

Courage

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Rated: G

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Summary: Clark Kent is dead... blending elements of TOGOM and mixed bits of Superman canon, here's a new twist on an old tale...

Author's Note:

This story, though complete for the Lois & Clark arc, is part of a larger piece that I'm working on. My idea is that a graduate student (Abbey) who is searching for her own answers about love and life, gets a letter telling her that the great heroes of literature are missing from the pages of the world's books and that she has the ability to set things to rights. Each story has a virtue that must be regained as the hero and heroine find each other once more. I'm still shaky on the why the heroes go missing and I'm wondering if I'm stealing too much from great stories... but it's just an interesting premise I thought I'd try. Anyway, I started out with lofty love stories which are mentioned in this story like Wuthering Heights and Gone with the Wind. But I've been on a Superman kick lately, and thought, why not? Once I started writing it, it took off and I was helpless to stop it! So, without further ado...

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Key:

««thoughts»»

((outside of Abbey's immediate experience; implied that she's reading the events))

Abbey saw a comic book peeking out from under James' papers. A slow smile crept over her face. ««So the bookish man also likes the simpler things in life.»» She pulled it out thinking about the stress of the last few days, the bizarre events and the satisfying endings that were beginning to show their original story lines in the pages of the books around her. Slowly, she was finding the pieces to the puzzles, bringing each character back into sync with his or her prewritten history. Maybe a comic book was the diversion she needed.

She laughed softly to herself. It was a Superman comic book. Her little brother had loved Superman growing up, and she had secretly always had a thing for the big guy. But her smile faded as she read the title, "A World Without Superman." ««Oh, no, not him too...»»

Abbey opened the first page, fearing it would be like the other books, sans one of the most iconic heroes of all and with a heroine bereft. She felt the inevitable transformation as she began to read.

"Lois Lane sat at her desk, certain she had a Pulitzer Prize winning story..."

Superman

The colors blurred into garish reds, blues, and greens around Abbey. Ink seemed smeared into everything, a waxy sheen with shaded dapples of ink as the streets of Metropolis took shape around her. It felt like New York, yet brighter, more alive,

humming with an innocence that the Big Apple had lost long ago. Abbey walked inevitably towards the globe of the Daily Planet. She didn't know what she had to do, but she knew who she needed to find: Lois Lane.

As the elevator climbed to the third floor news room, the paints seemed to dry, and the world around her began looking real again. The building was still dated, a classic from the thirties, but it was solid in its own reality, and almost looked brand new. Abbey wasn't in a comic book anymore... it was a real place, with real people.

Abbey walked towards the bull pen, stunned. She had never seen such productivity. Copy boys racing here and there, Perry White, editor-in-chief, screaming orders, "Two more hours till the paper gets put to bed, people! Lois, how's that cover story coming?"

"I'm almost done, Chief," Lois said, not looking up from her typewriter. Abbey watched Metropolis' famed reporter doing what she did best.

Lois Lane's sleek black hair swished as she shuffled through her notes, making small piles on her desk. "Jimmy! I need that report on the series we did last fall about the Chilean drug cartel. Hurry! I'm putting the finishing touches on here, and Perry needs my copy!"

"I'm on it!" called Jimmy, an eager young man, waving his work-in-progress folder.

Abbey watched closely. Lois, she knew from pop culture, was a driven journalist, and Abbey saw the evidence of it in her every movement. Lois was professional, polished, and looked like she could steam-roll anyone who got in her way or caught her in a bad moment. When she had looked up again for Jimmy, Abbey caught an intense fire in her eyes, though dark circles where there as well as a clenched jaw.

There was so much going on in the newsroom that Abbey could wander and investigate a little before talking to Lois. She wasn't sure what she'd say yet, anyway. Abbey noticed an empty desk across from where Lane sat. It should be Clark Kent's desk.

Abbey's eye then caught a series of framed stories on the far wall. They were award-winning front page stories, the pride of the Daily Planet mostly written by Lois Lane and more than half were about Superman.

««So he's here. He's somewhere in the story! Then it was Clark Kent who I needed to find. Maybe this won't be so hard after all...»»

Abbey thought a moment through the Superman canon that she knew, trying to piece together the puzzle a bit more. She looked back at Lois. This wasn't a comic book, all these people looked very real. A memory triggered... she remembered a television show that had been on in the nineties about Lois and Clark. Was that the world she had somehow got caught up in? Though as she looked around, she noticed the setting wasn't the nineties. Lois was wearing a navy blue suit, which would be classic in any era, but the line on the back of her stockings and the shape of her heels, and her makeup, all bespoke an earlier era.... Abbey turned back to the articles, studying the years. 1938, 1939.... The thirties! When the original Superman comic books took place! But being reminded of the television show oddly made Abbey's goal much clearer. Lois was meant to be with Clark, not Superman. That was the great love in the Superman story: Lois and Clark's love, not Lois and Superman's.

Abbey sighed. ««So who will I need to look for first? Clark Kent or Superman? »» In the other stories, the hero had been lost, absent from the world they were supposed to live in entirely. She thought this case might be even more complicated because of the dual identity thing. But one thing was for certain, Lois needed her Clark much more than she needed her Superman.

Abbey wandered back over to the award-winning stories. She looked for a Clark Kent byline, but didn't see one anywhere.

Wait, there was one...

"Can I help you?" Lois came up behind her, making her jump out of her skin. Lois was on her way to Perry's office, and had no time for lost tourists, but didn't want anyone nosing around where they shouldn't be either. That was her job. "The last tour group left over an hour ago, and we have a paper to finish..."

"Oh, no! That's not why I--why I am here," Abbey thought quickly. She had to think of something to get Lane interested in her enough to talk to her. Abbey gestured to the articles about Superman. "I'm just finishing school--college--in journalism," she lied, glibly. "And I'm a huge admirer of your work. I know you are a very busy woman, but I was just wondering if I could maybe ask you a few questions over lunch tomorrow?"

