's paternity and where his biological father fit into the scheme of things.

Things Richard thought were stable only a week before were spiraling out of recognition. He'd had a woman he loved, a child, a job at the best newspaper in the world. Now he wasn't sure of the woman, the child wasn't really his and his job... well he had accepted the assistant editor's position so he could stay in Metropolis, but at heart he was still a reporter. He missed running down the stories, uncovering the truth. He missed being in the field.

Finally, "Lois, if you want to... try to make a go of it with Jason's father, I'll understand. I won't like it, but I'll understand."

"I don't know if *he* wants to make a go of it," she told him.

"Then maybe you should talk to him," Richard suggested.

Clark had her coffee ready just the way she liked it when Lois got to her desk. Black with a hint of vanilla and artificial sweetener. It was just like the old days when he could practically read her mind when it came to the stories she was working on. They made a great team then. And they were still a great team despite a nearly six year hiatus. Perry had been very pleased with their story on the first blackout. He was ecstatic over their work on the second one and how it all tied back to Luthor.

She studied Clark over the rim of her cup.

He was standing, deep in a discussion with Jimmy on something. It could have been anything - world events, last night's basketball game on television, the new girl in composing. Lois wondered idly if Clark had managed to find a place to live yet.

'I honestly thought it was Clark I was going to have to worry about,' Richard had said.

It was odd how things worked out. Clark and Superman returned to Metropolis on almost the same day. In fact... she looked closer at him. His arms were folded over his chest as he looked at Jimmy with benign amusement. It was an eerily familiar stance. His glasses grayed out the color of his eyes, but she knew they were blue - the same blue as Jason's. The same blue as...

Clark settled in at his desk, barely avoiding tripping over Polly's trash can.

"Clark," Lois began. "Do you really think it's possible to love someone without commitment?"

His head came up and he looked at her in wide-eyed surprise. "Uh, well, that could be why the divorce rate is so high," he managed to say.

She traced a pattern on the floor with the toe of her shoe. "Superman told me it was easy to give oneself for a while, but commitment was the glue." She looked over at him, watching the gears turning in his head. "Do you think I'm fickle? I mean, you disappear off the face of the Earth and a couple months later I'm shackled up with the boss's nephew?"

"I think... I think you found yourself in a situation... And Mister White was there when you needed someone, and then Jason needed..."

"Then Jason needed a father," Lois completed for him. "We really need to talk, because no matter what I decide to do about this, a good man is going to get hurt."

"I know and I'm sorry."

She studied his face. He hadn't aged at all in the time he was gone. The world had moved on and here he was the same. Tired but not older. A little thinner, perhaps but that was all.

"It was you, wasn't it?"

He nodded and she was almost afraid he would bolt. A buck that had caught scent of a hunter. Then he seemed to settle down. He stared at his hands on his knees.

"Why don't I remember?" she asked.

He swallowed hard and licked his lips nervously. "It got complicated. Complicated enough that I thought I needed to do something to ease the pain you were in. I don't even know how I did it."

"We broke up..." she said. It made a bizarre sort of sense but somehow she knew that wasn't the entire story. Memories of a crystal cathedral skittered through her mind and a man's voice saying 'You cannot serve humanity by investing your time and emotion in one human being at the expense of the rest... If you will live as one of them... love their kind as one of them, then it follows that you must become... one of them.'

She waited for Clark to continue.

"Superman got in the way," Clark went on, shaking his head. "He can't have close relationships. He can't, mustn't, invest his energies in one person. At least that's what he thought. And I thought you wanted him, not me. I'm not..."

"And now?" Lois asked, interrupting him.

"He still can't allow himself to be close to any individuals," Clark said.

She sighed and looked over to Richard's office. He was standing in the door, watching them. She couldn't read his expression but she was sure he wasn't happy. After a moment he seemed to realize she was watching and he disappeared into Perry's office.

"Clark, Superman was gone a long time," she said, turning her attention back to her partner. "And while he was gone I realized something. We really *don't* need him. Hell, I won a Pulitzer for writing up that profound observation... He's nice to have around, but I don't need a hero in a cape. Jason doesn't need that. But he does need you. And so do I."

"Commitment is the glue," Clark said softly.

"It takes two to make that commitment work," Lois said. "And some things *are* worth waiting around for."

"It won't be easy," he warned. "I can't promise to always be there. But I do promise to try."

"That's all any of us can do. Do you still love me?"

He nodded. "From the moment I met you."

"That's a start," she told him. "Now we need to break it to Richard, although I'm sure he suspects. And then over lunch you can tell me exactly how we managed to get into this mess..."