

A Spark in the Tinderbox

by Kala Lane Kent

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Rating: T

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*This is a bad idea. This is **such** a bad idea.* Clark had been tense from the moment Perry sent them on this assignment. New Year's Eve had only been a week ago, and the magnetic attraction between himself and Lois that was all too obvious at Christmas had resulted in a New Year spent in Smallville with Ma, pretending he wasn't yearning for her. The main reason for the avoidance was the usual: his secret identity still lay between them and he was having a more and more difficult time keeping it that way. He sometimes wondered just how many times he had already begun to trip up around her. And from the feisty way she'd been acting when Perry called them into his office, he found himself once again wondering what she thought she was onto.

Unable to help a grin at her tenacity, made all the more intriguing by the sly way she kept nudging him, he had nonetheless tried to play it cool. Most likely, she was just on a wild lead for what she was certain would mean a Superman front-pager and was riding high on the possibility of getting it in before his City Council article. But then, the moment the Chief left the room, Lois had thrown him a curveball that he hadn't even seen coming. Thoroughly triumphant, she had boldly confronted him with the very thing he'd been fretting over: she claimed that he, her meek best friend, was Superman.

And then tried to prove he was Superman *by jumping out a sixtieth-floor window.* Typical of her to commit everything, even her life, to a single conclusion.

As she screamed, his heart had seized up in sheer terror, but fortunately his mind was still running at its usual super-speed. Clark had managed to race downstairs, slow her fall with super-breath, and use heat-vision on the awning. Lois was falling slowly enough that she bounced off the awning and landed in the fruit cart. By the time she looked up, covered in watermelon, he was leaning out the window sixty stories above. Her disbelief when she caught sight of him would have amused him to no end normally. In this instance, it was only how stung Lois seemed after the fact that killed his mirth. Her hero hadn't showed; she'd not only embarrassed herself and scared poor Clark, but Superman had never even put in an appearance.

He'd felt bad about it, especially when their train arrived in Niagara and Lois was still clearly annoyed. She'd been snarky to him over having to skip the plane because of his perpetual airsickness, snapped at the porter, and had now changed her tune about the assignment. Clark had tried to defuse her by pointing out the clear need for a story about this racket, but Lois wouldn't be swayed. Her infamous views on the institution of marriage didn't really help matters. This was also to say nothing over the *romantic* room they were given.

When all else failed, he brought out the charm. But it was Clark's special brand of homegrown Kansas charm. Stuttering, he'd asked her about the sleeping arrangements, complete with what he knew would be a sweetly-suave grin, while not-so-subtly standing beside the bed. That at least had gotten her to give him that crooked smile before responding with fond amusement when she'd offered him the complimentary couch. It wasn't as if he actually expected to share a bed with her; although he couldn't deny a small feeling of disappointment in the back of his mind.

Remembering that now, Clark found himself blushing, and looked down. They still had a few more days of this farce to get through, and though Lois' mood would certainly be improved by teasing him, he knew more than she did. He'd seen the wonderment in her eyes at Christmas, when Superman hovered by her balcony. And he knew why he'd avoided her over the New Year. Being around Lois subjected him to an attraction so strong it made the stereotypical romantic's reference to magnetism seem ridiculous. His feelings for Lois were like the pull of gravity, always drawing him back to her, and it took all of his considerable strength to fight it. Even now, he wasn't sure exactly when Lois Lane had gotten this far under his skin.

"Clark, did you fall in? Not even Luce ever took this long getting ready! Are you ready yet? Hello, earth to Clark?" Lois called out suddenly from the other room, startling him out of his reverie. They were supposed to be going to the newlywed's dinner tonight, and Clark was just about ready.

"Be right there." He glanced in the mirror, straightened his tie, and went to meet Lois at the door. His misgivings about this assignment could wait.

The newlyweds' dinner turned out to be far less outstanding than advertised. Not that this was any kind of surprise to the jaded veteran reporter. The moment the plate was set before her, Lois was already staring at it in a way that would have made most men at the *Daily Planet* turn and walk away quickly. A forkful was enough to have her sneering at her entrée with an almost-comical degree of disgust. "Seriously? I mean, have they ever even see Kung Pao shrimp before? Or read a recipe? The chilies are supposed to actually be *hot*. This is barely lukewarm. And it tastes like they ran out of cornstarch and used glue instead." This was pretty typical of the resort so far - the fancy newlyweds' dinner had turned out to consist of oriental food, which Lois would ordinarily enjoy, but this was poorer fare than the greasiest Chinese takeout place in Metropolis.

