

Baby It's Cold Outside

by Kala Lane Kent

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Rating: T

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Adrian, the younger of the two desk clerks on duty at the Hot Springs Honeymoon Resort in North Carolina, glanced at his fellow employee in distaste. Bob was leaning against the desk, watching the newlyweds in the main lobby with cynical amusement. The older man didn't care for his uniform the way the employee handbook recommended; his gold braid was slightly flattened, and the crease of his slacks was nowhere near the razor's edge that Adrian maintained. Bob had worked here since before the tiny mountain town had exploded into a tourist magnet though, and management let him get away with infractions that would've gotten anyone else fired. As the newest hire, though, Adrian still slightly resented Bob's casual behavior.

One of the couples who had registered yesterday came into the lobby, and Adrian straightened up to greet them as per the most recent memo. "Good morning, Mr. and Mrs. Smith," he called, making the lovely dark-haired woman wince. "Enjoying your stay so far?"

"Yes, thank you," Mr. Smith replied with a cheerful smile. "The cabin's, well, really nice."

"Coffeemaker's broken," Mrs. Smith growled as she cruised past the desk, heading for the complimentary coffee urn like a shark homing in on the scent of blood in the water. Mr. Smith gave the desk clerks an apologetic smile and shrug before following in her wake.

Bob snickered, but Adrian waited until they were well out of earshot to mutter, "That is the most mismatched pair I've ever seen in my life."

"You need to get out more, kid," Bob chuckled.

Adrian cut him a look. "Well? I can't imagine they'll stay together long. He's so nice, and she's so..."

"Yeah, she's a hellcat," Bob said, a trace of admiration in his tone. "Don't you worry, boy. They'll probably be together a long, long time."

"What makes you think so?" Adrian asked grudgingly.

"Experience," Bob replied. "Look, it's the sugary simpering ones you gotta look out for. All smiles and cuddles here, but by the time they get home they're already fighting about money or the kind of cigars he likes to smoke or the way she drives. Couple years later, one of 'em shoots the other or brains 'em with a frying pan or something." He snorted laughter at Adrian's horrified look, watching the Smiths as they went back outside and stood just to one side of the doors, talking. "Those two there, well, he must like her that way. He did marry her, and she's got her nastiness all out front and showing. Not like my Linda, all sugar 'n' spice 'til the honeymoon was over, then she started runnin' up my credit cards and havin' headaches every night."

Adrian winced slightly, not wanting to hear too much more about his coworker's love life. Linda had been the first of three wives from whom Bob was now divorced, frequently referred to as the Alimony Triplets.

Bob was watching the young couple outside with what was nearly a nostalgic grin. "Yeah, she's evil, that one. Probably a real firecracker. Piece of advice, kid, pick an evil-tempered gorgeous one. At least then you *know* she's gonna tear your ego to shreds like dynamite every time she opens her mouth. But it'll be damn worth it - there's compensation for a temper like that."

Adrian tried for the same kind of worldly, contemptuous snort that Bob made seem so natural, but he just sounded like a kid aping his elders. "Oh, yeah? Compensation like what?"

Bob grinned wickedly, his eyes gleaming. "The vicious ones are always great in bed."

"What a racket," Lois said with a contemptuous look around at the view, sipping the coffee outside the reception office. She was always testy when she had to do anything before drinking her morning cup of wakefulness, and having to get up, get dressed, and walk fifteen minutes to the reception office from their cabin had made her positively savage.

"I dunno, Lois, it's kind of charming," Clark replied, giving the spectacular mountain scenery a brief glance before returning his attention to the woman at his side. "Hard to believe Perry thinks there's a scandal here."

"This coffee's scandalous," his fellow reporter muttered, turning that skeptical look on the innocent Styrofoam cup in her hand. "This is that cheap discount-brand coffee, and they brew it weak, too. I'm paying four hundred dollars a night to drink this watered-down crap - actually, crap would probably taste better than this." Shaking her head in revulsion, she took another sip. "Gah, it's disgusting."

Clark turned a horrified look on her, and then that sour look was off her face, just as he knew it would be. Only, Lois laughed so hard she managed to spray weak coffee out of her nose, which he had *not* planned for. "Shit! And it burns your frikkin' sinuses too! I'll sue the management - and I'll *kill* Perry!"

Thumping her on the back gingerly, Clark asked, "Are you all right? Gosh, Lois..." A part of him wanted to break down laughing and mutter, *only Lois*. The situations she got herself into...

"I'm fine," she coughed. "Or I will be when I stop drowning in coffee and snot. Oh yuck, now *everything* smells like that godawful coffee!" She rubbed her nose, her expression a grimace of irritation. "Could it get any grosser? Remind me why we're in this godforsaken armpit of civilization? I already hate this hideous little tourist-trap town."

"Oh, come on, Lois," Clark said. "Yesterday you said it was beautiful."

"That was on the drive from the airport, looking at the snow," she retorted. "*Before* I saw

the hotel. Don't get me wrong, I like art deco, but something designed like a Swiss chalet should not exist outside of Switzerland. Furthermore, it should *never* be painted flamingo pink, jaundice yellow, and nursing-home teal." Lois turned to look up at the looming building with a wrinkle of her nose. "If I lived here, I'd burn the place down for the good of humanity."

Clark just stared at her as she continued to rant. "I mean, I realize honeymooners are stupid, but are they *blind* as well? *Look* at this place. It should be illegal. There's such a thing as eye pollution, and assault on good taste, you know."

"At least our cabin is nice," Clark said, trying for something good to curb her wrath.

She threw her hands up in exasperation. "Yeah. Except for the broken freakin' *coffeemaker*," she snarled in reply, rolling her eyes. "Why the hell am I here?"

"Because Perry's convinced that the string of misfortunes among couples who stayed here isn't a coincidence," Clark said in an undertone, glancing around to be sure they weren't overheard. "Police investigations haven't turned up any admissible evidence, but a couple of good reporters might."

