

So Close - Out Of Reach

by Kala Lane Kent

© 20-Nov-07

Rating: T

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Author's Note: This oneshot is NOT set in the world of Little Secrets. This is a stand-alone tale based around the infamous 'Ring Scene' at the end of SIII. This was always the way I saw that scene ending, taking it from Lois' point-of-view. Also, it explains why Lois knew The Secret in SIV. Again, this is NOT based on LS.



*How did I come to this?
How did I slip and fall?
How did I throw half a lifetime away
Without any thought at all?*

*This should have been my time
It's over, it never began
I closed my eyes to so much for so long
and I no longer can*

*I try to blame it on fortune
Some kind of shift in a star
But I know the truth and it haunts me
it's flown just a little too far
I know the truth and it mocks me
I know the truth and it shocks me
It's flown just a little too far.*

*Why do I want him still?
Why when there's nothing there?
How to go on with the rest of my life
To pretend I don't care
This should've been my time
It's over-
 It never began
I closed my eyes to so much for so long
and I no longer can*

*I try to blame it on fortune
Some kind of twist in my fate
But I know the truth and it haunts me
I learned it a little too late*

*Oh I know the truth and it mocks me
I know the truth and it shocks me
I learned it a little too late
Too late...*

~Aida, I Know The Truth

I can't just take a normal vacation like everyone else. It's an absolute impossibility. Not even to get my head clear on one of the most agonizing decisions of my life, which I didn't even know had been made. It just seems like fate has a sense of humor, especially and specifically in my case. So, of course, I leave to deal with a problem with the man in my life, that of his sudden desertion, and I come home with a story. I headed out to the Caribbean to deal with a torn feeling I couldn't explain, something I had been hiding from the rest of the 'Family', and come back with a front-page exclusive on corruption after being abducted in a taxi and one of the greatest revelations of my life.

It's amazing what you'll discover under duress. And my little week and a half-long adventure with those mercenaries was just enough to break whatever was keeping it all dammed up in my skull. Although my passing out while the memories came flooding back to me was a blessing in disguise. The panic caused by the fear of being caught with a dead American woman on their hands was enough to cause them to scatter like a pack of cockroaches when the lights come on. Thankfully we weren't too terribly far from civilization and I managed to find my way back.

Although it was assumed I had some kind of amnesia the first couple of days in the hospital, seeming as how I can't remember how I made it back to the nearest town. My mind was an utter jumble, but not so much from the kidnapping experience. More from the memory of those two days that had been missing since I left Metropolis with Clark on that stupid story in Niagara. The memory of a silvery bed, a touch of cold, and the man I had always known as Superman curled around me in a lover's embrace, his warm skin pressed to mine. My heart in agony from the words he spoke that I only now heard. An entire lifetime in three days and all of it lost to me until I was in the worst kind of danger. And the fact that, for once in our history, he hadn't been there when I needed him. I felt like an utter train wreck. Doctors came and went, but all I could remember was what I had unknowingly lost.

Coming home a couple of days ago, I had to resist the urge to go straight to the source

and demand an explanation. But he thought I had forgotten, that much was clear. Especially looking back at the days before we had left for our separate trips, the way he didn't seem capable of looking me in the eyes. Just keeping my head together took all the effort I could afford, only calling Perry to let him know I was back in town and not uttering a peep about just how much danger I had been in. Only told him that I would have a hot story for him tomorrow, a front-pager for sure. There, alone in my apartment, I tried to tell myself all of those images in my mind were created by my subconscious, trying to find ways to distract me from the stress of the interrogation.

But all of it had been so real, the memory of the wind on my face as we flew what could only be North, to a crystal palace on snowy tundra. The taste of champagne and the warmth of his hand in mine. Forced to watch him agreeing to have his powers being stripped from him, biting my lip, feeling utterly useless and more than a bit unworthy of the sacrifice. It had eaten at me, being all too aware that the pain must be torture. Attempting to knock out that Kryptonian bitch in Perry's office when Zod and his goons made their way to Metropolis with that bastard Luthor's help. Now I could remember being used as a pawn in Zod and Luthor's little chess game, remember the pain of failure washing over his handsome face two-fold in the diner as we heard the newscast. And then, once the day was won and all was right again with the world, the decision that he had come to alone.

By a kiss betrayed, my traitor mind whispered so softly and suddenly that I had had to turn away from the computer as I cried, seeming to lose bits of myself in the process, washing away splinters of what might have been and what might never be. He had made the choice for both of us, the noble choice. He belonged to the world, something that I had struggled with and had had inexpert footing. He had thought he was doing the right thing, I tried to tell myself. But to know that he hadn't left me at least with the comfort of our time together stung. I hadn't been meant to have even that.

