

Snapshots: The Glow of Embers After

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© 20-Jun-09

Rating: T

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Mid-story, the freezing weather finally got to Lois. Christmas' picturesque snowflakes had given way to gray slush and bone-numbing chill in Metropolis. Despite her trench coat and scarf, even the white beret perched on her dark hair, three hours out on the icy streets of Metropolis had reduced her to shivers. "That's it," she growled in aggravation. "I can't take it any more. We're getting coffee. Now. The story can wait fifteen minutes while I get caffeinated and thaw out."

Clark followed her; the cold didn't affect him as much as it did her, but a steaming mug of coffee would be welcome. Maybe the jolt would help wake him out of his daydreams. Ever since that night...

He shook himself, pretending it was a shiver. No, he couldn't think about the things that had happened in those few, momentous days, when he'd had everything he'd ever wanted and lost it all when the world came crashing down. Not when the woman beside him was what he'd wanted most, and she didn't remember losing him - or ever being his.

When he'd taken her memories in that last kiss, Clark hadn't thought through the consequences. Lois' amnesia worried her colleagues; she'd been an eyewitness to General Zod's defeat, and she didn't remember a single moment of it. Lois had been furious about that, but the first time someone mentioned post-traumatic stress disorder, she'd clammed up. Proclaiming that work was the best cure for everything, Lois had thrown herself into chasing stories, too busy to think about the gap in her memory.

Clark felt guilty enough about that, but the repercussions didn't stop there. He remembered everything that had been between them, but Lois didn't. She was her usual self around him, and the playful teasing wounded him. Worse, she was back to being flirtatious and shy with Superman. Every lashes-lowered look, every slow, sweet smile, seared his soul.

Like a bloodhound on a familiar scent, it took Lois exactly thirty seconds to weave through the city streets to her destination: the nearest coffee shop. Why was he surprised? Clark was at her heels as she darted inside with a happy sigh at the blast of heat. "Caramel macchiato with a double shot of espresso," Lois rattled off while making her way to the counter, rubbing her hands together. "Oh, and double the caramel, too, I need the sugar."

"And you, sir?" the barista asked.

It took a moment for him to respond. "Um," Clark said fumblingly, looking at the menu. Half of it was in Italian or French, and nothing on there looked like regular old coffee.

One dark brow slowly raised, the black-haired woman just watched him scramble for a moment with affectionate amusement. "Give 'im a tall spiced cider," Lois finally spoke up,

smirking at Clark. "I don't think he can handle the French roast here."

Clark gave her a ghost of his usual grin as their drinks were made. He loved the gleam of mischief in her eyes, the way the corners of her mouth turned up. Lois' drink was finished first, and she took a hurried sip. Clark was still watching her, and he saw her grin smooth into a satisfied smile, her eyes soften and close. "Mmm, that's delicious," she sighed, a purr low in her tone.

His heart leaping into his throat, Clark forced himself to look away. He remembered that expression of indolent delight all too well. He'd seen it that first night, when she lay beside him and traced idle patterns on his bare chest. Her fingernails had tickled, and he'd chuckled softly, as lazily satiated as she was.

That night... Clark couldn't even think about it without his heart aching. He'd never experienced anything as profound, as intimate, as passionate as that one night and the following morning. And now he was the only person on Earth who remembered it.

The woman responsible for creating the memory was the very one to interrupt it. "Are you all right?" When he glanced over at her, she was giving him a most quizzical look. One with more than a little worry just barely hidden.

Giving himself a mental shake, Clark tried to smile at her. She couldn't guess what was behind his mixed expression, regardless of the bittersweet poignancy of it. "Sure," he heard himself say in a voice far calmer than he felt, "I'm fine. Just... thinking about the story, that's all."

But those hazel eyes were sharp and the brain behind them doubly so. Amnesia or not, Lois' reporter's instincts hadn't been dulled in the least. He didn't miss the scowl that crossed her features as they walked over to an empty table. Her brow was furrowed when she looked across the table at him once they got settled. "Clark, did I do something stupid while we were in Niagara? Tell me the truth."

In light of his current thoughts, he struggled all the more to keep his feelings under wraps. *She can't know. She can't even guess. Pull yourself together.* "No, of course not." Clark's reply was hurried, his blue eyes flicking up to meet hers. Most of the time she acted like the gap in her memory was of no concern, but he knew it bothered her. And seeing her confused and upset bothered *him*. He wanted to keep her away from that topic as much as possible, for both their sakes. Especially with how little time had passed.

The woman across from him was worrying her lower lip and trying to read him. Under normal circumstances, Lois wouldn't have made it clear when she didn't distrust information until the moment when she nailed you for your duplicity. Now, her frustration showed while she tried to understand this new awkwardness between them. An awkwardness he hadn't wanted her to suspect. "Are you sure?" she murmured, watching him over the rim of the mug as she sipped her coffee.