"Misfortunes, huh?" Lois grumbled. "A couple cases of identity theft, some break-ins, all minor stuff. I got yanked from those murders in Metropolis for this, all because some spoiled heiress lost ten grand after staying here. Remind me to strangle Perry White when we get home."

"Lois, you don't mean that," Clark sighed, adjusting his glasses. Once she was wound up, there was no calming Lois down until she was ready to let go. He often admired her determination, but not when she was determined to be angry.

"Even better," Lois continued at a low boil, arms crossed tightly, "we're missing Christmas. Unless we wrap this story in two days and catch a really, really fast plane, neither one of us is going to see our families this year. All because of Perry and this stupid story. 'Best reporters for the job, ' my ass. No one else was sucker enough to fall for it, is what he meant."

He didn't dare reply to that. If he could just get out of Lois' sight, *Clark* would be able to make it home on Christmas day. But she would almost certainly miss spending time with her mother and sister - and perhaps she was also missing the chance to see a certain caped hero. No one would expect to find Superman in this tiny mountain town - especially not the woman unknowingly posing as his wife.

The thought made him smile inwardly - if that was the reason for Lois' ill temper, well, it argued for her caring about him a lot more than she would admit. Thoroughly annoyed now, and without any help from Clark in maintaining her state of irritation, Lois stalked off toward their cabin. "What's on the schedule for today?" she called over her shoulder.

He'd only glanced at the announcements board for an instant, but as always when they were on assignment, Lois relied on him to be the organized one. "Um, romantic brunch at ten..."

"Bagels and cheap champagne, if the coffee's any indication of the food here," Lois interjected.

"They have sleigh rides every afternoon, and moonlight skating every night," Clark replied as if she hadn't spoken, his gentle voice attempting to soothe just a bit. "Dinner is a roast, if I remember right."

"My sister's is better," Lois sighed, homesickness clear in her voice. "She's got this red wine concoction she marinates the beef in... I hope she saves me leftovers. Anyway, a sleigh ride sounds like it might give us some idea of the property." She glanced speculatively over her shoulder, the infamous Lane eyebrow cocked. "You're not afraid of horses, are you, Clark?"

"Um, Lois, I did grow up on a farm," Clark said.

"That doesn't mean anything, Clark. I grew up on military bases, but I can't fly a fighter or drive a tank." Clark had to force himself not to laugh at the image that presented. Unaware of the hidden hilarity, she followed through with the snark he had seen coming. "They still plow with horses in Kansas?" Lois asked archly.

"No, but a friend of mine had horses," he said, adjusting his glasses again.

"Really? Interesting," Lois observed, although her attention was more on her footing than on him. They were halfway up the 'nature trail' to their cabin, a steeply winding graveled path that Lois had christened 'the neck-breaker' last night upon seeing it.

"She and I went horseback riding a couple of times," Clark offered, remembering sunlight on auburn hair.

The incongruous mental image of Clark on a horse - he was so tall, so accident-prone, and Lois had never seen him in anything other than a three-piece suit - came to a screeching halt. *She?* "Ah, so there *is* a girl back home," Lois said, the grin clear in her voice even with her back to him. "Well, I guess that's someone to be jealous of, hmm, 'Mr. Smith'?"

Clark was caught off-guard, somehow having missed where she had been headed with that and so flustered by all the implications of that remark that he didn't even have to fake slipping on the loose gravel. At least Lois tried not to laugh while she helped him up. "Just giving you hell, Clark," she teased, beaming at having gotten his goat. "Loosen up, geez. We are supposedly *married*, you know. I'm just staying in character as a jealous shrew." But the wicked gleam in her eye told him another story as she pulled away to continue the walk.

"Darn gravel," he muttered under his breath, the tips of his ears turning red at the thought of being married to Lois. All of this felt incredibly awkward to him - she thought of him as a friend with a crush, or a hero she was infatuated with. But he was in love with her, and dared not show it. If he admitted to loving her, he would have to reveal his secret, and Clark could guess how Lois would react to learning how she'd been deceived for a year. Not only that, knowing the whole truth would put her in more danger than merely being Superman's press agent. He'd almost lost her once; he couldn't bear to lose her again...

And to love her, to be so close to her and yet so far away, tormented him. They were sharing a romantic cabin, complete with hot tub and fireplace, and the atmosphere of the place kept giving him ideas that didn't fit with the reality of sleeping on the couch. Lois padding around in the middle of the night wearing nothing more than a nightgown wasn't helping, either. Especially when she'd gone straight into the hot tub following that little stroll and locked the door as she did so. And stayed there for over an hour. Sometimes he thought she was doing that on purpose to mess with his mind...

It was the sound of her voice that broke his wistful musings. "C'mon, Clark!" Lois called from the door of their cabin. "If I didn't know better, I'd think you were trying to avoid me!" She shot him a saucy grin before heading inside, and Clark sighed heavily. *I'm in hell*, he thought.

Several hours later, Clark was even more flustered. The weather had abruptly turned colder, and the snow on the ground had frozen hard, which made their private sleigh ride much less romantic. Even the thick blanket they were wrapped up in didn't keep out all of the icy air.

Lois' reaction to the frigid temperature was the reason for Clark's discomfort. Even in a turtleneck, ski jacket, ski pants, boots, and gloves, she claimed it was *almost* too cold for her. Everything had been fine while she attempted to tough it out, but once they had settled into

the sleigh and had been pressed close, she had made the discovery that sealed his fate. "You're warm," she'd said in surprise when the sleigh started to move and the wind nipped at their faces. Before he could make some kind of excuse for his unusually high body temperature, Lois had curled up against his side to absorb a bit for herself, and Clark had to stifle a gasp.

