

Breakdown

by htbthomas

© 25-Aug-08

Rating: K+

Disclaimer: All publicly recognizable characters, settings, etc. are the property of their respective owners. The original characters and plot are the property of the author. The author is in no way associated with the owners, creators, or producers of any media franchise. No copyright infringement is intended.

Author's Note: Written for the August Heatwave Challenge at 12days_of_clois



Lois tucked a loose strand of wavy hair behind her ear, waving with her other hand at the clouds of steam emanating from inside the hood of their rental car. *Wow, that's even more steam than I expected.*

Apparently Clark agreed. "Oh, my," he said, rubbing nervously at the bridge of his nose.

She coughed and leaned forward over the engine block, peering around to see if she could figure out why the car had overheated. But of course, it was all a charade. Lois knew why it had overheated.

She had sabotaged the car herself.

It had only taken a quick jab of her penknife into the water reservoir, while Clark "went to use the facilities" at the last gas station. Lois was glad he had used that excuse, too. If he had really been in the restroom, instead of stopping a fire two counties over (it was all over the local news on the radio), he might have seen or heard her puncture the plastic container.

He came back fifteen minutes later, apologizing about eating something that didn't agree with him, and Lois pretended not to notice the faint whiff of smoke on him. Getting back in the car, she wondered how many times she had been fooled with some inane excuse... But this time, it was really Clark who was none the wiser.

Lois stepped back from the car with a frown. "I think there's a leak in the water reservoir...."

Clark looked dubious. "In a car this new?"

She shrugged. "Hey, it happens. I hung around the motor pool at the my dad's army base enough to see practically everything. But why the *hell*-" She put a little extra oomph into the word, fanning her face against the blazing August heat. "-did it have to happen in the middle of

nowhere?"

Clark nodded toward the opened hood. "May I?"

She moved aside and she watched him bend his tall frame awkwardly inside the hood, trying to view the damage from every angle. She had to suppress a laugh - he had probably scanned it back when the car overheated, but had to pretend to get his information by human means. And the hole in the water reservoir surely didn't look like a "leak." When would he get up the nerve to call her on it?

It was even worse an hour ago to keep a straight face, watching the temperature gauge rise at the same rate as Clark's frown slowly deepened. She hoped to God that her acting skills were even half as good as his, or she might have already given the game away.

"You think you can fix it?"

He pulled his head out of the hood to look at her glumly, mopping his face with one hand. She would bet that was steam, and not sweat. "Well, we could cover the hole with duct tape... or maybe some gum - do you have any?"

Lois shook her head.

Clark continued, "But the biggest problem is-" He turned in a slow 360. "-getting more water. There's no telling how many miles it is to the nearest house, or how long it'll be until someone drives by."

She could tell him. It was about 45 miles to a town in any direction, and there were almost no farms or houses along this stretch of road, according to the online satellite maps. She had picked this spot carefully.

Clark put in tentatively, "We should have used the interstate..."

Lois glared at him and he turned away in embarrassment. "This was the shortest route according to the online map!"

It was the shortest *distance* at least, if not the shortest traveling time. She thanked Jor-El's big round head that Clark had probably never ever used one of those sites. Why drive when you could fly?

Lois clenched her fists and swore for effect. "Could this day get any worse? First they can't find our flight reservations to El Paso and there's no room left on standby... and then our rental car breaks down..." She looked out at the miles and miles of scrub and bare rock. "I guess we'd better call Triple A."

Lois retrieved her phone from the car and flipped it open. The screen was totally black, as she expected. She'd used the last of the battery on a last minute call to Jason to let him know she'd call him back in the morning, and reminded him to be good for Grandma Ella. She tried the power button. Nothing. She jabbed it a few extra times for Clark's benefit, and then tossed it back onto the car seat with another curse.

"No signal?"

"No battery. I must have forgotten to charge it before we left." She dared him to challenge her with a sharp look.

Clark let out a long breath and leaned against the side of the car. "So now what?"

"What else?" Lois waited a long moment, but Clark only looked at her blankly in response. "We wait."

"I could walk down the road and try to find help. I'm more used to the heat, from working on the farm all day."

And because you get your power from the sun. But there was no way she was going to let him slip out of sight and play super-sneaky savior today. "No - we need to stay together. What

if someone comes by and I can't find you again?"

He paused, but then nodded, resigned.

They sat on the shady side of the car, suitcases for seats. Lois used a magazine as a makeshift hat, and Clark placed a hand over his eyes, squinting into the distance. By his increasingly troubled mood, he was probably scanning for signs of anyone coming this way and not finding a soul. Served him right.