I can't even remember how long I had lost myself in the past I had only recently regained that night, but it was nearly two in the morning when I put my fingers to the keyboard again, forcing myself to block all reality until this job was done. And yet, the entire time I typed up my notes, the real Story of the Century continued to haunt me.

Never in my life had I ever dreaded walking through the revolving doors of the *Planet* the way I did that morning. Just getting out of bed had been a struggle, but I wouldn't chicken out and call in. Normally wild horses couldn't keep me away from the job, but facing what I now knew about the man who had no clue that I did was going to be one of the hardest things I'd ever done in my life. I'm not all that religious, but I had sent up a silent prayer every block on the way to the job. Normally, Clark would make his way in on foot as well, but I had managed to miss him, as if by magic. *Probably a toppling mountain in some little Swiss village or rescuing a cat stuck in a tree outside the Hague*, I thought with a touch of acidity that almost surprised me. Seems I was not taking this as well as I had tried to convince myself.

Still in luck and unspotted, I surged into the elevator with the rest of the early morning crowd and wound up pressed against the back. I don't care what anyone says; it sucks to be short. Especially when everyone in front of you seems to subscribe to the *Daily Superman*. It's funny how it never bothered me before, but now... Although at least that way I found out that he had stood me up for the millionaire who had been named *Humanitarian of the Year* just before I had left for Bermuda. In spite of the fact that I had written the article, I found it didn't surprise me one bit. Ross Webster had seemed to have a creepy little arrogant streak that

reminded one of Luthor if you spent too much time around him. And with that chill-inducing sister and that little blonde twit, it was no wonder. Vera Webster had reminded me of Mussolini in all that implies, only less attractive.

Luck had been on my side thus far and I only took a momentary deep breath before making myself shove open the swinging glass doors into City. I could do this, I told myself sternly, my mother didn't raise any cowards...

And slammed the door directly into the back of one Clark Kent, alias Superman, the Kryptonian Kal-El, full-time Defender of Worlds, part-time perennially-late reporter, and my amnesia-inducing former lover.

I squeezed my eyes shut for a moment against the sudden pain in my chest. Oh, God, what the hell was I thinking? I couldn't do this. Had I been insane when I told Perry I'd be here today? I needed to get as far from here as possible. Get out of here. Now. Tell the Chief you want a transfer to Gotham, Coast City, wherever. But who was I kidding? Even the middle of nowhere wasn't safe from this man, who had lived on a farm. Who saw all. Who had always seen through me even without the X-ray vision.

Even as my stomach leapt and everything inside me crumpled, he turned to grin broadly, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose with an index finger. I wondered if he had just arrived from some rescue, standing so close to the entrance. His expression was clear, open, delighted. No, not open, I realized. I'm not so sure that it ever was, although it always seemed to be. I guess now I know why. "Lois! You're home!" And now he was moving forward, and unable to move fast enough, he was hugging me even as I stiffened. And it was all I could do not to push him away. But it was the secret that was important, the mission. Regardless of how mixed my feelings were, the thing that had pushed us apart was important enough to still my tongue.

It was only when he was pulling away that I noticed Perry standing behind him, having just turned away from hollering at Pearson for missing his deadline the day before and turned now with his cigar firmly implanted in the corner of his mouth. I had all of about twenty seconds to prepare for my greatest acting job ever. I didn't miss that instant of mingled annoyance and affection in the old man's face before he bellowed, "Good of you to come home, Lane. The ladies were getting lazy while their competition was gone." He turned his pit bull glare to the entire room, mostly filled with men. That, of course, was Perry's version of *Hey, kid, we missed you. Good to have you home*. I wonder if he realizes that I learned to read between the lines years ago. He turned from me then, glaring at 'Clark'. "Kent, you're late again."

He flushed and looked away. "Yes, sir, I know. I got... well, the door in the men's room... it just sort of... well..." The stammering, the reddening, the playing with his hands; it was all an act that I could clearly see through. It was amazing just how much of an act it was once you knew. I wondered yet again if he had been laughing at us all this time, something that had never come to mind the first time. It didn't exactly help my game face, but you can't help idle thoughts.

Knowing I had been silent too long, I finally stepped up my performance. It was just another ordinary day at the paper, I had just gotten back from vacation, I was just catching up with my boss and the man I had considered my best friend... "I promise you, Clark, the world would explode if something bizarre didn't happen to you every day," I commented with a wit I didn't really feel and a wicked grin that felt like a mask.

After a moment of nervous fumbling for words on Clark's part, Perry mercifully cut him

off. Rolling his eyes as he gestured toward his office, he commented blandly, "Yeah, right. Come on, the both of you. I got your piece this morning, Lane. Now, where's yours on the Grimalkin scandal, Kent? Are you still so wrapped up in that reunion article you wrote you've forgotten what your real job is?"