She was far too close to him, her cheek against his shoulder, her side pressed against his arm, and her legs curled against his thigh. She was so cold that she nuzzled in beside him without a thought for his personal space. So much so that she was shivering. *Stop thinking about it*, he told himself sternly. But it would be so easy to kiss her, to warm her up even slightly...

"*Gawd*, not even the snow can hide that monstrosity," Lois muttered in a normal tone of voice despite the intrusive position, glancing across an open field at the lodge. Her acidic remark completely derailed Clark's train of thought, for which he was grateful. The lodge, and the assignment for that matter, was the last thing on his mind.

"You know, I didn't realize this, but they can see all the cabins from the lodge," Clark managed quietly. "Look. The cabins can't see each other, but if you look across the lodge at the mountainside, you can see the lights."

"So even if you don't register for the evening activities, they know whether you're in your cabin or not," Lois said under her breath, nuzzling her nose into the lapel of his jacket. It wouldn't do for the driver to overhear them; better to make him think that the lovebirds were cooing to each other. *Dear God, what kind of sappy metaphor is that? Knock it off, Lane. Geez. It's bad enough over the man in the cape, but on assignment? Twit. Lovebirds?* "Smart. Nobody in their right mind would leave *all* the lights off out here in the middle of nowhere, not even to sleep."

Clark grinned silently. Lois had insisted on leaving the kitchen light on last night. Not because she was a city-dweller and nervous in total darkness, but because *he* was so abysmally klutzy that he'd probably break his neck if he got up in the middle of the night. Really. "Oh, I dunno, Lois," he said. "I'm sure there are people out here who aren't bothered by the dark and the quiet."

He didn't have to glance at her to sense the narrow look she was giving him. "Yeah, right," she said in a low tone, the annoyance obvious. "None that *I* see. All the cabins have lights on."

"Even ours..." he said, trailing off as he took a closer look. "I thought we left the lights off."

"We did. Maybe someone's in there right now, taking down our addresses," Lois growled. "Good, let 'em try. All our documentation's fake, anyway."

They hadn't been worrying overmuch about the man driving their sleigh hearing their conversation. His seat was much higher than theirs, and he was hunched over inside a heavy coat, trying to keep warm. He also hadn't said two words to them since they got into the sleigh; evidently most of the other couples were using the sleigh rides to look at scenery or each other, not get acquainted with employees. Clark saw the man tense slightly, and shushed Lois by squeezing her hand, bringing her startled eyes up to his.

The driver wasn't paying attention to the Smiths and their whispered conversation, however. Something else had caught his attention; he was staring at the back of the lodge, where a shadow had just dropped from a window. Seeing this, Clark nudged Lois and nodded in that direction. Someone was definitely trying to move stealthily across the lawn...

The sleigh driver's whip cracked suddenly in the silence, and the two horses leaped

forward, startled. Lois yelped as the cold wind stung her eyes, and she buried her face in Clark's shoulder, his arm going around her. The driver swung the horses to the left, off the beaten path, and snow flew up from their hooves and the sleigh runners, obscuring the view of the man now running around the side of the lodge.

"Sorry 'bout that, folks!" the driver called, full of false cheer. "Pete here wasn't quite doin' his share!"

"That's all right," Clark replied in a cheerful tone that belied what they had actually seen, wiping snow off his face. "Isn't this exciting, honey?"

"Yeah, like a root canal," came the muffled reply from against his coat, and Clark didn't have to fake laughter.

After their sleigh ride, Lois insisted on trying to find out who had been breaking into the rooms at the lodge. Clark, reluctantly, let her do it; he had other business to take care of. Namely, a quick trip to the Fortress and his usual rounds in Metropolis. *I've got to figure a way to stop getting sent on assignment with Lois. She's getting suspicious.* He'd seen her give him an odd, calculating look whenever Superman just *happened* to show up wherever the two of them were. So far, she seemed to attribute the coincidences to Superman lingering near *her*, which had the benefit of being true. *But I'd better make sure I'm seen in Metropolis frequently, when she knows Clark is in North Carolina.*

He arrived back just in time to see her rush in the door of their cabin, bright-eyed and triumphant. "I found a contact who knows what's going on," Lois announced, the familiar gleam in her eyes of a reporter on a hot story. "He's been here *forever* practically, and the new owners have no clue that he knows what they're up to. But he's not sure of me yet; he'll only talk if he thinks I'm an ordinary honeymooner. If he gets wind of an ulterior motive..."

She trailed off in mid-sentence, leaving Clark to look after her wonderingly. Lois suddenly turned to him with a manic grin. "Do you know how to skate, Clark?"

"What, like ice-skate?" Clark asked, thinking of frozen ponds in Kansas and his reputation for clumsiness.

"No, rollerblading," Lois replied sarcastically, putting a hand to her forehead and momentarily closing her eyes before looking up at him again. "Yes, Clark, like ice-skate. That's what you do when everything freezes, right? Hello, what other kind of skating do you plan to do out here in the frozen mountains? Yeesh. What planet are you from again?"

"Um... Yeah, I know how to skate. I'm not too, um, great at it, y'know..."

Lois sighed as her eyes rolled heavenward. "Clark. Please, get changed," she said. "We're going skating like every other moony-eyed romantic newlyweds. This cover has to be *perfect*."

"Well, gosh, Lois, if it's that important..."

She was already on her way to the bedroom, and stopped to turn a devilish grin on him. "It is. Hey, the way this guy was looking at me, I'd wear a short skirt and tights just to get him off his guard. And fall at least once."

I have got to avoid going on assignment with her, Clark thought as that mental image seared itself into his brain. "Geez, Lois," Clark muttered.

"Hey, these legs are my best weapon," she called back. "If I can't completely derail a man's train of thought by flashing them at him, I can always kick him in the face."

"Lois, you're something else," Clark sighed, shaking his head as he slipped into the bathroom to change.