Just adding to the joy of the occasion was the fact that the heater had gone out this morning, they were told. Not to worry, the desk clerk had assured them, they had a repairman on it. Which, despite the insanity of the price of the room, was fine when you were in there with the god-awful 'Flames of Love' automatic fireplace, but the 'Great Room' was freezing. Even though it didn't match her dress in the least, she was kinda glad she had thought to snatch her jacket on the way out of the room. *Dammit, Perry, why the hell couldn't you not be a cheapskate for once and actually do this during the wedding season? It's probably comfortable here then. There would be more people here and I wouldn't be freezing my ass off.* It was a good thing that they had the entire weekend here, because she had absolutely zero interest in trying to pull information out of coo-some honeymooners when she had goose bumps running down her back. Tonight for observation, tomorrow for investigation. Trying to temper the urge to do something truly evil, she glanced over at her partner, what she saw there making her tilt her head, one dark brow rising.

Clark was picking at his own meal meditatively as if it answered all the questions to life in this universe and the next, and for once he didn't even attempt to contradict her. His usual persistent attempts to make the best of a bad situation could be counted upon to cheer her, if only by sheer ridiculousness. He *would* try to see the silver lining of every cloud. The fact that he was apparently incapable of his usual chipper chatter made Lois stifle a grin; obviously her choice of dinner attire was having its desired effect. Maybe the mini dress had been a little overt, but it wasn't as if it wasn't tasteful enough for the event. Especially if she truly wanted to rattle his tree; Man of Steel or Farmboy of Kansas, the legs had the same effect. And wearing the boots with it had obviously upped the ante. It was like he couldn't even trust himself to look in her direction. Which, she found, was exactly the response she wanted at the moment.

However, she was starting to think that maybe she'd overdone it. Missing his cue once was one thing, but no retort for this long? After the designated amount of response time passed and he didn't even glance in her direction, Lois rolled her eyes heavenward. *Oh, for God's sake, Clark, get with the program. I know they're amazing, but come on.* Still not even a flicker. Finally, she elbowed him slightly to get his attention.

Clark actually startled and looked over at her with profound surprise. Forcing her husky growl into a saccharine chirp, she managed not to snicker when she asked, "Sweetheart? I was starting to think I had lost you there. How's your cashew chicken?" The sweet smile on her lips only held a glimmer of wickedness.

With a ghost of his usual grin, he replied, "I haven't found any cashews yet."

"Maybe they forgot them," she snarked under her breath, still waiting for him to catch up to her. That didn't jog Clark into replying with their usual snappy patter either, so Lois gave up and pushed the plate away. "Okay, whatever. Never mind, we'll sneak out to that Fry Truck place and get some *poutine* later." Catching his eyes, she gave him her million-dollar grin. "Hey, at least they can't screw up fortune cookies, right?"

That, finally, made him chuckle. It was enough to make Lois give a sigh of relief; took him long enough. *Take a memo, Lane. Never wear both a mini-dress and boots around Clark again. You just might break his brain.* For the moment, his attention was right where it should be for the moment: directed at her. The smile on Clark's face was familiar and reassuring when he said, "Let's hope not." He pushed his plate away too, and picked up the fortune cookie that had come with the meal. By the time he got his unwrapped, Lois had already cracked hers open and leaned back in her chair.

"*Your dynamic eyes have attracted a secret admirer,*" Lois read aloud, lips quirking into a smug grin, before snickering. "Yeah, right. Only one? Besides, none of my admirers are ever secret. Not for longer than five minutes, anyway. As much as I wish most would be." She glanced over at her partner, noticing that he had that far-away look in his eyes again. *What's going on there? Is it me or is something else on his mind? Maybe a cry for help back home?* That thought just sat weird; it hurt your brain to know Superman and Clark separately and try to fuse them. The evidence was there, but how could she reconcile the good-natured man she'd come to think of as her best friend and the hero who left her starry-eyed? Sitting here next to him it was hard to believe, and yet, all signs pointed to the reality of it.

Before she could let her internal battle show on her face, she brushed those thoughts away. Better to consider it when you weren't in a roomful of people. She'd find out, don't doubt it, but now just wasn't the time. Leaning toward him, she tried to glance at the cookie in his hands. "Enough about me and my harem. Clark, what's yours say?"

