

TOGOM for 2008

By Tank Wilson <tankw1@aol.com>

Rated PG

Submitted May, 2009

Summary: It's been four weeks since Clark's "death" at the hands of Clyde Barrow, and still Lois can't get past it. Can Superman help her come to terms with her Clark's death?

Lois Lane was dead. Not literally, but she might as well have been. Another heavy sigh escaped from her lips as Lois stared at her computer screen and the wretched prose that mocked her once again. It wasn't even a big story. She should have been able to knock off the page-three filler in her sleep. As it was, Perry would have to send it back to her to 'punch up'. It was crap, and she knew it was crap. In fact she hadn't written a decent story in over a month... and she couldn't make herself care.

It was no big secret as to the why. No mystery as to why the fire had gone out of Lois' writing. It was because her heart was no longer in it. Her heart had suffered a nearly mortal blow a little over four weeks ago. On that day Lois had lost something that she'd never thought she'd ever have or need. She'd lost her partner, and best friend, to the trigger happy actions of a reincarnated 30's gangster, Clyde Barrow.

Clark, being Clark, had interposed himself between her and another reborn criminal and had paid the ultimate price. John Dillinger had made a pass and grabbed at Lois. Clark had shoved him away and paid for his chivalry with his life. In a room full of shocked witnesses the hot-headed Barrow had pulled his revolver and fired three shots, point blank, into the broad chest of her partner. The thugs had pulled a hasty retreat, taking Clark's lifeless body with them. It had never been found.

Perry understood and had been cutting her quite a bit of slack over the past month, but she knew that he couldn't do that forever. Even his obvious affection for his favorite reporter wouldn't protect her for long if she couldn't produce. The Daily Planet still needed to put out an edition everyday, and it couldn't wait for Lois to 'get on with her life'.

The trouble was, she understood all this but just couldn't make herself do it. That night had turned out to be a tragic epiphany for Lois. They say you never know what you have until it's gone. The irony in that statement would make Lois laugh if it didn't hurt so much.

Clark Kent, the hack from Nowheresville, had not only become her partner but had become her best friend. He not only managed to worm his way into her life, but also into her heart. She had gotten used to having Clark in her life; so much so that she couldn't imagine it anymore without him.

No, she could imagine it. It would be like it had been before he'd arrived. No friends, no social life, no fun. Just work. Granted, it was a job she had loved, but all work and no play made Lois a dull girl. Clark had shown her that she could have more than just a successful career. She could have a friend. A friend who would show her that love was not just something for others. She could have it too, if she'd just reach out and take it.

But she hadn't done so... and now it was too late. She'd been blinded by the flash and celebrity of Superman, and Lex Luthor. She hadn't allowed herself to see that her best friend, the man who shared all her moods, whether good or bad, was the one that her heart had chosen. Her head just hadn't caught on to the fact until the option was no longer available. Now her other great love, her job, no longer seemed that important, or exciting.

Without Clark to share it with, her life seemed to have lost its color. She was now fated to live the rest of her life in shades of grey.

Clark was gone. She had gotten him killed. He was dead, and it was her fault.

She wanted to scream, to rail against the fates; to break down and cry till her eyes burned and hiccups made her sick. But she couldn't. She'd done all that, and there was no passion left in her to vent. All that remained was the dull ache in her heart. A pain she would keep with her forever.

With a sigh of resignation she made a couple of changes to her story. She was sure that Perry wouldn't be happy with the effort and would want to send it back to her for 'punching up'. But he'd have to accept or reject it as it was. She wasn't going to be around for him to find. She was tired, and she was going home.

With a mental shrug, she pushed the key which sent the weak story to her editor. Switching off her computer, she stood and quickly moved up the ramp to the elevator, and escape.

Minutes later Lois found herself out on the sidewalk in front of the Daily Planet. She didn't feel like driving home, so she began to walk. She just placed one foot in front of the other, not really engaging her brain. She just walked.

Several minutes later she was somewhat surprised to find that she hadn't been walking toward her apartment, but had actually gone in the opposite direction. She was now in Centennial Park. She let her footsteps continue to guide her destination. She wasn't surprised to find that she'd come to a particular park bench.