All too soon, they were out on the frozen rink with the other newlyweds. Moving on

roughened ice while wearing blades strapped to his feet was one of those inherently dangerous activities that Clark abhorred and Lois adored. Lois presumed it was Clark's usual klutziness, but he worried about hurting someone if he went a little too far with the unbalanced act and actually fell.

She, on the other hand, was skating around lazily, making it look simple. "C'mon, Clark," Lois called. "It's easy!"

"For you," he muttered in reply, keeping close to the edge of the rink. "You know, Lois, somehow I just don't think it's as easy as you say..."

She just laughed in response, turning gracefully to skate *backwards*. "Look, it's not that hard!" Another skating couple, less agile than Lois, had to dive out of her way as she slid blissfully past.

"Lois, *please* don't do that," Clark said, not having to fake any of the concern in his voice. "C'mon, seriously, it's dangerous."

"Live a little!" she teased him, and whirled back around in a spray of ice chips. Their contact happened to be standing at the rail, watching her, and Lois gave him one of her thousand-watt smiles as she sped up to weave through the other skaters.

Clark dropped only part of the ineffectual act, pretending to gain a little confidence on the ice. As he passed the employee, the older man grinned at him and said, "Good luck - you'll need it."

Now what did he mean by that? Wondering, Clark kept Lois in sight. She was showing off now, skating backwards and making fast turns. Most of the other skaters were watching her warily, eager to stay out of her way - rather like the other reporters in the office when they saw Lois homing in on a story. Clark couldn't help but admire her in that moment - she was all power and grace and beauty, her little white skirt billowing slightly, black hair flying against the snowy background.

Her eyes met his, and caught him with that openly adoring look on his face. For a moment Lois' expression softened into something like the fond regard he always hoped to see, and then she smirked at him playfully. Cutting across the center of the rink, Lois whirled up to him and said, "See, you're getting better at it already. If we get another ice age, you *might* be able to catch up to me."

"It would take an ice age to catch up to *you*, Lois. Trust me," Clark said, utterly deadpan, and Lois tipped her head back to laugh the open, delighted laugh he so rarely heard. Most of the time, if Lois so much as chuckled, it had a tint of sarcasm in the tone. But this was pure amusement.

She snickered and thumped his shoulder. "C'mon, farm boy. Show everybody what you've got."

A cape hidden in my luggage? The thought made him chuckle in reply, and for a few minutes Clark just enjoyed Lois' company, with her skating backwards in front of him slowly. Although she was looking at him speculatively; Clark wondered if maybe he was suddenly *too* competent, and let himself suddenly overbalance as if he'd hit a rough patch of ice.

Lois chuckled good-naturedly and held out her hands. "Clark, geez. Come here."

"What?" That would make it a great deal harder to pretend clumsiness, with Lois supposedly steadying him. And if he fell, he'd take her with him, *not* something he wanted to do on cold, hard ice. Not when she was wearing a skirt, anyway... Clark blushed as he added, "No, Lois, it's fine."

"C'mon, you big chicken," Lois said affectionately, flicking her fingers at him. "It's either

that or fall on your butt. I swear, you are the least-coordinated guy I know."

"Gee, thanks," Clark muttered in reply. "I'm all right."

"Okay, fine," she sighed, shoving off gracefully without even looking behind her to see if anyone else was there. Lois whizzed around the rink alone, flashing a huge smile at one of the employees standing by the rail. Was that their contact?

Clark passed him a moment later and recognized the older guy from the reception desk, Bob. He nodded and waved, and Bob grinned at him. "You sure have a pretty wife, Mr. Smith," he commented.

Sighing, Clark agreed, even though he couldn't help thinking, *I only wish.*

Lois chose that moment to come sailing back up to him, clad all in white so that her raven hair and hazel eyes stood out in sharp contrast. They were still in Bob's earshot and pretending to be ordinary newlyweds, so Lois smiled charmingly and said, "Doing great, honey. You haven't fallen down once." Only Clark saw the mischievous sparkle in her eyes and knew she was teasing him.

But he couldn't help reacting to the pet name with another forlorn moment of longing. *Oh, I wish. She looks so very lovely...*

His thoughts were interrupted by another two employees hurrying down to the rink. They spoke to Bob, who scowled and then cupped his hands around his mouth. "All right, newlyweds! We're sorry to say the Moonlight Skating is gonna be closed early tonight! There's a snowstorm coming in, and we'd like all of you to get back to your rooms in the lodge or to your cabins before it hits."

Assorted groans and laughs of disappointment met that announcement, but the couples started to leave the rink. Lois was one of the first to hustle out of her skates, rushing to talk to Bob. Clark, following her more slowly, heard her ask, "Are we still on for tomorrow?"

"Sure," he replied with a fond smile. "I'll tell you some tales that'll curl your hair, miss. But you get back to your cabin, now. Stay safe."

Clark had caught up with them, and Bob gave him a wide grin. "Keep warm," he added.

At first Clark didn't quite understand the meaning behind the remark, but when Lois smirked, rolled her eyes, and shook her head, he got the innuendo - and blushed.

"C'mon, Mr. Smith," Lois said in a suggestive, purring tone. "You've got to take me back to our cabin ... and find me the electric blanket."

The overnight snowstorm didn't let up until after dawn. Lois woke slowly, the cabin cold in spite of the heater, and wrapped herself in the comforter to go check on the weather.

She opened the door of the cabin only to confront a wall of white - the snow was piled as high as her chest. "Holy crap," she muttered. "Hey, Clark, do we have a snow shovel?"

"Wha?" he queried, pretending to sound sleepy. He'd actually woken up the moment she started moving around, and had only slept that late because he'd been out late the night before as Superman. Getting in an upstairs window without waking her had been interesting... Bright sunlight reflected off the packed snow and into the room, right into his face. "Whoa. It really snowed last night, didn't it?"

"Yeah," Lois replied, sounding faintly worried. "How are we going to get out, Clark? I'm supposed to meet my contact today."