Lois was flattered, if a bit annoyed. Most young grad students were too scared of Mad Dog Lane to even dare ask to meet with her. And it had taken gumption to just walk into the news room and ask her. And if there was one thing Lois could respect, it was gumption.

She sighed. "Be here at 11:45 sharp, tomorrow morning. I'll have fifteen minutes before I need to leave for a press conference. Don't be late. And bring me a cream cheese bagel!"

With that, Lois sped away, making a beeline for Perry's office. "Here you go, Chief..."

Abbey watched Lois from across the street as she left the Planet. Lois was about to hail a cab, but thought better of it for some reason. She seemed to sigh, and started walking up the street, away from the busy downtown area. Abbey decided to follow her. She needed to learn as much about Lois Lane as she could before she met with her tomorrow.

Abbey followed Lois discreetly as she cut through Centennial Park. Lois didn't seem to be aiming towards home. In fact, she was just sort of dejectedly wandering. After a hard day at work, maybe Lois just didn't know how to wind down, so this was what she did.

At last she sat down on a bench. Abbey sat on a bench behind a bush behind Lois and spied on her. As she watched, she suddenly felt like the worst kind of voyeur. Lois was hurting deeply, and she needed a friend, not a spy.

Lois sighed painfully, and then started to feel the welling up of the hurt that she'd been trying to mask for the last three months. She knew if she said his name, all hell would break loose and she'd never be able to stop crying. But not saying it... that seemed a worse crime against him, against what he meant to her.

"Clark..." she said brokenly, her heartbreak caught up in a single sob as she at last said the name that haunted her, broke her heart, and gave her solace.

"Oh God, Clark! Three months! It's been three months, and it still hurts like yesterday!" Lois cried, giving into the tears that she thought might never stop.

Abbey wanted to say something, to try and comfort her, but she knew she couldn't. She had already presented herself as an admiring up-and-coming journalist, and to try and talk to Lois now would only be humiliating for Lois, who Abbey was sure, wouldn't want the world to know the depths of her feelings, to have to explain why she was in this terrible state of emotion. Best to save her questions for tomorrow morning.

After a few painful minutes, Lois eventually calmed down a bit. She seemed to be in a struggle with herself, needing to mourn, yet feeling foolish about doing it here in a public park.

"Get a hold of yourself, Lois!" she chastised herself. She smoothed her dress suit, and stood up. With a deep, steady breathing, she slowly made her way home.

Abbey watched, not wanting to spy further. She knew what questions she needed to ask tomorrow. She just hoped Lois Lane would be up for them.

Time moved strangely when you were stuck in a story. The mundane passing of time didn't exist, only the crucial moments, the moments that moved the story along. You would feel the definitive ending of one chapter, and as if someone turned the page, you'd suddenly be in another moment entirely. There was a pacing to your life. Momentum that often slowed or sped up in real life, had in a story an inevitability and inescapable timing to it. You couldn't hide from it, you couldn't sleep unless it was part of the plot, you didn't eat unless it added to the story. But you were never overly hungry, and only appropriately tired or restless, according to your character and place in the story.

But when you weren't part of the story, when you were part of the warped dimension that Abbey had found herself, you felt more or less tugged and pulled in directions that were unnatural. You felt the missing moments of having not eaten or not slept, as you were catapulted into your next crucial moment, the moment that the literary fates had decided you needed to be included in to help right the wrongs of a world gone topsy-turvy.

Thus Abbey was suddenly back at the Daily Planet, the next day with a bag in her hand containing a cream cheese bagel, and no recollection of how she had gotten there. Thank God she remembered why.

It was exactly 11:40, and Lois, looking impeccable yet busy as a tornado, didn't seem to remember their fifteen-minute interview. Abbey walked over to her desk, with confidence she didn't feel, and laid the bagel on Lois' desk.

"Hello, Miss Lane. Here's the bagel, as promised." She smiled sweetly, hoping to gain favor.

Lois looked up, momentarily forgetting who the girl was, but the bagel reminded her. She liked this girl for some reason, so she decided to give her a break. "I'll be right back."

As Lois went to talk with Perry a moment, Abbey panicked a bit as she realized she had nothing to write with. A world-class journalist like Lois Lane would not appreciate the slight. So Abbey surreptitiously went through Lois' desk drawers, finding a stack of small writing tablets in the second. ««She won't notice if I take one, right?»» And then she leaned over to grab a pencil. She really only had two questions for Lois, but knew she'd have to make it look like she was more interested in the reporter than the reporter's love life.

In ten minutes, Lois came back, graciously apologizing. She could be magnanimous at times, and Abbey felt the intensity of this woman's spirit with a jolt. ««Well, I suppose she'd have to be pretty special to snag Clark Kent/Superman.»»

"So, what would you like to ask me?" Lois asked, spreading her hands out in a gesture of openness. Abbey studied her, noticing how well she hid the pain Abbey had learned was just under the surface.

Abbey dove in, and started asking typical interview questions. How long had you wanted to be a reporter? All my life. What did it feel like to break open your first story? Exhilarating. Actually, every time feels like the first time. It's a bit like a drug, I guess. How long have you worked for the Planet? Six years, this May.

««... and now for the hard questions... ease into them, maybe she'll be caught off guard...»»

"I noticed you write a lot of articles about Superman. Do you see him often when working on stories?"

"Superman?" ««Gotcha.»» "Um, well, I used to see him a lot. He's --well, he's a friend. But he's... well, he's been busy elsewhere, a lot lately. For about the last three months, I haven't seen much of him at all."