"Um," he stalled, and almost dropped the cookie while opening it. His face seemed to

freeze before he managed to stammer out, "*Your dream will come true when you least expect it.* Hmm. That's ... interesting."

"Too bad it doesn't say which dream," Lois remarked off-handedly. "I have this one dream where a pair of my sister's sneakers - like she had when she was about five - comes to life and chases me. Here's hoping that one's not coming true."

Given the quality of the food, and the strangely distant way Clark was behaving, Lois decided she was justified in leaving the newlyweds' dinner early, and dragging Clark with her.

After that awkward meal, and the rather embarrassing fortune cookie - if only Lois knew the things he dreamed of - Clark was happy to settle in for the night, bedding down on the complimentary couch. He hadn't counted on Lois noticing his distraction, and deciding to add to it.

She sauntered past in a long white satin nightgown that covered every potential impropriety, but followed her curves closely enough to make Clark wish she'd just go to sleep already. He winced, closing his eyes tightly, as she rummaged through her purse for something. Did she *have* to be so irresistible? He was already madly in love with her, a fact he was coming to terms with since Christmas. That he'd had her photo from the company party framed and kept it at his bedside made his feelings impossible to deny. But she was making it worse with that gown, the way he could imagine the silky glide of it under his hands as he slid them around her waist and kissed her.

Two months ago, he could've handled this. Lois simply wasn't a modest person; though fortunately she never changed clothes in front of him, she had no problem with Clark seeing her in sleepwear, and this nightgown wasn't the most scandalous thing she'd worn around him. Now those slips she wore to bed... Clark banished the thought. How could a simple black satin slip with a little lace around the top be so very alluring?

The simple answer was that it wasn't the slip, it was the woman wearing it. Ever since Christmas, the tension between them had been so keen that Clark could barely stand to be around her. At the same time, he couldn't bear to be away from her, the paradox pulling him in two directions at once. And now with Lois on the scent of his identity, he couldn't afford to be distracted, although he hoped that falling from the *Daily Planet* building might have put Lois off of trying to unmask him for a while.

Although a part of him, a very small part tucked in the back of his brain, whispered that it might not be a bad thing for her to know the whole truth, to see that her faithful friend and her hero were the same man all along. That insistent little voice was the reason he'd been grinning like a fool when Lois snapped open their own paper under his nose, showing him a photo of Superman with Clark's hat, suit, and glasses drawn on. He couldn't help being delighted by the fiery triumph in her eyes, even while his mind raced to try and keep her from finding out.

Tell her. Don't tell her. Let her find out. Keep her from knowing at all costs - it's the only way to keep her safe. Those thoughts chased each other around in his mind until Lois walked back by him, white satin flowing like moonlight itself, and the sight of her silenced all of his inner voices.

It was back to work first thing the next morning. Lois had successfully talked him out of going to the Breakfast Buffet in the ballroom with the other couples, unwilling to endure another uninspired meal. The moment she saw that the menu included Cupid's Special Aphrodisiac French Toast Smothered in Venus and Adonis Syrup and St. Valentine's Heart-

Melting Oleomargarine, it was a given.

Yes, it kept them away from questioning the guests on their experiences, but she was more than willing to put the Sunday paper puff piece on the backburner for now. As it was, she was perfectly willing to use their own observations for the article if she could get a lead on the story that haunted her right now. And she had finally found something to like about the hearts-flowers-and-naked-cherubs nightmare that was Niagara Falls: they had one Indian restaurant that started serving early. With Lois actually awake and pleasant with a belly full of naan and curry, she and Clark proceeded to do the tourist thing, wandering around the falls taking photos like everyone else, the camera part of their camouflage. God, she hated this assignment, no matter how you sliced it - she was a city reporter, her beat was crime and graft, not poor little honeymooners getting bilked out of their savings because they were too stupid in love to pay attention to the fine print. It wasn't a good use of her talents and Perry knew it. Good thing she had her own agenda for being here...

Lois shot off several pictures almost on auto-pilot, her mind far away and reviewing the events of the last few days. What exactly had that awning been made out of, anyway? Some kind of super-strong fabric? She was no physicist, but it seemed like a woman falling sixty stories ought to rip right through it, not bounce hilariously into a stupid fruit cart.

"Um, Lois?" Clark said, bringing her briefly out of her reverie. "Look. Everybody's holding hands. Maybe ... maybe we should hold hands too?"