He bit his lip as he sat up; sleeping on the couch wasn't comfortable. He *could* have melted all that snow with heat vision, but that was out of the question. "Well, um, if it's just drifted up against the door we might be okay." Clark got up, remembering to huddle in his

blankets as if the cold affected him, and went to look out of the door to the deck on the other side of the cabin.

The snow had fallen there, too, but hadn't drifted against that door. The view across the valley down to the lodge, however, was not going to make Lois happy. "Um, Lois? I don't think you're going to meet your contact today."

"Why not?" she asked irritably, storming up behind him. "You know how to shovel snow, right...?" Lois trailed off as she looked out and saw the entire valley blanketed in deep snow. "You've gotta be kidding me."

"Nope," Clark replied. "And the trails to the cabins are going to be pretty dangerous, too. That's assuming the snow outside our door is just a drift. It might be that deep all the way down."

Lois snarled enough profanity to turn Clark's ears red, ending with, "Well, that's just *lovely*. I'm calling the lodge; they're going to have this path cleared by mid-afternoon or my name isn't Lois Lane."

But when she picked up the phone, the line was dead. "What the *hell*?"

"The phone lines are down," Clark observed. "We're lucky we still have power..."

As if his words were a cue, the lights flickered. "Oh, no," Lois said threateningly. "Could you be more freakin' clichéd?! Don't you *dare*..."

Seemingly in defiance of Lois' words, the power cut off entirely. In the sudden silence, the only sound was Lois swearing. "*Sonofabitch!*"

"Um, Lois, maybe you shouldn't have said..."

"Shut up, Clark."

The power came back on an hour later, but both of them decided to act as if it might go out again at any time. They couldn't find a snow shovel, so Clark crawled out a window and brought in the rest of the firewood from around the side of the cabin. He also, unfortunately, brought in a squirrel that had been sleeping in the wood, and it nearly drove Lois out of her mind before she could chase it back outside. Then they discovered that the only radio in the cabin was missing a power cord, *and* its batteries were dead.

While Lois ranted, Clark tuned in to the rest of the resort. It seemed that, as a last-minute reservation, the 'Smiths' had gotten the most remote cabin on the property. No one else seemed to be in any particular distress, and no one else had lost power. The resort had contingency plans in case of unexpected snowstorms like this, but to get up a trail as steep and narrow as the one leading to this particular cabin, they couldn't use snowmobiles. *Just our luck*, Clark thought miserably. *It's going to take all day for them to dig a path to us, or vice versa. I could take care of it in a minute or less, but how would I explain that to Lois? The snow can't even 'disappear' while I'm supposedly in the bathroom - Lois is already getting suspicious of me. I'd never hear the end of it after a stunt like that...*

Her triumphant voice intruded on his worried thoughts. "Aha! Finally found batteries!" Lois called, rushing into the living room. After some fiddling, she managed to tune into one of the local stations.

The raspy, static-filled news was grim. *"A freak storm dropped two feet of snow over parts of western North Carolina last night. High winds created drifts in some areas... Today's forecast calls for freezing rain, possibly sleet at the higher altitudes. Tonight, folks, we're going to have more snow. Residents are advised to stay indoors, keep warm, and stay tuned to WJKH for more news..."*

Lois swore graphically and creatively, until Clark's ears burned and he stared at her in wide-eyed horror. Not even the *men* back home talked like that - not even men who'd been in the military. *And you're madly in love with this woman*, a part of his mind commented in part sarcasm and part amazement.

At last, winding down her furious tirade, Lois flung herself into the nearest chair, crossed her arms, stretched her legs out to rest her feet on the coffee table, and snapped, "Well, *dammit*." As usual when she was angry, she looked *amazing*. Her hazel eyes gleamed with a brilliance that only anger or intrigue could bring out; her entire long-legged frame practically shimmered with vitality; and her full lower lip pouted slightly in frustration, nonetheless looking like an absolute invitation to be kissed. Lois was, in fact, the only woman Clark knew who made near-murderous wrath look, well, *sexy*.

He had watched her pace and curse, and now blinked owlishly at her where she'd come to rest, trying to strangle those thoughts. Lois was beautiful all the time in his eyes, but never more so than when she was either in trouble or about to cause it... But he knew perfectly well that to approach her when she was like this would wind up destroying his disguise. The last man to touch her when she was in this kind of hot-blooded rage was Grizzly Lombard, who had put a hand on her leg while she sat on a desk (Clark's, actually) and ranted about the competition. It didn't matter that Lombard wholeheartedly agreed with her sentiment; when his palm came down on her thigh, Lois had automatically swatted it off and kicked the desk drawer beside her shut. She'd been almost as surprised as Grizzly when the drawer had broken four bones in his hand...

And don't forget, while you're staring at her so longingly, that she looked at Steve, looked at his hand, and said, "Whoops" while clearly trying not to laugh. Not that he didn't deserve to get slapped at the very least for having touched her, but he spent six weeks typing one-handed.

Lois huffed and glared at him. "Well? What're you looking at?" she said peevishly, then modulated her tone. "I'm sorry, Clark. Probably just ruined your image of me, huh? Foul-mouthed little princess blows her stack when she can't get her way."

"Um..." *Don't worry, I've seen it before - this doesn't change anything* didn't seem like a good thing to say.

"C'mon," she sighed. "We don't have a snow shovel, and it's going to sleet anyway. Let's see if they have some board games around this place. Bob will still meet me tomorrow, I hope."

Spending time with Lois, in enforced idleness, was a new experience for Clark. As the storm outside picked up, sleet hissing against the cabin's windows, he learned that Lois was absolutely lousy at Monopoly - she played too aggressively - and far too good at Risk. Fortunately, in spite of her intense concentration on the games, Lois kept enough of a sense of humor to laugh at herself. Although she *did* throw the dice at him when she landed on his Boardwalk with two hotels on it, Lois managed to laugh it off and lose gracefully. It was only fair, since she *slaughtered* him at Risk, snarling troop directions under her breath at the little plastic soldiers.