Three months. The same length of time that Clark had been gone. Abbey looked carefully at Lois. Superman's slowdown of appearances in Metropolis obviously affected her. Lois seemed to take it personally. Abbey sighed, wondering what happened between them that Clark felt he had to disappear and would leave

Lois so alone, yet still in contact with Superman. She then wondered about the encounters Lois had had with Superman since Clark's disappearance.

"What has Superman been like when you've seen him recently?" Abbey tried.

Lois shifted uncomfortably. She knew the world knew she was friends with Superman. And this young girl's questions weren't over the line. But she also knew that Superman had been more distant with her than ever before, never coming to her apartment to check on her. Never staying long when he rescued her. He barely looked at her anymore. And it hurt. A lot.

"Well, he's been really busy. Last I saw him was almost three and a half weeks ago...But there's the War going on in Europe, and so he's been flying back and forth between there and here, and there's just not much going on here in Metropolis these days..." she went on, the famous Lois Lane babble.

So Abbey snuck in half of the one question that she was terrified to ask, but needed to find out more about.

"Did you work with Clark Kent?"

This stopped the babbling Lois. She suddenly had a very haunted look in her eyes. Her mouth made an "o" shape, giving her the look of a frightened child. But she straightened up, ever the professional, and tried to answer the girl's question.

"Y-yes. I did. He... was killed," Lois got out, proud of herself for not losing it right then and there.

And here it was. THE question, the one she really hoped Lois could answer above the others. ««Hold it together, Miss Lane. I'll find him for you.»» "How?"

Lois looked up at the ceiling, a movement to try and keep the tears from falling. She sighed and then turned her glassy eyes on Abbey. "He was shot. By some gangsters. Three months ago," Lois whispered.

Abbey decided to let her off the hook. That was enough to go on for now. She reached out her hand, offering what comfort she could. Lois took it, and tried to smile.

"Thank you, Miss Lane. And... I'm sorry about your partner."

((He could see her. He could hear her heartbeat. He could smell her. But he couldn't touch her, not really, and he barely dared to speak to her, lest the awful truth come tumbling out of his lips, unbidden by his mind.

He hovered outside her window, wanting more than anything to knock on it. Knowing she'd let him in, yet knowing he wouldn't know what to say. Because he didn't want to be there as Superman. He wanted to sit on the sofa next to her as Clark. Share a pizza, have a laugh, go over notes for a story. But that chapter had closed. Clark Kent was dead to the world, and dead to Lois Lane.

He sighed heavily, remembering seeing her grieve, his secret the only thing keeping him from sweeping her into his arms, covering her face with tender kisses. With every feat of strength, every flight, every powerful moment of being Superman, he wanted to scream to her, "I'm alive! I'm here! I'm Clark! And I need you!" But as time passed, it simply became harder and harder to find a way to resurrect Clark. And so, he drifted away from her, as best he could. Still her protector when absolutely needed, but always a distant angel, an untouchable hero that she could never know held the heart of a man desperately in love with her.

A dream... Floating high in the air, clouds like gentle waves in the ocean. The sun a beacon of energy, of life. A whistle of wind, the hum of the atmosphere in its tenuous hold, bound just barely by gravity. But he was not. Higher than the birds, higher than planes, a soul free and unbound, yet captive by circumstance and his own fear.

At last he landed, in an icy, wintry place. A place as cold and lonely as his heart had become since Clark Kent died. His

'Fortress of Solitude,' a mockery of a safe place he had built with his father as a child. This was true solitude, and the fortress had been built around his heart.

The wind howled, carrying with it the loneliness of the miles of empty winter. Not even animals lived this far north.

The Man of Steel sat down gracefully, looking like the superhero, yet feeling shattered in his skin. His cape was the only whisper of protection around him, a garment sewn by his mother, a symbolic memory of another life. All that he stood for felt empty; the cardboard hero was all that he was now. Clark was dead... though memories lived in his mind. And love beat in his heart, no matter how thick an icy layer he tried to build there. Because she was there.

Like his name had been on her lips, a prayer, a supplication, a painful balm that cut and healed at once, he spoke hers.

"Lois...")

Abbey awoke, finding herself back in Dublin, back in the cozy bed and breakfast James had set up for her. She was surprised to find her cheeks wet with tears. She had felt all that Clark felt, and it shook her to the core. He felt empty, alone, and she knew Lois felt the same way. They were two halves of the same whole, and the separation was keenly felt. Time was spinning out of control for these two, as each tumbled faster and deeper into despair. She had to bring them together and have each see what they meant to the other. The rest would fall into place.

As the dream of Superman still shook her, she tried to look for clues for how to piece them back together. What was it each was missing, besides each other? She thought about Clark, his love for Lois was strong, but had he forgotten who he was? He was living in an icy fortress, in the middle of nowhere. A cold, heartless place, the very opposite of Clark's warm personality. And he was hiding. From himself, from Lois, from his parents, and the people of Metropolis who needed him. Had Superman become a coward?

Abbey was standing in Perry's office, feeling like she had just completed an interview. Perry reached to shake her hand.

"Welcome to the team, Abbey Meadows. Jimmy here will show you around until you get your feet wet."

Jimmy, the young man Abbey had seen yesterday, gave her a winning smile. He seemed a sweet guy, if a little over-enthusiastic. She let herself be led out of the office for Jimmy to begin showing her the ropes.

She tried to concentrate on what he was saying, but she was distracted by her mission. The pieces had come together as she had mulled over her vivid dream of Superman. Lois could bring him back, and Abbey thought she knew how. She desperately needed to talk to Lois again, and thought running errands around the office wasn't going to afford her many chances.

Suddenly, Lois was walking up to them, intent on the coffee machine nearby.

"So, I see you got the new intern position. Congratulations, Abbey."