They didn't talk much - the heat was too oppressive for Lois, and Clark was too busy pretending to feel the same way. But she could imagine what was going through his head right now.

How were they going to get out of this without exposing Clark's secret?

Lois smiled internally. Ever since the day when she had finally put the pieces together a few weeks ago, she had been planning this. Well, really, since she had stopped being incensed about it, and her fantasies of revenge had died down. Really, how dare he masquerade as her partner and friend by day, and her hero and ex-lover by night? For Krypton's sake, they had a child together! She had no idea what the big dumb alien was think-

Lois took a deep breath and let it out noisily. Maybe she wasn't totally over it yet. The fact remained that this seemed like the best way to force him to admit he was Superman.

Short of pulling a gun on him.

Clark turned his head toward her. "Are you feeling all right?"

"Just fine, so far. A little thirsty, I guess." But she could do without for at least another hour, and with no bathrooms around other than some waist-high bushes, it was just as well. "I had a thought, though..."

"What?"

"We could... call for Superman."

She watched his face carefully, but all he did was grimace. "This is hardly a life or death situation, Lois."

"Maybe not now... but what if no one comes along? That packet of Corn Nuts you bought at the gas station back there will only last us for so long, and with no water we're not going to make it very far, even after sundown." She gave him a serious look. "Besides, I *know* he wouldn't let us die out here."

His answering look was almost pained. "What if he's busy with a disaster somewhere on the other side of the world?"

"Hey, who's supposed to be the cynic in this partnership?" she chided. "It wouldn't hurt to try."

Clark gave her a gesture of 'Go ahead' and folded his arms around his long legs.

Lois stood, brushed herself off and stood a few feet from the car. She tried to give her best performance. "Superman! Help! We're stuck out in the middle of nowhere!" She turned the other direction. "Superman! Help!"

She waited for a few moments as if she really expected him to swoop down in a rush of blue and red. "Well... maybe he *is* busy." *Busy figuring out how to get out of this, more likely.*

She sat back down, and they waited another half an hour. Her white blouse was soaked through by now, but that was better than a sunburn. Clark had shed his jacket, but he hardly looked the worse for wear, of course.

"I've been thinking, Lois..." Clark began out of the blue.

"Oh?" Was he finally starting to break?

"I didn't want to worry you before..." Clark seemed more uncomfortable in his own skin

than normal. "...but I think our car was sabotaged."

"What? How?" She was very pleased with how shocked she sounded.

"It couldn't have been long ago - probably at the last filling station. But that hole in the water reservoir looked too perfect..."

"Who could have done this? Someone who doesn't want us to get to El Paso?"

"Very likely. Though I can't figure out why. I do have a theory about who..."

Oh, now this was interesting. "Who?"

He turned his sincere gaze full on her. "I think it was *you*, Lois."

She fell back from him, trying to look dumbfounded. "What the hell kind of stupid ide-"

"Don't pretend anymore. I've been trying to comprehend for the last hour and a half why you would do something like this - and I've come up nearly empty. So why don't you tell *me* what kind of stupid idea this is?"

Maybe she should have brought that gun after all.

"I-" Lois shifted nervously. "I don't-" But the afternoon heat combined with the frustration which suddenly came boiling up and she jumped up. "You know what?" Lois stood over him with a finger pointed in accusation. "I can think of a lot more stupid ideas than this!"

She expected him to be shocked, to make excuses... anything but the way he just stared back at her serenely.

"Well?" Her voice was starting to get shrill, and she hated it. She began to rock on her heels in agitation. "Are you going to make me come out and say it?"

"No, I think I've got it pretty well figured out. You think I'm Superman." He shook his head like he couldn't believe what a preposterous notion that was.

"No, I *know* you are - but I can't figure why you wouldn't tell me yourself!" Lois began to pace, her anger just as hot as it had been when she first realized his true identity. At least he wasn't really denying it. "It's not as if we haven't known each other for years, worked together, even had-"

Lois stopped pacing, a horrible realization coming over her. She had to go to the bathroom.

She marched over to yank up her purse and headed for the nearest bush. This was so idiotic, but she'd go in the middle of a cornfield before she'd beg him to "save her" again.

"Where are you-?"

"The little cowgirl's room. And don't you dare zip off while my back is turned, either."

She came around the side of the bush, out of sight. She started digging for tissues and had just realized she didn't have any when she heard a telltale whoosh. "Damn it, Kent, you better not leave me here in the-"

"A peace offering?"

She would have laughed if she didn't think she would have an accident. Stretching over the top of the prickly leaves was a hand, holding... a roll of toilet paper.