Board games seemed a bit too intense for Lois, so they switched to cards. Clark could've won every hand if he used his powers, but playing fairly, he quickly realized that she was much better at anything requiring bluff than he would ever be. "You've got about a million tells," she complained as he lost the sixth hand. "Good God, Clark, *never* walk into a casino and play poker, okay? You might as well just throw your money on the table and leave."

"Poker's all about lying, Lois, and I've never been good at that," he replied sheepishly.

"Yeah, and I'm the queen of ... *dammit!*" The room plunged into darkness in the middle of her sentence.

"Stay still, Lois," Clark said. He looked around for the first time in several hours, realizing with a chill that snow had crept up the windows. It was also getting dark outside, and with no electricity indoors, that made the room very dim indeed.

Lois' eyes evidently adjusted quickly, and she reached for the radio. The forecast was grim. "...blizzard warning for all of Buncombe, Marshall, and Madison counties. Remain indoors, be sure to protect your pipes and pets, and make sure you have alternate sources of heat and light available. Outlying areas **will** lose power before the night is over, and unless this storm passes to the north of us, we can expect another three feet or more of snow. North Carolina hasn't seen a storm of this magnitude since the blizzard of 1818..."

"Shit," Lois muttered. "They're really serious - there's no way anyone from the lodge is going to get to us now..."

Clark had been listening to the surrounding area throughout the day. Most people here knew how to weather a severe snowstorm, and fortunately there was no work for Superman at the moment. Even the other honeymooners had either been rescued to the lodge or had made themselves safe and comfortable in their cabins. Only Lois and Clark were in trouble, staying in the remotest cabin on the most dangerous trail. And not even they were in danger, little did Lois know it - if anything did go seriously wrong, Clark could rescue them both at the cost of his secret identity. Lois would probably hate him for lying to her, but she'd still be alive. Besides, radio stations always exaggerated the weather...

"It's gonna be all right," Clark told Lois confidently.

"Sure, course it will," she replied, striving to sound like her usual flippant self. But Clark didn't need his enhanced vision to see the nervous gleam in her eyes, the tension in every muscle. "Please. C'mon, like I'd be scared of ... something like this. It's just a storm - inconvenient, but nothing compared to dealing with Lex Luthor, right? Besides, if it gets too bad, Superman will come save our bacon. I mean, when has he let me down before?" Her grin was a little jauntier at that thought.

"Of course," Clark replied. "We'd better see if we can find some candles, though. It's going to get dark soon."

"I saw some in the closet," Lois commented, turning in that direction. "And we ought to get a fire going..."

"Hand me your lighter," Clark said. "I'll work on that while you get the candles."

She tossed him the lighter and hurried out of the room, giving Clark enough time to use his heat vision to get the fire started. No sense fiddling around with the lighter and twists of paper, although Lois did give him an odd look when she returned to find the fire well-started. "Huh. Where'd you learn that, Kent? Cub Scouts?"

"Camping with my dad," he replied quickly. *Well, maybe failing to light the fire on the first try would've been a better idea...*

Midnight. The wind outside was howling; a high-pressure system from the gulf had come up and settled to the south of them, stalling the cold front and the storm right overhead. Clark listened to the blizzard pound their cabin with snow, very glad that they were the only ones trapped alone out here. If any of the other newlywed couples had been in this predicament, he would've had to rescue them, no matter how badly it exposed his secret.

He and Lois were as well-prepared to weather the storm as they could be. They had dragged the mattress into the living room and laid it in front of the fireplace. Overturning the sofa behind it helped hold some heat in that space, but they had still piled every blanket and sheet in the cabin over them for warmth. *All we have to do is hold on*, Clark told himself, the same refrain he'd been saying in his mind since the storm began.

Lois shivered miserably beside him. She had read somewhere that, when facing potential hypothermia, it was best to wear fewer clothes and pile on more blankets. So they were both wearing only socks and pajamas, not the coat that Clark would've worn. Admittedly, it was warmer under the blankets with their coats spread on top to hold in their body heat, but Lois was far enough away from Clark that she wasn't getting the full advantage of his solar-powered warmth.

"Are you all right?" he asked softly, reaching out from under the blankets to add another log to the fire.

"No, I'm bloody *freezing*," Lois murmured, trying not to let her teeth chatter. She forced herself to stretch her legs, whimpering a little at the cramps caused by the cold.

Before Clark could say anything, her foot bumped his as she stretched, Lois' ankle briefly touching his bare skin. That little contact sent a powerful chill down his spine - not from how cold her feet were, but from the reminder that he was in bed with Lois Lane.

Lois, on the other hand, noticed the temperature difference immediately. "You're warm," she gasped in surprise, wiggling her foot around on his ankle. "My God, you're still warm."

"Um, Lois, I..." Clark had three different trains of thought colliding at once. One, he was trying to fight down the sudden shock of mingled desire and embarrassment caused by the simple touch of her skin. Two, she was *cold*, far colder than she should've been. The room was cold to him, but he didn't know how dangerously low the temperature had gotten. Three, he had to somehow explain why he was so warm without giving her any hint to his real identity...

That last was the furthest thing from Lois' mind. She caught his hand and pulled his arm around her waist, ignoring Clark's gasp as she wriggled backward into his arms. "Propriety be damned, Kent, it's too frikkin' *cold* to worry about it," Lois mumbled peevishly as she pressed her back against his chest.

As soon as she nestled into him, Clark realized Lois was shivering. Not the little shivers of a chill, but a full-blown trembling that made him worry about her so much that he forgot decorum and wrapped his arms around her. Lois cuddled into that embrace with a relieved sigh, nuzzling her face into the crook of his elbow.