It was the bench where she sat when Clark professed his love for her. She'd rejected him that day. She'd even been cruel enough to ask him to pass a message on to Superman for her. She'd been stupid.

Lois sat and clasped her hands in front of her.

"I'm so sorry, Clark." A couple of tears rolled down her cheek. "I was wrong that day when you confessed your love, and I was wrong to drag you to your death at Georgie Hairdo's. It's my fault that you were there. Even though you cautioned me to the possible danger I had to run headlong into trouble, and you, being the wonderful friend and partner that you were, followed me there. Of course, I wasn't the one who had to pay for my impetuous actions. You were. You had to die to protect me from my own foolishness."

Lois sniffed back a few more tears. "Now I know what I have truly lost. Why was I so blind as to what was right in front of me? What am I, galactically stupid?"

She took a deep, shuddering breath. "I don't know if I can move past this, Clark. I've suffered loss before, but it was never like this. I've never missed anyone as much as I miss you." A bark of laughter, bordering on the hysterical, erupted from her. "God, am I pathetic or what? I have the most generous and compassionate guy as my partner and best friend and what do I do? I become the instrument of his death.

"I know you would forgive me because that's the kind of guy that you were. But I don't think I will be able to ever forgive myself. I'll carry this guilt in my heart until the day I die."

She wrung her hands repeatedly. "You know what was really stupid, Clark? I think I knew all along that you loved me, and it scared me. That's why I wouldn't let myself believe that I could love you back. Whenever Lois Lane fell in love it turned into a disaster and I couldn't let that happen to us. You were my... best... friend. I never really had a best friend before and I can't imagine that I ever will again.

"I'm sorry, but that's why I could never say it to you, Clark. Even if I knew it to be true in my heart of hearts, I just couldn't say it out loud." She wiped at her tears with the back of her sleeve. "Well, I'm saying it now; too little and too late, but I'm saying it nonetheless. I love you Clark Kent, and I always will."

Lois sat there on the hard bench, staring at her hands until a cooling breeze made her aware that night had fallen. The sun had disappeared behind the buildings to the west, and the lights in the park were beginning to turn themselves on.

She stood. It was time to go home. Maybe tomorrow she would feel like chasing down a juicy story... yeah, tomorrow.

Superman watched from high in the sky as Lois Lane slowly got up and began her walk to her apartment. He'd heard everything she'd said even though he was out of sight of a normal person. It wasn't like he was invading her privacy. He'd heard his name mentioned so he'd stopped his patrol and listened in on her sad and heartfelt emotions.

He had known that Lois was distraught over his 'death' and that she grieved for that loss deeper than might be expected from just a friend. Today the feelings that he suspected Lois might have harbored were verbalized.

What he hadn't known was that she carried such guilt within her. He hadn't known that she blamed herself for the death of Clark Kent. She mustn't. It wasn't her fault. It was purely the thug-like actions of the time-displaced gangsters that had resulted in the death of her partner. They were killers by nature. It didn't matter whether he and Lois had been there or not. Clyde had killed in the past and he was sure to have killed more if they hadn't been able to bring him and the others to justice.

But he couldn't let Lois continue to beat herself up, thinking she had killed her partner. He still thought it best that she didn't know that Clark Kent was Superman and as such hadn't really been killed. Because the truth was, for all intents and purposes, Clark Kent was dead. It would have been better for Lois to have grieved for her lost friend, then moved on with her life. She was young, vibrant, and brilliant still. She had every right to carve out a good life. Even if it had to be without him.

It wouldn't change things. There still would be no Clark Kent for Lois to partner with, but if knowing that she hadn't caused his death could offer her a small measure of comfort then he had to do it.

It was with no small measure of trepidation that the brightly clad hero sped off toward Lois Lane's apartment.

Lois trudged up the stairs to her floor. A minute later she was at her door, fumbling for the keys that would unlock the myriad of locks she had on her front door. It took a few extra moments but finally she was through the door and closing it behind her.

Immediately she could sense that she wasn't alone. There was someone in her apartment. She dropped her bag and looked for the bat she had gotten into the habit of keep near her front door. The smallest wooden bat leaned against the corner near the front closet. She had just wrapped her hands around the club when a familiar voice broke through her anxiousness.