She couldn't resist a grin at that. No way, she really was losing it. That hesitant stutter, as if holding hands was somehow the gateway drug to wicked, sinful premarital sex, simply couldn't belong to the hero who had looked at her with such warmth in his blue eyes. Lois tried to shake the cobwebs from her mind with a little banter. "Here's my hand, Clark, hold it."

He grinned boyishly when he laced his fingers through hers, and she smiled back even while noticing how warm his hand was. "Know what? They're afraid to let go," Lois teased.

"Why?"

"Soon as they let go, it's straight to the lawyer. Next stop, Reno."

"I don't about that, they seem happy to me," he said, trying to refute her cynicism, but Lois could only give him a condescending tilt of her head. At the look of warning in her frown, it was clear he had hit a nerve and he couldn't help his disappointment. "Lois, I get the feeling that all this - being here, newlyweds, and all - is somehow ... threatening to you," he said, his voice growing cautious on the last phrase.

That stung her. Domestic bliss was not her thing, she'd loudly proclaimed; Lucy did it well enough for the entire family. This whole saccharine charade nauseated her ... but there was one man who could make her as starry-eyed as all the hopeless romantics around them.

Of course, she couldn't let Clark know he'd hit her where she lived. Putting on a mock Viennese accent, she snarked, "Zank you very much, Herr Doktor Freud. Or should I say Doctor Marrin; he loved that topic." Crossing her arms, her whole body language was one of stubborn defiance. "Let's be realistic about this 'wedding' mumbo-jumbo, okay, Clark? The girl gets handed over and traditionally supposed to give up her own life to further her husband's, down to taking his name. Not to mention the fact that when Papa marries off his little darling, the first thing he thinks is, 'Hurray! One less mouth to feed.' And then he feels guilty for thinking it. See the reasoning behind all of this ostentatious crap. You're right; I'm not a huge fan of slavery. Why can't two people just love each other with all of this ridiculousness in the way?"

In light of the secret she was trying to uncover, did they have to talk about this?

Seriously? What if that really was the way he thought of it? And what had been the traditions on Krypton? What if the rules were something more rigid? And it wasn't as if everyone at the paper didn't know how she felt about the topic. It was just another form of bondage to her, and not even the fun kind. If she wanted to lose her identity, she'd get brainwashed with the foreknowledge, thanks very much. After the way things had been for Mom and Dad...

He'd pushed it too far. A part of him had wondered why he had even tried. Clark sighed with defeat, a trifle wistfully. "Okay, fine. They still look happy to me."

At that, she took a deep breath. As usual, she was being defensive when a weakness was exposed and striking out. *Calm down, jackass. He wasn't trying to point out a character flaw. Breathe. Now apologize for being a jerk.* She opened her mouth to speak. And, as fate was usually laughing at poor Clark, that's when Lois realized that his lenses were fogged over. She gave a small laugh. It just figured. "That's because I'm a jerk and you're blind, Clark," she retorted affectionately, reaching to take his glasses off over his protests. Really, what would he do without her here to keep an eye on him? He was so sweet-natured and so totally hopeless. If she had left him to himself when they first met, the rest of the crew would have eaten him alive. She looked down as she cleaned the glasses quickly, amused by how nervous he was - did he think she'd *drop* them straight over the side into the falls just because he brought up her marriage allergy?

But when Lois handed them back, though, she froze. That moment was a revelation unto itself; she had always thought his eyes were gray, but without the glasses to filter the sunlight, she saw they were actually blue. And his face looked so very familiar, once the distracting black frames were off... A breathless instant, both of them pausing in surprise. Before she could speak, the moment passed, Clark hustling off after some idiotic kid playing on the wrong side of the guardrail. The brat's mother was more concerned about him embarrassing her than the fact that he'd been one slip away from death. Lois scoffed as she turned away, trying to process what she had seen despite the distraction. Some people just didn't need to have kids and this was just another fine example. *Right, kid. Don't get hurt. Let Mama hurt you.*

Just as Clark returned to her, Lois caught sight of the hotdog stand, and her stomach growled. While he was trying to draw her attention to the narrowly-averted tragedy, she murmured. "Hey. Hey, I'm hungry. You hungry?"

At the total change in topic, her partner just stared at her then. "Lois, you're amazing," Clark said with a disbelieving chuckle.