Even though his worry for her overrode his hesitancy, Clark was still very much aware of her closeness. Automatically, he shifted his lower body away from her, reluctant to touch her anywhere inappropriate. Lois, however, whimpered at him and snuggled closer, her spine flush against his belly.

Clark felt his face redden. Here was Lois, dangerously close to freezing, and the moment she slid back against him like that, *cold* was the last thought on his mind. "Um, Lois..."

"Hush, Clark," she sighed.

"Lois, that's kind of... This could get a bit ... uncomfortable..."

"Clark," Lois said. "*Hush*. It's all right."

"Lois..."

"*It's all right*. Now shush. I'm cold." Her soft voice held a hint of affection, and Clark relaxed slightly. Maybe it would be all right... So thinking, he let himself curl around her, willing his warmth to soak into her chilled body.

Lois positively luxuriated in his touch, her shivering ending and her cramped muscles beginning to relax. As time passed, she began to grow drowsy ... and then snapped awake as a different chill ran down her spine. "Clark, the fire..."

"Still going," he murmured in reply. "I'm watching it."

A moment's silence, and then he heard Lois' voice, very soft, sounded fearful. "What if it goes out?"

"It won't," Clark told her. "I'll make sure it doesn't."

"You have to sleep sometime..."

"Then I'll wake you up and let you watch it for a while." Clark sighed, his breath ruffling her hair. He hugged her, trying to be reassuring, trying not to think about the sweet curve of her hip pressed against him.

"What if we both fall asleep?"

"Lois, it's going to be okay," Clark soothed. "Trust me. We'll get through this. We always do. *Nothing* gets between Lois Lane and a story, right? Not even a blizzard."

She laughed, but it was an odd, half-choked sound. "What if I've used up all my luck, huh? No one's seen Superman yet, least of all, us. He would have been here by now if he knew." Lois tried not to think about the pain that accompanied that thought, how let down she felt. If she had ever needed her hero, it was now. And he was nowhere to be seen. "Clark, this could be it. I don't think he's going to make it this time. If we both fall asleep and that fire goes out, it's all over. No one's coming to rescue us in this storm..."

"That won't happen," Clark told her, making his voice slightly stern. He tightened his arms around her, and Lois shifted to take advantage of his warmth. Unfortunately, when she did so, she trapped the tips of his fingers under her arm ... and against the side of her breast. Clark stopped breathing for a long moment.

"We could really die out here, with no one to save us this time," Lois was saying, in a small voice he'd never heard her use. "Clark, this is real. We're pretty warm right now, but if it gets much colder..."

"Lois, we'll be fine," he said at last, unsticking his tongue from the roof of his suddenly dry mouth.

"You don't know that," she argued, a hint of anger in her tone but no real fire behind it, and there was no way he could counter it without revealing his identity.

But perhaps he could reassure her a little... "Lois, if it's really that serious... If it looks like we won't make it out of this ... then there's something I have to tell you." *And I won't tell you what it is, but maybe you won't curse a blue streak later if I give you a little hint like this.*

To his surprise, he felt her side rise and fall as she chuckled, near-silently. He could almost feel the affectionate smile in her voice. "Clark, it's okay. I know."

Clark froze. "You *know*?"

"Yes, I know. I've always known."

"You mean ... you've known since we met?" *Oh my dear God, she's known all along? All this time, she **knew**?* Clark was frozen in horrified shock, no longer even paying attention to her body pressed against him.

"Well, you didn't exactly keep it a secret," Lois told him, her voice still warm.

"Uh ... I thought I did," he said sheepishly, feeling like the world's biggest idiot.

"Clark," Lois laughed, turning to look over her shoulder at him, "the entire *office* knows."

For once, the anxious rise of his voice wasn't faked. "*Everyone* knows?" Clark replied, floored. *Everyone* knew - he couldn't get his mind past that. How could he have screwed up

that badly...?

"You don't have to be embarrassed about it," Lois said softly, rolling onto her back within the circle of his arms. Looking up at him, she smiled fondly, her hazel eyes gone soft with indulgence. "Clark, really. How could I *not* know you were in love with me?"

"Wha...?" Clark's train of thought came to a screeching halt, and then reversed itself. *You idiot! She didn't think you were talking about the secret! She thought you were talking about your crush on her! Which I still didn't think was quite that blindingly obvious...* "Oh. Um. Yeah. That's, uh, that wasn't what I was talking about. Yeah."

"Clark..." Lois reached up and stroked his cheek, silencing him. "It's okay. I love you, too."

The words were the ones he'd longed to hear, but in his dreams they'd never been spoken in those tones of brotherly affection. Before he could stop himself, Clark replied with a slightly bitter, wounded note in his voice, "But not like I love you, Lois. It's not the same."

He saw a hurt look flare in her eyes and regretted saying anything. *You've always known that Clark was the kind of guy she'd never see as anything other than a brother. This is a woman who's chasing a superhero, remember. That takes the kind of chutzpah that would never look twice at a guy like Clark.*

Lois was stunned for a moment by the pain in his voice. No, she wasn't madly passionately in love with him, but who else was as close to her as Clark was? Of all the guys in the office - all the guys in her life, period, caped ones included - who else knew her as well as he did? How many of the others had met her mom and her sister, been on assignment with her, worked with her and gone on dates with her and not let the dates change how they acted toward each other at the office? Hell, how many other men even got the chance to take her out to dinner - and of that very small number, how many would have gotten a second date if they'd taken her out for hamburgers? In a bloody chiffon evening gown, no less?

No one. There was no other man who was as intricately bound into her life as Clark Kent. Always kind, always supportive, always yearning for her but never, ever making that desire intrusive. Always respectful, and always deeply loving - he had seen the best and worst in her, and loved her anyway. She couldn't say the same about Superman...