"Thank you, Miss Lane," Abbey said, her mind clicking ahead, looking for a way to get Lois to talk to her more privately.

"Uh, Miss Lane?" Abbey began, "Could I---well, I started my report for class last night, and I had just a few more questions---"

"Leave them on my desk. I don't really have time for much today," Lois looked away, gesturing vaguely in the direction of her desk, as her cheeks flamed slightly in memory of how pointed the girl's questions had been yesterday.

"Miss Lane. Actually, I had an idea. It's about Superman."

That got her attention. Lois considered a moment.

"What about Superman?"

"I think I have an idea how to--bring him back to Metropolis. On a more permanent basis."

Lois was intrigued, if annoyed. Everyone knew Superman was strictly her territory. But she had run the well dry of ideas on how to catch his attention the last few months, short of throwing herself off a building, which she just wasn't inclined to do, no matter how upset she got. And without Clark there---well, Superman's abandonment of her had been almost too much to bear.

"Jimmy, I'm going to steal your new trainee for a minute," said Lois, grabbing Abbey's arm and steering her to her desk.

"No problem, Lois."

Abbey sat down, facing Lois.

"OK, out with it. What do you got?" Lois asked bluntly.

Abbey sighed. How to explain without saying too much?

"I think... I think Superman is feeling dejected, feeling like he's not needed in Metropolis so much anymore."

"Not needed! Surely he *knows* he's needed!" scoffed Lois.

"Does he? You said yourself he's been in Europe a lot. You know about some of the horrors going on there. Maybe they are having an effect on him. I mean, I don't think Superman needs accolades and keys to the city, but I think a reminder about what he means to us wouldn't come amiss. L--Miss Lane, *you* are the only one who can help him."

"Me?" Lois asked. "How?"

Abbey could see the question had been swimming in Lois' head for a while now. Lois had undoubtedly and unsuccessfully tried numerous times to recapture Superman's attention.

"By telling him what he means to us. To you."

Lois laughed a bit bitterly, though quickly recovered. "I barely talk to him anymore. I hardly think---"

Abbey gestured to Lois' typewriter.

"Then write it. Write the best story about Superman that you can write. Tell him what he means to everyone. I think he needs it more than ever. Have the courage to write the story. Bring him home, Miss Lane. I know you can."

((Lois sat in the quiet newsroom. All day long Abbey's suggestion lingered in her mind, whether she wanted it or not. Could she do it? Did she have the power to bring Superman back to Metropolis, back to her? Would he care what she wrote?)

She had felt completely rejected by Superman, and she had never needed him more than when after Clark died. But she still believed in him, she had to. Even though she rarely saw him, rarely could speak to him anymore, he was still a symbol of goodness that was desperately needed, and he meant a lot to her. She felt she and Superman had a special connection. She couldn't explain it or label it, but she believed in it utterly. And maybe that connection would make him realize just how much she missed him and how much Metropolis needed him.

It was late when she finally sat down to write it, nearly midnight. But she knew she had to write this alone, with no distractions. This might well be the most important story of her life.

A World Without Superman

By Lois Lane

"Superman came to our fair city a few short years ago, a stranger who quickly became a true friend and hero. We were all amazed by his strength, his abilities, but mostly by his feats of character and courage. The strongest man on the planet is also the gentlest of souls, the most compassionate among us. Now, while the world is torn apart by war and uncertainty, we need our hero more than ever, and I believe, he needs us. The ideals that Superman represent are the ideals we all strive for, in everyday efforts to make the world a better place. Truth, justice---these, along with his heart, his quiet strength, his fortitude, his grace, show us what it is to be good to one another, to always strive for a better tomorrow. His courage shores us up when we think the world is ending, his impossible feats are a beacon for believing

anything can happen. But more than that, Superman is kindness, generosity, and always there when you need him. I know the truth of his kindness, the courage of Superman because again and again he's rescued me from danger and from despair. He's been a friend to this city, a friend to me, asking for nothing in return but acceptance. Superman needs us to believe in him, accept him as a man, a man with extraordinary gifts, but a man nonetheless who needs friends and a community to support him. A world without Superman would be the darkest of places, with no light, and no hope in miracles. Superman, we need you to come back home, back to Metropolis. Back to us."

««Back to me,»» she finished quietly to herself. Lois sat back from her typewriter, stretching a bit. She didn't think it was the best story she'd ever written, but it was the truth. Usually she wrote to take down villains, and here, she had set herself out to build up a hero. As clear as she could make it, it was true, and she hoped that Abbey was right, that having had the courage to write it would bring Superman back home.))

"A Kerth award? And maybe talk of a *Pulitzer*?" Lois stuttered two weeks later into the telephone. She nodded a few more times, a shocked look on her face. "Thank you.... OK. Yes, I will."

She hung up the phone and looked around. Her eyes caught Abbey's and she waved for her to come over.

"Yes, Miss Lane?"

"Well, your idea hasn't brought Superman back, but I've just been nominated for a Kerth, and they are saying my name's on the list for possible Pulitzer nominations!"

Lois looked so happy, happier than anyone had seen her in months. Abbey wanted to rejoice with her, but the article hadn't had the intended effect. It was supposed to make Superman--- *Clark* swoop down and realize he couldn't live without Lois! So it was good news, it just wasn't great news.

But she faked along anyway, "That's wonderful, Miss Lane! Congratulations!"

Perry heard Lois' shrieks of joy from his office. He hadn't heard her do that since Clark was--- well, he had to find out what made her so happy.

As soon as she saw him, Lois was out of her chair with her arms around Perry.

"I did it! I'm nominated for a Kerth, and may even get a *Pulitzer*? I can't believe it!"

"Aw, that's wonderful, honey! For which story? Luthor's return from the dead? Taking down the Church group?"