"Aw, c'mon - anybody can get hungry, Clark." Lois smirked; now they were back on track, Clark teasing her about her endless appetite, and her working toward getting him to buy her lunch. Some things never changed.

"No, because... Here you are standing in front of one of nature's most awesome spectacles, and you're thinking about *food*. I mean, aren't you impressed?"

And now the bait, to see if what she half-suspected (but no, it was madness) could be true. "Clark, once a girl's seen Superman in action, Niagara Falls kinda leaves you cold. Know what I mean?"

"Him again, huh?" Somehow Clark's reply sounded off, not as bitter or sad as Lois expected, but then she might be reading far too much into it.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I have a one-track mind, don't I?" She looked up at him, trying to gauge his reactions, and brightened her voice. "Well, right now my one-track mind is telling me I'm hungry." She gave Clark a winning smile, the one that got her free lunches and let her get away with stealing his coffee and donuts.

Sighing, he headed off to get her food and her freshly-squeezed orange juice, and Lois watched him go. He really was a little too nice for his own good sometimes - no other man she knew would put up with such a cavalier command after her meltdown earlier. And she really shouldn't do it, she knew, but Clark always gave the impression that he liked to do things for her. On top of that, if what she suspected was true, that might be the reasoning behind it...

Just then, the stupid kid from earlier finally managed to fall with a piercing scream. In spite of the fact that she'd been thinking the gene pool needed a little chlorine moments ago, Lois felt her heart clutch in horror as the little boy fell toward the roaring water. "Help!" she screamed, leaping to the railing herself, hoping that her savior could hear her...

...and he came, just like he always did, Lois' heart rising to her throat as he dove down and caught the falling boy. Lois called encouragement, grinning so broadly her cheeks ached. How could she help loving him?

And then he did the unbelievable. For the first time since they had met, Superman flew off without even a word to her. Without even a glance. Her brow furrowed in hurt, she watched him disappear. As much as it nettled her to admit it, he'd been a little distant since Christmas, since that night when she leaned on the balcony and he hovered just out of reach and she imagined they were both thinking the same thing, both wondering what would happen if they kissed. Maybe he'd felt that he'd overstepped his bounds. Maybe that was why she was hung up on this Clark-is-Superman explanation. Maybe she just needed to let this go...

Frustrated and stung by Superman's clear dismissal, Lois turned to look for Clark with a sigh. "Well, what's your hurry, seeing as how you happen to be ... in Niagara Falls..." she growled under her breath, and then her voice faded as it dawned on her.

Clark was nowhere to be seen in the meandering crowd. Or at the hotdog stand. Nor had he run up with the others during the rescue.

And his eyes behind the glasses had been *blue*, not gray.

Clear cerulean blue.

And she'd seen that face numerous times in her dreams.

She wasn't losing her mind.

Clark *was* Superman.

Her eyes were crafty when he finally made his way back to her with the hotdogs in hand. She whirled to confront him, slyly asking where he had been, her mind already racing with plans to make him reveal the truth. He gave his standard stock answer, only to have her call him on it, "I mean it strikes me funny that every time Superman's around, you disappear. What do you have to say to that?" He tried to distract her and change the topic, as usual, but she just let him this time. But she only grinned as she lead him toward the white water rapids further down the boardwalk.

They had danced this dance so long now, why not change the moves at last? If the longing she saw in him was truly how he felt, why were they still fighting it? Someone had to take it to the next level, even if she had to do it herself. Lois was so bent on her goal that she even skipped the orange juice.

"Bye-bye baby," Lois called jauntily, and he thought in dismay, *She never bluffs*. When he turned around, she was already in the water, calling for Superman.

All the information he'd read on the displays was *not* helpful at the moment, Clark knowing that the rapids contained standing waves up to five feet high, that this gorge set the highest class standard for the eastern half of the continent, and that the water was moving at thirty miles per hour. He hurried along the boardwalk, keeping her in sight, trying to figure out

how to save her without letting her find out the truth.

A dead tree and his heat vision provided Lois with a floating log to hold onto, but that was only a temporary solution. He had to get her out before she reached the whirlpool further down. She was a strong swimmer, not in any danger of drowning at the moment, and before he could figure out what to do she managed to get herself into an eddy where she could touch the bottom and climb out.

Clark hurried down to help her, and for the finishing touch, let himself fall sprawling into the water so that *she* had to rescue *him*. The scathing disgust for the whole situation that her tone implied wounded him, but at least his secret was safe for another day.