

Second Chance

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Rated G

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Summary: It's Christmas Eve. Lois and Clark are together at her window. The carollers begin to sing ... and then someone needs Superman. A ficathon 2009 story.

A/N This fic was written for bellarata. Her requests are listed after the story. Thanks for such wonderful prompts! Also many thanks to IolantheAlias for a great beta job.

Clark Kent knew this would be a Christmas he would never forget. What he didn't know was whether he would remember it as the best Christmas of his life — or just another opportunity that had slipped through his fingers.

He gazed out of Lois's window as below them a small group of carollers sang their festive songs.

Their clear melody carried the palpable magic of Christmas. It combined with the warmth of Lois's hand in his, the nearness of her bare shoulder against the sleeve of his jacket and the lingering aroma of the food she had cooked. Together, they formed a persuasive whole that worked into Clark and decided for him.

This was *not* going to be just another opportunity that slipped away.

He turned, very slowly, away from the window and to Lois. She mirrored his movement and suddenly, their faces were only inches apart. Her mouth ... the mouth he dreamed of ... was so very close.

And he wanted to kiss her more than he had ever wanted anything.

The lure of her lips captured him ... enticed him forward ... closer ... closer.

"Superman! Help! Superman!"

Clark lurched away from Lois, and the suspended millisecond of confusion was long enough to perceive the hurt shock scrawled upon her face. He pulled his hand from hers and raised it, leaning forward in a stance that was far too familiar. "I ..."

What could he say?

Nothing.

There was nothing he could say.

And he had to go.

"I can't do this," he muttered.

With a few quick strides, he was at her door. Seconds later, he was out of her apartment, into the Suit, and flying at superspeed towards the cry for help.

Fifteen minutes later, Clark — still in the Suit — was back at Lois's door. Situation salvaged. People saved. Everything returned to normal.

Except Lois.

Lois, who was behind that door either very, very angry or very, very hurt.

Probably both.

And all of Superman's powers combined were not enough to restore that situation.

Clark stared at the solid wooden door, not daring to look through it. If he did, he knew what he would see ... Lois — wounded, lonesome, frustrated, confused.

The only thing worse than Lois hurting was the knowledge

that he had hurt her.

He slouched against the wall, head low.

He'd come so close. So close to kissing her. So close to seeing if this could be the best Christmas ever.

Instead, it was going to be the worst. He would look back and know that this was a substantial step in the steady decomposition of his friendship with Lois.

Could he do *anything*?

He certainly couldn't go back to her as Clark.

Clark was the absolute last person Lois would want with her right now.

But he couldn't leave her. It was Christmas, and she was alone. And upset.

He tapped softly on her door and listened as her footsteps approached.

Just half an hour ago, he had stood right here, knocking on this door, the star in his hand and hope in his heart at the promise of an evening that had seemed rich with possibilities.

Now the star sat, somewhat precariously, at the top of her tree, and his heart was shattering.

He heard the first of her locks click and tried to arrange his face into a mask that hid his abject despair.

Lois opened the door, and he saw immediately that she had been crying.

Not just crying but sobbing — her eyes were red and puffy.

She'd never touched his heart quite like she did at that moment.

"Superman," she said in a voice that was thick with lingering emotion.

"May I come in?" he asked. Then, as an afterthought, "Do you have company?"

Lois dejectedly shook her head. "Just me," she said. She stepped back to let him in and gestured to the table still laden with the untouched Christmas fare she had prepared. "And more food than I'll eat in a week."

"We could eat together," he suggested, desperate to soothe the desolation from her face.

Lois shrugged. "I'm not hungry," she said. "But there's plenty there if you want to grab a bite between calls."

"How do you know I've had calls?" he asked quickly.

"It's Christmas," she said flatly, her tone totally devoid of the excitement that usually accompanies those words. "People are travelling, the roads are a little icy, people are tired from their preparations, they're frazzled, and in a hurry. All that adds up to a busy night for you."

"No one needs me at the moment," he said softly.

"Thanks for coming," she said with no discernable enthusiasm. She slumped onto her sofa.