"No," Lois said, calming down a bit. "The Superman editorial. 'A World Without Superman'."

Perry smiled kindly. "Good, I'm glad, honey."

((Lois sat on the sofa, curled up re-reading her Kerth Award-nominated story. She was still proud of it, even though it didn't get the Pulitzer nomination she was hoping for. Pulitzers were reserved for miracle workers, she supposed. And since her article hadn't made Superman magically reappear...well, there was always next year. Clark would have still been proud, though... As she read the article, enjoying her lofty phrases and confirming their rightness in her mind, her thoughts drifted to Clark. She wanted to concentrate on Superman, as if she could conjure him up from the abyss of wherever he had gone, but Clark came unbidden to her mind instead.

««He had been a lot like Superman in his ideals.»» Clark had been always striving for truth and justice. She felt the tears well up in her eyes, as she always did when she thought of her dead partner. He had been the best man she knew. Besides Superman. Yet, they were so similar--

Lois sat up, her eyes suddenly dry. She looked again at the archived photo in her article of Superman, in semi-profile. Most

of the photos owned by the Planet were with Superman in action, doing some amazing feat. This one was a candid photo she had managed to talk him into for Jimmy. It was the only one the Planet had of him, relaxed and close-up. That smile looked so familiar-- on someone else... ««I must be dreaming. I want him back so much that I will believe anything.»» Still, the reporter's instinct was a hard one to kill. She couldn't resist digging out the photo of Clark she had buried after it became too painful to look at on a daily basis. Her sniffles turned into a stunned choke.

They looked so much alike... exactly alike! She had never seen them together, and with their photos side by side, the resemblance was uncanny.

««No, no, this can't be! He wouldn't do this to me! He wouldn't!»»

All Lois could do was stare at the two photos. Was her mild-mannered best friend really Superman? And if it was true, *where was he?*)

Abbey was back in Ireland. A piece of the puzzle was in place. ««Lois knows, or at least suspects.»» Is she supposed to know? Not that it hadn't been done in the Superman story before, but she couldn't decide if Lois knowing Clark's secret was a bringing together of the story or more unraveling of their story in the wrong direction. Could the revelation bring them together, or would it drive the wedge between them even further?

Again she tried to think about her limited Superman knowledge. Was this a good thing? She remembered the old eighties movies, with Christopher Reeve. In those Lois would find out, but then 'forget' after being kissed by Superman or some such nonsense. Would that happen here? *Should* that happen?

She thought of what she knew of Lois from her interactions with her. This Lois seemed made of sterner stuff than a comic cut-out or doe-eyed damsel in distress. This might be Lois' greatest test on the road to her true love, and if she came out of it, if they both came out of it, it would make their love more binding and stronger. If they passed this test, then maybe Lois and Clark's story would be lasting and eternal, forever freeing it from campy comics and caricature, to live instead with the greatest love stories ever told.

Lois got to the Planet early the next day. When Abbey arrived, Lois had already drunk half the coffee canister and was asking for someone to brew some more.

««What was she up to?»» Abbey wondered.

She peered at Lois' desk, trying not to be obvious. Lois had a stack of archived photos of Superman on her desk, and the last two stories she had written about him before her editorial. Lois kept looking at the pictures, sighing with frustration, and then looking over at Clark's desk.

"It can't be true," Lois whispered to the empty desk. Then looking back at the picture of Superman, "Can it?"

««Poor Lois, she's driving herself crazy.»» Abbey knew Lois needed absolute, irrefutable truth. She was terrified to believe the proof under her nose, because it would mean that the man she loved had truly abandoned her. Abbey could understand her not wanting to accept that, and knew that if Lois was persistent enough, she wouldn't have to. But first she needed to get Lois and Superman in the same room together. Otherwise, Lois would never believe it, Clark would truly be gone, and their love story would simply disappear into oblivion. Abbey couldn't let that happen.

"Have you tried to contact him?" Abbey asked.

Lois flashed angry eyes at Abbey. "This is none of your affair, Abbey. I'm sorry. Please, I appreciate your help, but this is my business."

Abbey nodded, backing away. Abbey couldn't confirm for her what she already knew. Superman's identity was a well-kept

secret in this world, not a part of pop-culture that everyone knew about. Abbey had to play that role, and simply be there to support Lois moving in the right direction.

"I'm sorry, Miss Lane. I didn't mean to pry. I just hope... I hope you find what you're looking for."

The Kerth Award ceremony was three days later. Abbey was invited and ended up going with Jimmy, as his casual date. Abbey had asked Lois if she had a date, out of pure curiosity. Lois had shaken her head, a determined glare in her eyes, and said no, but it didn't matter.

The black-tie affair was held at the Weston Hotel on the Upper West Side, a posh area near the opera house. The nominees all arrived by limo. The Daily Planet employees, minus the star of the evening, all waited outside to take photos along with the other journalists who were assigned to cover the ceremony.

Lois arrived, wearing a floor-length black satin dress that fit her elegantly, with a swag that ran from shoulder to shoulder, giving her a look of modest elegance. Her hair was swept up and two large diamond studs shimmered on her ears. She was glowing. Only those who knew her saw her looking around, sometimes slightly up, as if she expected to see something---or *someone*---land nearby. One last look was sent skyward as Perry led her into the dining room.

"You look fantastic, Lois. I wish, well. If Cla---"

She stopped him. "Don't say it, Perry."

She seemed slightly angry and frustrated by the almost-mention of Clark's name, and Perry couldn't fathom why. Maybe it was a mistake on his part. Maybe it was still too soon for her...

The dinner was four courses, the Writer's Guild having spared no expense. They had hired a French chef who worked in a three star restaurant in Nice, and his culinary palette was sheer perfection.