Those hazel eyes, darkened, staring at him over the rim of the champagne flute, a hint of a sly grin quirking the curve of her lips.

The sudden recall of that memory shook him enough that he was forced to break eye contact. *Stop it. Now is not the time.* He sipped his cider automatically, and it was strongly spiced with just the right sweetness, almost as good as Ma's. But Lois' next words turned it into vinegar on his tongue. "Because it seems like you've been avoiding me ever since then, Clark. This is the first story we've taken together since we went on that stupid honeymoon exposé that's lost in the fog of my brain, and it's a hometown deal, no travel involved. Come on, Clark. Give. What the hell did I *do*?"

The earnest way she was watching him tore at his heart. "You didn't do anything," Clark tried to reassure her, while his mind argued the point, *You shot me. And then you said you loved me. And then you proved your love. And then Zod and Luthor ruined it all for both of us.*

His preoccupation was all too obvious to a star reporter. Especially a star reporter determined to understand several days' worth of memory gap. "Clark, you know you can't lie worth a damn," Lois insisted. "What happened while we were up there? I can't remember any of it beyond coming to work that Tuesday. Hell, Perry had to tell me that we went on assignment! I can't remember a damn thing beyond the fact that we printed the Luthor trial sentencing that morning."

Crossing her arms, she dropped herself back in her chair, frowning as she heaved a sigh. She just sat there with that frustrated look clear in every feature, pouting just the slightest in the way she always did when she couldn't get the answers that she wanted. Finally, she cocked her head a little and raised one dark brow. "Clark, what did I do to make this so weird between us? What, did I lose my mind and make a pass at you or something?"

It was clearly intended to make him laugh, a tiny smile on her lips then, but her voice had an undercurrent of unease. And those words made him sit bolt upright, eyes widening in shock. How could she know what she was saying? How woundingly close to the truth she was? This was obviously not the answer she had been expecting. He saw the way her own eyes had gone wide, saw the shame sweep across Lois' face when it fell, and the horrified remorse was evident when she whispered, "Oh God, I did, didn't I? Clark..."

"No," he said, chuckling a little at the ludicrousness of it. "No, Lois, you didn't even make a point of strolling past me in a nightgown like you usually do."

The guilt-stricken look that passed over her face then was wounded enough that he could've kicked himself. Why had he said that? Regardless of his reaction to the sight, it happened often enough that she likely hadn't been trying to provoke him. More than that, the remark was out of character for Clark, and his distraction had given him away. He took a tighter hold on his emotions before saying, "It's okay, Lois. You... you didn't do anything to cause this. It's just... I'm sort of at a difficult place in life, you know?"

It was only after he said it that he realized just how oddly he had phrased the statement. Thankfully, it seemed that he had caught a fleeting break. Lois just stared at him, her eyebrows sky-high and her lip curled a little. "Sure," she said dubiously, while her expression conveyed *What are you talking about?*

That was better than dealing with her awkward questions, at least, and Clark took a relieved sip of his cider. Only to have Lois ruin his momentary equanimity with another statement. "Fine, I guess I just have to adjust to the fact that a potentially world-altering event happens that's a big fat blank spot, and now all the men in my life have gone bonkers. While I'm losing it, too. Lovely. If this keeps up, we can all ride down to the nut-house together, singing Kumbaya in our straitjackets."

"*What?!*" He couldn't help giving her a perturbed look. Of all of the things she could have said, he hadn't seen that coming. Normally a statement like that would've made him laugh - typical Lois Lane hyperbole - but right now the bitter undertone to her voice was worrying him. "Lois, what...?"

"Well, you're expecting me to buy a half-assed line of bullshit like that. I want to understand what's happening here and no one can tell me. Or *will* tell me. Nothing feels right anymore and I don't know why!" The full force of her irritation came out then, that beautiful

face a storm of emotions that she had briefly lost control of as she slammed her fist against the table. At work, she had been shrugging most of her memory loss off as if it were just a minor annoyance. It was becoming clear that it wasn't. And of course she'd reveal this to Clark when she wouldn't to anyone else. Who else could be trusted to keep this chink in her tightly-woven armor to himself?

Fired up at this chance at release, Lois continued, "Perry keeps looking at me like I've had a lobotomy just because I forgot a few things, and obviously Superman thinks amnesia might be catching, because he's avoiding me. You're acting like you're scared to death of me, and *he's* acting like a have the plague, and everyone else acts like I'm going to fall over dead any minute. Is it any wonder I think I'm going crazy?"

Her moods tended to shift abruptly these days, and this was a prime example. As Clark stared at her, open-mouthed in shock, he reflected that this sudden change in emotional weather could be a normal reaction for a reporter finding a huge front-page-worthy blank spot in her memory... or it could be something more organic, a side effect of the amnesia he'd inflicted upon her.