A moment later, we were all trooping to the far end of the huge space that the City Room occupied as Perry grumped and the man I had known so long as Clark fluttered. I passed Jimmy with a salutation and a wave, making a mental note to talk to him later. The old man first, then me, with Kent bringing up the rear, as always. Old habit, something I should be comfortable with, but something felt even more wrong than it should. Not only was it *him*, but something else... Brow furrowed for a moment, I looked around the newsroom, trying to find the secondary source of my unease, but couldn't pinpoint it. Perry had been speaking for nearly a minute before we were to his door and I caught what he was saying. "Lois, I've got to hand it to you. Who else could turn a three-week vacation into a front page story that's going to blow the lid off government corruption in the Caribbean?"

I grinned at that, even though it pained me. The story meant exactly jack to me now, but I was a reporter. I relay the news. It was my job. Besides, it made no sense to worry them at this late date, especially since the worst of the ordeal was over with a week and a half ago. I lived. "I knew I was onto something when that taxi driver kidnapped me," I managed with that gung-ho grin still on my face, my voice reeking of confidence and modesty that I didn't even begin to feel.

We were in the office now, *he* passed me to stand against the wall, as was his habit, commenting with a fond grin. "Lois, you're terrific." His tone was warm and affectionate. I alternately wanted to throw myself into his arms and sob and find a Kryptonite dagger to bury in his chest, kill him where he stood. He knew the truth; knew what lay between us. God, why, why was I here? If I'm so damned terrific, why did you let me go? Why couldn't we work it out? Why didn't you tell me what you were going to do?! Why didn't I get a choice?

With an iron grip on my emotions, I summoned all the Lane charm I could muster and sauntered over to my customary perch on the edge of Perry's desk. I had read the article he'd written about his own vacation, a very sweet and nostalgic bit of fluff about his class reunion. Not his best work, but good enough for what it was. Sentimental pieces had never been his strong suit. Nevertheless, it was a way to keep myself reined in, even if it was a little acidic teasing. "I have to be. Seems I've got some new competition."

"What?" He seemed honestly surprised, confused... and a bit... something else.

"Your story on the high school reunion? I thought it was terrific." It was pushing it, but I was trying to keep myself from looking too deeply into his expression. That look in his eyes for a moment there... That was it; I needed to talk to him. I couldn't keep this up. We had to talk about this. I had to find an in to get him away. So much for patient nobility. Not even trusting what I said, I blurted out, "And fascinating. Especially the part about the little girl back home." I had only vaguely noticed that; his life before me was none of my business. I was far more concerned with his current state of being and where I was supposed to fit in now. If I was supposed to fit in at all. I just had to know, to understand. "Why don't I take you to lunch and you can tell me all about it?"

Then I saw it again, beneath the charming grin, that flicker. And my unease grew even stronger as I heard the door to Perry's office open and looked up. Moving toward them with a stack of papers was a pretty redhead and I immediately felt cold as 'Clark' turned that smile on this woman. She was beautiful in a bright and chipper sort of way, seeming to radiate sunshine

as she breezed into the room. I was still hoping to be proven wrong when I heard *him* say as if from a distance, "I'd love to, Lois, but today I'm having lunch with Mr. White's new secretary." The redhead smiled back at him as she handed the files to Perry. "Hi, Lana."

"Hi, Clark." The voice was soft, sweet. A perfect match for that face. In that moment, I hated her more than I had ever hated anyone in my life. More than Lex. More than Zod. More than Fate. Those green eyes, bright as emeralds, as they must be, flickered over me with distinct curiosity.

I guess it took Perry a minute to realize that we had never met because there was a moment of silence as I tried to absorb what was happening, what had possibly occurred while I was gone. Maybe he even noticed the tension in the air. Off-handedly, he made introductions as he read over the contents of the pages Little Miss Midwest had brought in without even looking up. And even before Perry said her name, I knew. "Oh, Lois. Say hello to Lana Lang, Smallville's newest gift to Metropolis."

"Oh?" The 'little girl back home'. The Cheerleader. His first love. The One That Got Away. Live and in color, working here at the *Planet*. I should have known, but I was always an idiot where he was concerned. And why exactly was she here, for that matter? I had a sneaking suspicion, but fought it. He wouldn't. Fighting a sudden rush of anger and humiliation despite myself, I let my gaze go from her to Clark and back, standing up as I tried to pretend I didn't feel stung.

Perry's words seemed to have affected her as well, especially since I saw her straighten and almost take on a protective stance. So she knew my name, did she? I resisted the urge to look at the man standing to my left again. Just what had he said? Or not said? That smile returned then, oppressively warm, and put out her hand with much purpose. "Pleased to meet you, Ms. Lane. I like your writing. A lot." The words seemed genuine, but almost forceful. As if daring me to doubt her sincerity.