At last it came time for the award ceremony. Lois tried to be excited for the other writers around her, tried to be supportive of colleagues, but all she could think about was her award.

Finally, her moment came

"...and the winner for Outstanding Editorial by a Staff Writer goes to... Lois Lane of the Daily Planet, for a 'A World Without Superman!'"

Lois beamed as she made her way to the podium. She was thrilled to win, that was evident, but it was a bittersweet win. She had meant what she wrote and still believed the man had those qualities within him. But his betrayal cut her to the core. He had let her suffer so deeply, and hadn't cared.

After hours of poring over photos of Clark and Superman, she finally had given in to the truth. They were one and the same and he had lied to her, let her suffer inconsolably, when just the simple truth would have been all she needed to make her world right. ««Was his secret so much more important to him than my broken heart?»»

Lois stood at the podium, bright lights in her eyes, and prepared to speak as she accepted her award. ««I still believe he's good, that he stands for good things. No matter what lies between us, the world *does* need Superman.»»

"My article was written in the hopes of bringing back a hero to us. A hero who has lost his way, maybe because of the War, maybe because of circumstance, maybe because..." ««of me»» "...of things beyond his control. The words I wrote were the truth, and I only hope that someday, somehow, they might reach the man---"

She stopped. Through the haze of lights, she thought she saw a flutter of red on the balcony. ««It's got to be the curtains. It can't be... him.»»

She struggled to finish, her heart in her throat. She had to get off this stage and investigate. It was only curtains fluttering in the wind, she was sure, but still. If he were here!

"...that they might reach the Man of Steel and let him know what he means to us. Thank you."

It took all she had to stay on that stage as photographers took her picture, asking her to stay a moment more for just a few more pictures. It seemed an eternity, but at last she was free of the stage. She didn't care what people thought---let them think she was overheated from the lights or something. She made her way to the balcony.

((The air was cool on her shoulders, her crystal award turning into ice in her fingers on the chilly balcony. She looked left, right... She sighed. It had only been the curtains after all. He wasn't here.

Then, another flutter, behind her.

She turned and faced him. He who haunted her and left her bereft. He who had her heart irrevocably whether she wanted him to have it or not, free to break it or cherish it as he chose.

All she could do was stare, her eyes filling with tears and her heart pounding. She was torn between anger, relief, hurt...and love.

She couldn't say his name, for she didn't know which name would come to her lips. She started to speak, helpless where to begin, but desperate to say something.

"Lois, we need to talk," he eventually spoke for her, seeing her war with herself. He could see conflict in her eyes, tell by her erratic heartbeat, that if she didn't know the truth, she was very close to it, and it was about to tear her apart.

"But not here. May I?" he came down to her, opening his arms for her to come to him.

She couldn't stop herself. To be held by him again, despite the pain of betrayal, was what she needed more than anything. She couldn't refuse.

Silently, still not trusting herself to say anything yet, she nodded, letting him lift her and carry her off the terrace.))

The audience at the Kerth Awards watched the action on the balcony in hushed silence. Lois Lane had done it. She had brought Superman back. Abbey smiled and took another glass of champagne...

((They were flying over the city, quietly, not saying a word.

Lois was afraid to breathe. Afraid it was all a dream that would vanish if she moved. She felt so many emotions at once, and the flight over the city, in his arms and away from the world, only made the war within herself more confusing. To be held by him again, knowing his secret, was painful and amazing at once. Clark wasn't dead. He was here... he was *Superman*---the implications of that betrayal had barely sunk in yet. Why was he here now? Maybe he had come to say good-bye, finally and properly. She suddenly clung tighter. ««Don't abandon me, again,»» she silently pleaded. ««I won't survive it.»»

Clark looked down at Lois in his arms. She wasn't looking at him; she held herself tensely in his arms. He couldn't fathom what was going through her mind, but to hold her again, no matter what lay before them, was what his soul needed. She was the balm his heart had craved in his lonely fortress. He knew what he had done to her, done to them, and he hoped that it wasn't too late. That maybe, she would understand if he told her everything and together they could find a way to right his mistakes, the results of his cowardice.

At last they touched down at her apartment.

"May I come in?" he asked, too politely.

She nodded. Once she touched solid earth again, could step away from him, all her emotions came to the surface. She felt like she was going to explode any second, but at least she'd be home where she could dive into her chocolate ice cream and cozy robes after.

At last they were inside. Lois braced herself while Clark just

watched her. Drinking in everything about her, yet wary of her as if she were a wild animal.

She turned away from him, the lines of her back eloquent in restrained emotion. He saw her take a deep breath, and then turn to him. "How...?" she began, a sob in her throat, the only word she had gotten out since she saw him. "How... could you abandon me like that?"

He sighed, his arms crossed on his chest, his head hanging down.

"Tell me, Clark---" she said his name, his *real name*, and his head shot back up.

He suddenly longed to be out of the Suit, in his Clark clothes, comfortable and able to comfort. But he hadn't worn those clothes in months, thought he might never again.

He took a step towards her. "Say it again," he said hoarsely.

"Clark?" she said helplessly, searching his face for answers with tears running down her face.

She was suddenly in his arms. They found each other's lips, neither questioning why, each claiming the other for their own, possessing and giving at once. He tasted the salt of her tears, and realized his own mingled with hers. She shook in his arms, her emotions too strong to name or pin down. She was still angry and hurt, but her soul overrode her mind as she gave into the solace they had denied each other for so long.

After a moment, when the passion subsided a little, she stepped away, shaken to the core. She dared a glance at him. He ran his hand through his hair, a typical Clark gesture which made her unhinge a bit and start laughing a bit hysterically.

"It is true, then?" she said, though she knew the answer already. "You've tortured me, believing you were dead, while you... You were...*are* Superman?!" Her eyes shown with wild emotion, she was past the breaking point.