"Lois?"

The curtains to the living room were closed, but she could still see the large silhouette of a man standing there. The head and shoulders were properly outlined, but the body seemed to widen out and had a wave movement to it. It only took an instant for her to realize that she was seeing a man in a cape.

"Superman?" She reached for the switch and flooded the entry with light. "What are you doing here?"

"I think we need to talk."

She walked into the living room and sat down on her couch. She faced the Man of Steel, who stood in the middle of the room. "What about?" She noticed that he seemed a bit ill at ease.

"About Clark Kent."

Lois' feeling of anxiety immediately came back. "What about Clark? I told you before that I don't blame you for not saving him. You can't be everywhere." It was true. She didn't blame Superman for not being there to save Clark. Not really. But she

had to wonder why he always seemed able to come to her rescue time and time again, yet the one time Clark needed him he wasn't there.

"I don't blame myself, but I've just become aware that you apparently do."

Lois turned her gaze to the floor, focusing on her feet. She began to wring her hands.

"Lois?" He reached down and tilted her chin up until their eyes locked. "It wasn't your fault."

Tears began to sneak from Lois' eyes as that evil night replayed itself again in her mind. In the past month, since that night, it had never been far from her thoughts. The thunder of the shots reverberated through her skull as Clark's slow motion fall to the floor repeated itself over and over again.

"Yes it was. He warned me that it could be dangerous but I didn't listen. I had to charge into the lion's den and Clark being who he was, followed obediently to his death."

"Lois, Clark was a grown man. He made his own decisions. If he went with you it was because he chose to do so." Superman gave her hand a squeeze. "It's not like it was the first time the two of you put yourselves in danger for the sake of a story."

She pulled her hand away from his. "Clark didn't have any choice, he loved me. Even if I wasn't worthy of that love he would have followed me into hell itself, because Clark's love was unconditional. Even if I was too stupid to see it. Even if I was too afraid to tell him how I really felt." Tears began to flow in earnest. "Perry once told me that Clark would walk on water for me... or die trying. Guess what, he never walked on water."

Superman reached out and recaptured her hands, holding them tight. "Yes, Clark loved you. But that doesn't change the facts. He chose to be there with you in case you ran into trouble. Do you honestly think that he would have let you go in alone? Clark was a reporter too. He may have worried about the possible danger but he knew that the two of you, together, would get the story. He chose to go with you that night because being with you is where he wanted to be."

Lois pushed against Clark's chest as she stood up and moved quickly to the opposite side of the room. "How do you know? You weren't there!"

"Yes I was." With a look of extreme sadness on his face, Superman began to spin. The bright blue and red blur changed color to more muted tones until the small whirlwind stopped.

Lois thought her brain was going to explode. "Clark?"

Shaking her head in denial, Lois couldn't look at her former partner as he stood, sans glasses, in a simple black T-shirt and blue jeans. She clenched her fists so hard that her nails inflicted little half moon cuts into her palms.

"I can't believe it." Her voice was barely a whisper, but of course, Clark could hear her.

"Is it really so hard to believe that Clark Kent was also Superman?"

Biting her lip, Lois shook her head. After taking a deep breath, she turned and faced him. "No, it's really not hard to believe. Actually, it makes a lot of sense. The running off with some flimsy excuse just before Superman shows up. The fact that you were always nearby whenever I needed to be rescued from my own impetuosity. Given the physical similarities which I must have been blind not to see makes me embarrassed not to have figured it out long ago. Doesn't say much for my crack investigative reporter skills."

Clark shrugged. "People see what they expect to see. But then, what is it that you can't believe?"

Tears still fell from her eyes but they were no longer tears of sadness. They were tears of hurt and anger. "I can't believe that someone who was supposed to be my best friend would do what you did to me. I can't believe that you let me think you were dead for all these weeks. Do you have any idea how devastated I was

by your death?" Lois began to pace and waved her hand in the air. "No, of course you didn't. Why else would you have put me through that torture just to protect your secret?"

She whirled and glared at him. "I was in love with you!"
"I didn't know."