Not willing to back down, I took her hand to shake it. And, all the while, I wanted to know what he had told her, if she knew what had happened between us and why he had told me he had left. In the same seemingly light tone, I replied, "Thanks." And then I really looked at her hand. Unable to help it, I felt another dagger of pain and fought a moment of panic. Struggling to keep my tone neutral, I forced out, "I like your sparkler. A lot."

I couldn't help the way my eyes widened as both the ring and her smug words combined into an almost physical punch to my heart. That diamond was huge, the implications clear. "Me, too. I couldn't believe it when Clark gave it to me," she'd gushed, glancing at Clark then with that sunbeam smile of hers. There were no words for how those words felt to me. It was worse than I had even let myself guess. I knew it couldn't be an engagement ring, it wouldn't have been announced this way, but something had happened while I had been dealing with the fallout of what happened between us in Bermuda. Something he had sworn would never happen. He had lied.

Before I could stop myself, before I remembered the secret I was hiding, I blurted out, "Clark gave it to you?" My eyes went from the rock to the man in the lousy gray serge suit, filled with disbelief, something dying inside me. He just smiled at me, just 'Clark Kent, Mild-Manner Farmboy Makes Good', so proud of himself for hooking the old hometown flame. How I hated him in that instant, how I wanted to yell at him for being such a liar right here in front of God and Perry. Let the biggest story of the century explode into a front-page exclusive before his eyes. The sudden pain was so strong; it was all I could do to dummy up. A part of me deep inside was screaming. No, he couldn't. His words. His mission. He couldn't.

Not after what he told me...

With that pert little cheerleader smile, so sure of herself, she speared me straight through the heart and slowly twisted the blade. "Yes," she replied in the tone of someone who has found that a priceless Faberge Egg has been thrown away with the misperception that it's simply for Easter.

Before I could even turn eyes on the man in question, Miss Henderson wheeled a machine into the room, crowing over this new automatic Jingo-Ball gizmo. I never really caught her blathering, still reeling from the way my entire mind-set had changed in a matter of minutes and that stupid lottery was absolutely the last thing on my mind. I couldn't believe anything he had said. It had only been two months since he had claimed that he had to belong to the world, not just one woman. Not just me. And now...

Finally I made myself look at this man I had made a fool of myself over and I knew that the anguish I felt was clear in my eyes as I did. I could only pray that it was only a fraction of the whole that showed. And then I noticed it. He wasn't looking at me; his eyes were locked on the Jingo machine that Perry and that nutcase from Features were going on about and *deliberately* not looking at me. Was it the fear of 'Clark' that I was mad about his being interested in another woman after his 'long-time crush' or did Kal-El, the man that had been my lover, feel the slightest twinge of guilt for having lied, even if I wasn't supposed to remember?

Suddenly, he looked up and met my eyes briefly as if feeling them on him, as if reading my thoughts. What he saw there seem to spook him. Badly. Mumbling the need to run some errands before lunch, 'Clark Kent' was gone before Perry could argue. I wasn't sure which was the stronger urge: the need to go after him and demand an answer or to let him go and try to get my emotions under control. Before I could do either, the machine started to make a deep grinding noise that distracted my inner maelstrom.

Knowing what was going to happen an instant before it did, I only had enough time to lean away before the top of the damned thing blew off at force. Amusingly enough, it flew straight in the redhead's direction, missing her by centimeters. I'm not sure how close it got to her, only heard a squeak like someone punting a small annoying dog. *Yip!* I knew he had to have heard the thing overheating, but had taken off because I had thrown him on how well his little trick had worked. And I'm not ashamed to say I had to hide a smile. *Smart man.*

Within seconds, shaken by The Amazing Flying Jingo Lid, Perry was bellowing out orders and I slipped away to my desk. Our desk. Still sick in stomach and in heart, it was almost more than I could bear. It was all I could do to boot up the computer and stare at the screen, using an iron will to keep from tearing up. How could you love and hate a man so much at the same time? I wanted to scream, cry, throw things, hit him and make him feel half as miserable as I felt. Make him know how it felt to see yourself as a mistake; an embarrassing and abysmal one night stand you thought could have been more. How could he not understand? And why did I still love him, the bastard? I had to choke back a sob. *Lane, you're an idiot, that's why.*

I was still staring half an hour later, lost in thought, when I heard a familiar voice behind me without warning. One with that nervous little undertone. "Lois, that was one heck of a look you gave me earlier. Are... are you mad at me or something?"

I felt my back tense. *This is it. Now or never. Let the anger go and remember what you once had or light him up and destroy everything here and now. Either way, he'll go on without you. He already has. At least this way, you can keep his secret, help him. You'll know, even if no one else does. It's not like bawling him out will change the past. Besides, do you really think that little farm girl will last long? Look what happened last time. Take your pick,*

Lane. What will it be?

Closing my eyes briefly, I slowly turned to look up at him, already knowing my answer.