Clark tried to get a hold of himself, overwhelmed after the months of solitude and the hell of war by what it had felt to hold and kiss Lois Lane, however briefly. He had to breathe, he had to tell her everything.

He walked towards her, trying to lead her to the sofa.

"Don't---touch me!" she suddenly cried. She thought another touch from him would send her into shock, if she wasn't there already. She needed to gather her thoughts, protect her heart, what was left of it.

"At least, sit down," he said.

She nodded, knowing he was right. He was always right. Well, usually. This last escapade was yet to be seen.

He paced in front of her. Superman was gone. It was Clark in the Suit, she saw that clearly now. It was Clark. Alive. Superman. Unbelievable.

"I didn't know what to do," he began. "The world saw Clark Kent get shot. I couldn't let them know I was Superman."

"But what about me, Clark? Did you not consider what you did to me, and all of your friends by... disappearing?"

"What was I supposed to do?"

"At least you could have told me," Lois whispered. Too hurt to look him in the eyes. "You don't know what hell you put me through."

He sighed. He did know. Or at least he thought he did. He had been through a bit of hell himself. "I wanted to tell you, Lois. So many times. I wanted to swoop in here and shout, 'I'm alive!', but I was afraid," he finished a bit lamely, realizing that his fear was a moot point now that she knew his secret. "How did you figure it out, anyway?" he asked, unable to resist his curiosity.

She got up, and brought him the photos she had been poring over at the Planet.

"These. And... well, Superman hadn't been around much after you... were shot."

He looked at the photos ruefully, noting one in particular. He knew the candid photo Jimmy had taken hadn't been a good idea.

And what price was he to pay for it now?

"Lois, I---" he reached his hand out to her, but she refused to let him touch her, for the moment.

"Why... why did you come tonight?" she asked, barely above a whisper. She hoped she knew the answer, but she wanted to hear him say it.

"I think you know, Lois. I read your article. Did you---did you really mean what you wrote?" Now it was his turn to be quiet, choking on his own emotions.

She dared a look at him. OK, she wasn't falling to pieces now, she could look at him, breathe again. As if to prove this true, she took a steadying breath and said, "Every word. About both of you, though I didn't realize it at time..."

"God, Lois, you don't know what that means to me. It has been hell in Europe. What's going on in Germany, Austria, Poland, is---horrific. I'd almost forgotten---"

"Me?" she asked quietly.

He leaned towards her, to reassure her. "Never. Not ever could I forget you, Lois. No, I'd almost forgotten who *I* was. Who Clark Kent was. I---became a machine, barely stopping between rescues because there was so much---" he swallowed, steadying himself. He shook his head, he couldn't get out the words, they were so painful.

"Lois, I am beyond sorry for not telling you the truth. I see now, that I should have told you. I berate myself constantly for letting you grieve needlessly, yet, you have to see, I was grieving for myself as well. For what I lost when I was no longer able to be Clark. Can't you see that?"

Her eyes flashed angry, her arms crossed, partly concealing the hurt that was there as well. "No, Clark, I don't see. You knew you were alive, that I was alive. It's nothing compared to me thinking you were dead!"

"Lois, I know we were close before, but--- honestly, I thought you wouldn't care so much. That eventually you'd go back to being and doing what you do best. That Clark would be no more than a memory."

She nodded, the anger still there, but the pain went so much deeper. "Yes, maybe so, Clark," she said sarcastically. "Is that the kind of heartless person you think I am? Really? That I would forget the best---friend I ever had?"

She let herself fall into the sofa, her satin dress shimmering in the moonlight as she once more fell to pieces. "I'm so tired of crying over you!" she said angrily, balling her fist and hitting it futilely against the sofa. "I feel like I haven't stopped since that horrible night. I cry until there's no more tears and then there they are again, whether I want them to be or not. Are those the actions of a person who doesn't care?!"

He was by her side in an instant, next to her on the sofa. She at last turned to him, and let him comfort her.

"No, I was wrong, foolish. I only wanted to protect myself. It's so ingrained in me to protect my secret, that I became blind to anything else."

She was sobbing against his chest now. Her head hurt from the tears, but they wouldn't stop. "And... and as Superman? Why did he---you abandon me as him too?"

He held her tighter, searching for words to make her understand. He knew they didn't make sense now, when before they were everything. He knew he had been wrong, selfish even, and he had no idea how to fix it.

"I was... scared. Of myself. Of telling you everything, and yet not being able to be there for you, as Clark."

He sat back a bit on the sofa, lifting her chin so he could look in her eyes. "Don't you see, Lois? What am I to do now? Clark can't just show up magically at the Daily Planet, like nothing happened. And certainly not now, so much time has passed... I'm stuck, Lois. I'm cursed by who I am."

Her fingers rose to his lips, silencing him and surprising him.

"Don't say that. You're the best thing that could have happened to this world, at this time. The best thing that could've happened to me." She looked up at him. Her eyes were bright, but dry - no tears for a change.

He looked at her ruefully, "And whom do you mean? Clark or Superman?"

She looked shocked at this. "Whom do you think?" she said, her voice rising in incredulity. "Who do you think sends me into crying jags by the mere mention or even thought of his name? Who is it that I've missed on stake outs and late nights at the office? You, Clark!"

"So, you aren't in love with Superman anymore?"

She looked at him, exasperated. "*You* are Superman, in case you forgot!"

He shook his head. He had to make her understand. "No, Lois, listen. Superman is what I do, not who I am. I realized that when I read your article. And reread it fifty times just to get it in my head. The attributes of Superman are really Clark's, though it's an awful lot to live up to, what you wrote," he tried for levity, but failed. He shook his head. "Anyway, my point is, Superman is a comic book figure, a two-dimensional ruse to protect who I am and keep my identity safe. I couldn't bear it if you loved Superman, Lois, don't you see? I need---had hoped that you'd come to love Clark, the man under the Suit."