She frowned as her anger cooled a tiny bit. "Okay, I'll grant you that I didn't really know myself until I had lost you. But you knew that I considered you my best friend. We were partners. You had to know how precious your friendship was to someone like me. Yet you didn't think I deserved to know that you weren't dead. That I hadn't been responsible for your death."

Clark walked over and grabbed Lois by the shoulders and gently led her back to the couch and sat her down. He sat down next to her and took a deep breath. "I'm not going to apologize for what I've done, or the decisions I've made. Honestly, the only reason I'm coming to you now and telling you that Superman was Clark Kent is because I overheard you in the park earlier this evening. I hadn't known that you blamed yourself for my death."

"My declaration of love for Clark had nothing to do with it?"

Clark had the decency to look embarrassed. "I'll admit that a part of me was thrilled by your words, but my rational mind quickly suppressed those thoughts. Actually it almost kept me away tonight."

"Why?"

"Because it just makes this whole thing harder; but I knew I couldn't let you continue to think that you were responsible for Clark's death. That responsibility lies solely with Clyde Barrow and he's now in prison."

Lois frowned. "Technically, Clyde isn't responsible either. You're not dead."

She watched as he reached over and took her hand once again. Her first impulse was to pull it back, but she didn't. She was hurt, and she was angry, but most of all she was confused. She didn't understand why it had come to this. Why he'd let her think he'd died when he hadn't. She couldn't believe that keeping his secret from her was so important that he'd let her suffer like she had.

"Now we come to the crux of the problem." He spoke in measured tones, but she could hear the disappointment and regret in his voice. "This body may not have been injured by the bullets fired from Barrow's gun, but Clark Kent is still very much dead."

Lois was beginning to get a very uncomfortable feeling. Clark continued to talk.

"There were dozens of witnesses that saw Clark Kent take three bullets to the chest from close range. All the papers reported on it the next morning. There was even a ceremony for me back in Smallville a few weeks ago."

"I know, I was there. I cried, and I never cry at funerals."

Clark just nodded. "What was I to do? I held out hope for a short time that I might think of some way to make a miraculous return. After all, a body was never found. I'd even entertained the notion that I could somehow use Prof. Hamilton's process to pretend to come back as a regenerated clone of myself."

"Why didn't you? That might have worked."

"There wasn't time. Hamilton was so distraught over what had happened that he'd immediately gone back to his lab and destroyed the machinery and burned all his notes. He wouldn't have been able to reproduce his work, even if he wanted to." Clark sighed. "I had to face the fact that Clark Kent was gone... which left only Superman."

Suddenly that nagging feeling in the back of her mind exploded into a blinding headache of revelation. Clark hadn't actually been killed that night, but he had, willingly, given up his life for her. True to his nature, he was there to protect her. Only he hadn't been able to change into the Spandex that time.

The heat of her anger had dampened, leaving only the ache of her constant depression. But she still was hurt that he hadn't told

her.

"I understand how you see the situation, and I can see how devastating this has been for you too, but I still don't understand why you didn't tell me."

Clark stood and walked over to the window and looked briefly out at the night lights of the city. He let the curtain fall back and then came back over to sit next to Lois. "Again, I don't apologize for what I did. It may have been wrong to think so, but I honestly felt that it would be for the best if you thought that Clark had died that night."

"What! Even if you thought that I only felt about you as a best friend, why would it be better if I thought you dead when you weren't?"

He held up his hand to forestall another outburst. "Hear me out." He paused and ran his hand through his hair. "First off, bottom line, Clark Kent for all intents and purposes is dead. He doesn't work at the Daily Planet anymore. He can't go to ballgames with Jimmy, or attend those crazy poker parties the third Tuesday of every month over at Perry's. He can't be your partner... and he can't be your best friend."

Lois chewed on her bottom lip, fighting to keep her cheeks dry. "That doesn't mean that it still wouldn't have been better to know."

"Think about it, Lois. You're still young, but I'm sure you've suffered the loss of a friend or a loved one before. Maybe a favorite aunt or a grandparent. We all have to go through it. Death and loss are a part of life. We grieve for a time, mourn their passing, then we place those good memories we have of them in a special place in our hearts and get on with our lives."