She couldn't say much about Superman. He was still, in many ways, a mystery. How he felt about her, for one - most of the time, the hero seemed to be above such petty human complications as love. Lois would've given up long ago if it hadn't been for little moments like that one in the desert, when it seemed that he would kiss her.

But where is he now? The thought haunted her. He must not have known she was in danger, or he would be here, melting the snow with one angry glance from those perfect blue eyes. Either that, or the Man of Steel wasn't quite as focused on Lois Lane as she was on him...

Meanwhile, here was Clark, right beside her as always, sharing his own body's warmth with her. From the sound of it, he was willing to die with no regrets tonight, so long as he was with her - he certainly seemed much less afraid of the encroaching cold than Lois would have expected. In so many ways, Clark was a perfect compliment to her... *Maybe, if I'd never met Superman... And if this is the end, well, what would it hurt...?*

Loyalty to the hero gave her a moment's pause, but Lois reminded herself that she and Superman had never, not even once, spoken openly of the attraction between them. He'd never unambiguously indicated that he wanted more than friendship from her, and for her part, she had tried valiantly to keep from showing him how crazy in love she actually was.

Oh, the hell with it. "C'mere, Clark," Lois whispered, making up her mind. She caught his

cheek and pulled him down to her, smiling at the poleaxed expression on his face just before she closed her eyes and kissed him.

So very sweet a kiss, that gentle press of lips; somehow it felt very *right* to Lois, like the closing of a circle, a feeling of completeness she'd never expected. She had a moment to revel in his tender adoration, a moment to wish that she'd given Clark more of a chance before the end...

...and then his arms tightened around her, and he kissed her back with trembling intensity. *That* wasn't the puppy-dog crush she'd always assumed Clark had on her; that was passion and desire, and to Lois' shock she responded to it. Suddenly the attraction between them was magnetic - but oddly familiar - and she found herself kissing him hungrily, shoving those damn glasses out of her way.

He didn't notice, and wouldn't have cared. Kissing Lois was like nothing he'd ever done or dreamed of doing. Being frozen into a block of ice and bathed in flame within the span of a few minutes hadn't been able to make chills run up and down his spine the way her mouth did, seeking his lips greedily. For once in his life, Clark was devoting his complete attention to doing only and exactly what he'd always wanted to do. For once, he was being selfish...

Lois raked her hands through his hair as she kissed him again and again. Some distant, tiny voice in her mind was ranting that this was *Clark*, and if she wasn't careful she might lead him into unreasonable expectations... While the rest of her mind took stock of the situation, and decided those expectations might not be so unreasonable after all. She didn't even feel the cold any longer, so swept up in this surprising rush of desire.

He had even managed to kiss her breathless, a feat no one else had accomplished. Lois pulled back slightly, breathing fast, her gaze lidded as she stared at him. Without those glasses, his features appeared stronger, and those grayish eyes were a true cerulean blue...

...and the hair, ruffled by her hands, was wavier than she'd thought. And there was one curl in the front that looked an awful lot like...

Lois' eyes opened wide, and the sexy stare became a look of utter shock.

Clark had drawn back from her as well, slower to return to his senses. At first, her expression caught him off guard; what had he done to make her look at him like that? She'd been just as eager for the kiss...

And then he realized what was missing. His glasses, which she had swept off his face, were lying in plain sight between them. From the way Lois was staring, she'd recognized him at last. Clark winced, waiting for the inevitable rage. He could hear her breath and heartbeat racing as Lois worked herself into a fury of betrayal...

Lois' face crumpled slightly, the look in her eyes going from shocked to hurt with something else lurking beneath it, and her palm cracked against his cheek. It couldn't *hurt* him, but he *felt* it, and a blow like that coming from the woman he loved hurt more than kryptonite. Clark had never been more ashamed in his life.

Lois' chest hitched, almost a sob, and he knew how she always reacted to being hurt or frightened. Clark steeled himself against the onslaught of her anger...

Which never arrived. Instead, Lois ran a hand into his hair and kissed him, hard and hungry. She'd had two warring reactions to seeing, at last, just *who* was beside her. Firstly, outrage and embarrassment that he'd fooled her for so long - those emotions had occasioned the slap, and her hand throbbed in a distant way that hinted she would regret that decision later.

But at the same moment, Lois realized who she was in bed with - just exactly *who* she had

been kissing so passionately. The man of her wildest dreams had been kissing her with all the fiery intensity of a lover long denied, and she couldn't help thrilling to it. Everything she'd ever wanted had been in her reach all along...

They drew back for air a second time, Clark looking utterly confused. "Lois ... I'm so sorry..."

She laughed a little, caught between vexation, tears, and joy. "You jerk, we're not gonna die out here, are we?" Lois asked in a slight choked voice. And then it dawned on her - "You were trying to tell me, weren't you?"

"Yes." His voice was very soft, hopeful and ashamed at the same time.

*Well, Lane, here you are. It's this or the Story of the Century. Your best friend and your dream lover are the same person. And he just happens to be wearing only pajamas and lying beside you, in front of a roaring fire on a snowy night at a honeymooners' resort. Now tell me: isn't **that** worth giving up a Pulitzer?*

She knew then that she would never reveal his secret - she loved him too much. Not only as Superman, the hero who'd *literally* swept her off her feet, but also as Clark, whom she could always trust and rely on. Lois had the best of both worlds.

Letting her smile grow wicked, Lois set aside all the questions she had for him and ran her hand slowly down his chest, feeling the perfectly defined muscle beneath the flannel. "I guess that leaves us just one question - for the moment," she asked huskily.

"What's that?" he whispered, studying her face. She couldn't possibly want to... Could she?

What happened next made the answer obvious. "What are you doing New Year's Eve?" Lois murmured, giving a soft smile before she kissed him again, pulling him down to her.

At the last instant before he lost himself once again to her kiss, he ran a hand down the length of her side and replied softly, "Spending it with you ... love."