They looked at each other a long moment. She thought about what he said.

"Well, you made it very complicated for me, Clark, by making me believe you were two people... but I do see your point. I think."

She stood up with a sigh, and wandered to the window, as if the answer was somehow out in the stars.

"I don't know, Clark. I only know I've been grieving for months now for someone that I never needed to grieve for. I should feel happy, but I feel drained. I've lost a friend, and gained one back all at the same time. I need time to think about all of this... You must understand that."

He nodded. "I do. I just ask---don't shut me out, Lois. I'll never do anything so foolish again. Your article reminded me not only who I am, but it reminded me of what I was missing. You've encouraged me so many times, Lois, whether you realize it or not."

She put a comforting hand on his shoulder, and he squeezed her fingers gently with his other hand, gazing warmly at her.

"That's what partners are for," she said quietly, with a small smile.

He took a deep breath. Could he really get it all back? After all the loneliness, the doubt? He berated himself again for what he had done to her. But she seemed willing to try to forgive, to understand him, if he would give her the time. And he would. He would wait forever for Lois, as long as it took. And maybe with time... the kiss they'd shared when they'd arrived at her apartment gave him hope for the future; it had to have meant something. ««Partners... and maybe someday more...»»

He gave her a smile, a genuine Clark smile that she couldn't help but warm to. "Speaking of partners... what are we going to tell them at the Planet?" he asked, hope shining in his eyes for the first time in months.))

"...yeah, an undercover investigation. They needed a reporter on the team. The federal agency gave me this new-fangled bulletproof vest the day before, knowing that Dillinger and his thugs might show up. They said it would be the perfect cover. I--- I feel horrible about the deception, though, Chief. But, they said it was the only way."

"Son, we're just so glad to have you back. I hope you have some great stories to write up about your time undercover!"

"Yes sir, I managed to cover Superman over there a bit as

well. I was surprised to see him there..."

Clark looked over the choices of flowers at the stand outside the Planet building, indulging in an impulse to bring Lois something. Things were better between them, and they had even managed to go out on a few dates over the last few weeks. He was slowly rebuilding her trust, and he hoped, something more.

He sighed. ««Roses, definitely. But what color?»»

Suddenly, he caught sight of the new intern, Abbey heading into the Planet. "Good morning, Mr. Kent," she waved.

"Hey, Abbey?" he waved her over. She had been awfully encouraging of his and Lois' relationship, and he was happy to have at least one female around the office who didn't ogle him or talk about them behind their backs.

"Yeah?" she asked.

"Which roses do you think I should bring Lois?"

Abbey smiled, pointing to two different colors. "You know what they mean, right?" she asked.

He nodded, grinning, "Yeah, I do. Thanks."

Lois entered the newsroom, her eyes automatically seeking out Clark. It was a comfortable habit that was one of the many things she was thankful to be able to do again. He was sitting at his desk, and looked up as she walked by him, a smug smile on his face.

"What is it?" she laughed good-naturedly.

"Nothing. There's a present for you on your desk," he said with a charming smile.

She walked over, spotting a lovely bouquet of red and yellow roses. Her heart flipped.

She saw a note was attached. "Red for love, and yellow for friendship. Friendship surrounded by love, and love built on friendship. Yours forever, Clark."

She turned and looked back at Clark, her heart in her eyes.

"Thanks," she said softly, about to sit down and begin her day.

But suddenly another impulse grabbed her. Her heart thrummed with excitement and she knew the newsroom would be talking about it for days, but she didn't care. She threw herself onto Clark's lap, her arms going around his neck. "Let me try this again," she said. "Thank you." She kissed him sweetly, then said so only he could hear, "I hope the red ones last forever."

((A whisper of wind came through the window.

"Clark?"

He stepped into her apartment, his face glowing with love.

"Lois, will you fly with me?" he asked, holding out his hand.

"Always," she said, answering his smile with one of her own, wondering if there was a girl in the world who could refuse an offer like his. She stepped into his arms.

They flew out towards the harbor, the city lights reflecting in the river like so many jewels. The moon was full, and large on the horizon, a mysterious silver globe. He flew her close to the light, so he could see her soft features in its glow.

"Lois... thank you."

"Thank you? What do you mean?" she asked, surprised.

He held her closer. "Thank you for the courage it took to write that story that got my attention. I was dying out there. Clark Kent was dead and I was biding my time till the rest of me could follow. I needed the courage to come back to you and to Metropolis, and you gave it to me."

"Oh, Clark," she said, touched.

He sighed. Something else was bothering him. "I'm so happy to be back in my old life. And it's all thanks to you. The last six months have been---wonderful." He brushed her hair back gently behind her ear, cupping her cheek with his hand. "Lois, you mean the world to me. Everything. I need to know---do you forgive me? *Can* you forgive me?"

She nodded, silenced by tears. Tears of joy this time, for time had healed the wounds of her heart. "I forgive you. I love you,

Clark Kent."

And the courage it took to say those words was rewarded by the truth of it in each other's eyes.

"And I love you, Lois Lane."

They kissed under the stars, above the twinkling lights of Metropolis, with the glow of a new moon, and a new life in front of them.))

Life in Metropolis was back to normal. Superman was on regular patrols around Metropolis, saving Lois at least once a week, and Lois and Clark were dating. All was right in the world. Abbey sighed, pleased with her meddling. Lois and Clark were amazing people, fire and ice, energy, grace, and brilliance. Things weren't perfect between them, but time was healing wounds, binding them to each other closer and closer every day.

Abbey closed the last page of the comic book.

It seemed that Lois and Clark's story would be the stuff of legend after all.

THE END