Lois could understand where Clark was coming from, and the rational part of her brain was nodding in agreement. But the emotional side of Lois Lane just couldn't accept the logic quite so easily.

"It's not the same."

"Not now it isn't, but it could have been... should have been. It's what I wanted for you. I wanted you to go through the normal process when someone close to you dies, then move on with your life." He reached out and briefly touched her cheek with the palm of his hand. "Lois, you are such a special person, you've earned the right to have a rich and fulfilling life. Maybe in time you could meet that someone who you would want to share your life with and have the love which you deserve. I had hoped against hope that one day that person could have been me. That's not possible now, but it could, and should, still happen for you. I thought that it would be easier to do that if you felt that Clark had been killed and was gone, just like that lost grandparent."

Lois allowed a little anger to refuel. "You thought; I should feel. Who are you to make those decisions for me? You had no right to decide for me that I'd be better off thinking you were dead then knowing the truth. How do you know how I'd feel?"

Clark stood up, his own manner taking on an air of heated frustration. "Because I know how I feel!" He clenched his hands several times. "Lois, I love you. I have since almost the first day I met you. My secret dream has always been that our friendship might grow into something more someday, but that dream died along with Clark Kent."

He began to pace about the room. Lois' eyes followed his movements, but her hands were busy twisting and shredding a Kleenex that she had suddenly procured without really knowing from where.

"Superman can't have a wife; he can't have a girlfriend; hell, he can't even have a best friend. It's too dangerous. Even when you claimed to be in love with Superman, I think you knew, deep down, that he could never have a serious relationship." Lois bit her bottom lip, but nodded. "Do you know how hard it is to see you nearly every day and not be able to marvel at how your mind works when we dig into a big story? Or how it feels to laugh with

you over the latest of Jimmy's silly antics? Do you know how hard it is to not be able to take your hand in mine; to touch you?"

Lois' mind had been feverishly processing his words but it was his body language, and the emotion behind those words, that was getting through to her. "I think I do now," she said.

Frowning, Clark nodded. "Considering what I overheard this evening, I suppose you might. But tell me, Lois, was I so wrong in trying to spare you all that?"

No, no he wasn't wrong, but she still couldn't say it. "Maybe, maybe not. But what about your parents? I'm sure they haven't had to give up their son because the rest of the world thinks he's dead."

"Haven't they? My parents live in a fairly remote spot out in the country; yet I still have to be extra careful when I go to see them. I can't be seen out in public with them, nor can I drop in unless I make sure that they don't have any guests. I can't stay too long, or wander out in the fields with my Dad for fear that someone might see me there, or decide to just drop in on them. It's hard on them, as it is on me, but it would be even harder to have some sort of secret relationship in a city the size of Metropolis."

"But not impossible." Lois knew from the look on his face that the idea had crossed his mind.

"Not impossible, but not desirable." His smile was a sad one. "Neither of us would find such an arrangement satisfying in any way. It would be too hard on both of us."

Lois wanted to shout out that it wouldn't be too hard. That they could make it work somehow. Seeing each other a little, in secret, would be preferable to not at all. But she couldn't bring herself to say it. As much as it hurt her to admit it, Clark was right. The situation he described wouldn't work for either of them.

"So what do we do now? Where does this leave us?"

Clark walked over toward the window and spun back into the suit. "Superman will be around when you need him, just like always. And if you should ever need to just talk about something, I'll try to be there for you also. Lois Lane's relationship with Superman need not be affected by the death of Clark Kent."

"So we're still friends; just not best friends anymore."

"I guess." He turned to the window. "Lois, I meant what I said. You need to push past this and get back into the flow of your life. You're still the best investigative reporter in this city and the Pulitzer waits for no man or woman." He lifted the sash on her window and scanned the surrounding neighborhood. "If you need anything just... well, you know the drill."

It hurt to do so, but she gave him a warm smile. "Yeah, I know... thanks."

A gust of wind ruffled her hair and he was gone. She walked up to the window and peered out into the blackness, but he was already out of sight. She closed the window and pulled the curtain shut.

"I'm Superman's 'friend'." She made the sign of quotations with her fingers. "Whoopee."

Fin.