Something had to be said to try to explain Superman's behavior, he realized, and he absolutely had to work on his reactions to her when he was in uniform, if she'd noticed his hesitancy that much. After everything that had happened, it was no wonder she expected the hero to hover closer. "Um, well, I'm sure he has a reason to stay away," Clark offered.

Her eyes flashed with fire then, and she crossed her arms as she leaned back in her chair. "Yeah, I probably made a pass at him, too," Lois muttered darkly, looking away.

"Lois," Clark tried to soothe, meeting her sharp gaze with effort. "I doubt it's like that. Really. He... I'm sure he's just... being his chronicler almost got you killed, you know. He's probably just worried about getting you in more trouble."

Her frown deepening, Lois gave a derisive snort. "Yeah, right. I had a graduate degree in trouble before he ever *met* me. I work the city beat, I run around with the cops, I interview rapists and killers in prison. And then I go uptown and confront senators and city council members who're siphoning off the public's money to line their own pockets, and I ask them the questions they never want to answer. Sure, being seen with the superhero is so damn much more dangerous than my *job*. It's been two years, and he decides overnight he's dangerous company? I smell a rat, Clark."

Clark stared down into his cider as if it could give him the answers he needed. Every moment made it clearer that he was ruining Lois' life. The amnesia angered and frustrated her by turns, his own reactions to her were getting harder and harder to control, and his unpredictable behavior in both guises was one more source of stress for Lois. *How could something so wonderful have caused so much pain?* His heart ached at the thought.

He'd considered taking it all back, telling her what had happened between them. When he first pulled away from her after that anguished kiss that had stolen her memories, he'd had a horrified moment of regret. How dare he do something this momentous to the woman he loved? How dare he take her very memories? But it was already too late - and at first, it had had the desired effect. Instead of the teary, exhausted wreck who'd walked in that morning, Lois Lane was back to her usual self, bossy and driven. Clark had been relieved, but sorrow settled in as he realized he was the only one who remembered their few days together.

And then, as Lois struggled to cope with the abrupt change in her life, Clark's regrets returned tenfold. One decision, made in haste, seemed to have endless repercussions. Clark hadn't thought about any of them. His mind had been filled with the desire to stop Lois'

heartbreak; he couldn't bear to watch another instant of her agony, not when it was echoed by his own soul.

Just as the sorrow was growing to be more than he could bear, he heard Lois give a gusty sigh, and Clark looked up slowly. Her eyes were closed, her brow furrowed, although the pale skin smoothed out in short order. The tension in her lean form had released, as well, at least for the moment. All of the skeletons placed away in the back of the closets to be dealt with later. The worst of this storm appeared to have blown past, he thought with a touch of relieved guilt.

The silent minutes ticked by before she opened her eyes again, and once she did, he could tell she had her emotions in check again. Meeting his gaze, a small smile of what was clearly regret curved her lips. "God, I'm such a bitch. I'm sorry, Clark. I had no right to flake and freak out on you. It's not like you aren't still dealing with all of this 'Kryptonian Villains Taking Over The World' mess, too. And it's not like you were there with me the whole time. It's just that no one can tell me what happened, ya' know? The only one who knows, from what they told me, is Superman. And he's not talking. None of this is your fault and I'm a psycho for taking it out on you. Forgive me?"

"Lois, you're not psychotic," Clark told her, reaching out unthinkingly to take her hand. "You're just under a lot of pressure. It's not your fault, either."

"I'm always under a lot of pressure," Lois grouched, squeezing his fingers. "That's no excuse."

He stroked her knuckles softly. "It's going to be all right, Lois. I promise. It will all turn out for the best in the end." Even while he tried to soothe her, his mind whirled through an all-too-clear montage of memories. Last Christmas, how lovely she'd been, the life of the party as always, so sweet to him, so wide-eyed and flirtatious to Superman later that night. He'd wanted so much to kiss her then, seen the expression on her face that told him she wanted that kiss just as much, and it had been the next month before he'd finally kissed her.

And oh, the sweetness of that first kiss, and that flight together to the Fortress, and the exquisite dinner that might as well have been cardboard - he had tasted none of it, overwhelmed by her presence. All of the memories swept through him again, and Clark had to struggle to maintain his composure.

Lois smiled at him, her expression soft. "Clark, you're such a sweetheart," she said gently, squeezing his hand before taking another sip of her coffee. "Really. I mean, what would I do without you?"

It took more effort to keep a smile on his face at that moment than it had taken to defeat Zod and his cronies. "I don't know, Lois," he managed to reply, thinking, *you'd be better off without me... you would've been better off if I was never in your life to begin with. If I'd never come to this planet, you wouldn't have to deal with any of this...*