Clark sat opposite her, careful to arrange his cape so it didn't pull across his neck. "What's wrong?" he asked. As if he didn't know.

"It's Christmas. I'm alone."

"Not anymore, you're not."

In the past, that would have brought a smile to her face. Tonight, it didn't.

"Want to tell me about it?" Clark asked. As if he didn't know.

"Not really."

"Who made you cry?" As if he didn't know.

She stared at the wall behind him. "Clark," she said. Her voice had a sharp edge that pierced his heart.

"Oh."

She said nothing for a long time. Clark searched frantically for something to say, but his mind stubbornly refused to cooperate. Then the dam burst.

"I know Clark is your friend," Lois said. "And I know I shouldn't involve you in this, but he is the most frustrating man I have ever met and believe me, that is a big call, and right now, I'd

like to tangle two fistfuls of his perfectly groomed hair around my fingers and shake him until his perfectly shaped teeth are rattling around his perfect throat so that the next time he flashes that formerly-perfect smile, I'll be reminded that under that suave, perfect exterior lurks a man who can be thrown into a brouhaha by an almost-kiss."

Clark spluttered but tried to turn it into a clearing-of-his-throat-cough-grunt-wheeze. He could only hope that the combination sounded vaguely like support and understanding.

When he'd recovered enough to glance at Lois, she was regarding him with a look that told him he had failed dismally. "How can you be choking?" she asked. "You haven't eaten any of my food yet."

"Sorry," he gasped.

"What are you sorry for?"

Everything.

For telling her he was in love with her and then telling her he wasn't. For telling her he wanted to be friends and then allowing them to get into situations — like the one at the window — where they threatened to cross the line beyond friendship. For running away, over and over again, and making it worse with inane excuses that totally insulted her intelligence.

For being here now — as Superman — when he should be here as Clark.

"Why does he do it?" Lois asked in a small voice. "Why does he look at me the way he does and then leave me? Why does he act as if he would mutilate anyone who so much as even thought about hurting me and then rip out my heart himself? Why does he laugh with me and then make me wonder if he's laughing *at* me behind my back? Why does he seem so trustworthy and then make it clear he doesn't trust me? Why does he —"

"Lois!"

"Sorry," she said forlornly. "I don't expect you to know the answers."

"I do know the answers."

"You do?" Her eyes trapped him as he squirmed inside, realising what he'd done. He'd admitted he knew something. And she was Lois Lane. There was no way out of this — at least not without a mountain of lies and an awful lot of super-ducking-and-weaving.

He couldn't do it.

Clark knew he would look back and remember this as the worst Christmas ever, but he had to tell her.

He knew she would look back and remember this as the worst Christmas ever, but he still had to do it.

There would be some consolation, he told himself — he would never again cause that confused look of betrayal to darken her beautiful brown eyes.

But never again would she look at him with anything other than the reproach he deserved.

Clark pressed his palms together, fingers spread. Then, he breathed deep and forced himself to meet her eyes. "I'm sorry I haven't told you the truth," he said.

"The truth about what?" Lois asked.

And this was where the rubber hit the road.

Or the sleigh hit the ice.

"The truth about who I am."

"You *lied* to me?" Her squeak of surprise ... and disappointment ... was like a cleaver through the core of his heart. Lois shook her head, not wanting to believe. "Superman doesn't lie," she proclaimed staunchly.

"There is something I care about more than the truth," Clark said. "Something that is more precious to me than everything else. I have lied, believing I needed to lie to protect it. But I realise now that I have damaged it. Irreparably."

"What?" she said. "What is so precious to you?"

Clark took a long, wobbly breath. "You. My relationship with

you."

"No," she said, head shaking, hand held up as if to fend him off. "No. That isn't true. I have thrown myself at you more than once, and you've made it very, very clear that you are not interested. Not like that."

"I have never wanted your adulation."

"Then what do you want?"

"I want you to know the man I am when the suit comes off."

The words were barely out of his mouth before Clark wished he could haul them back and stuff them so far down his throat they could never be located again. He looked to Lois, dreading her reaction. She wasn't laughing at him though. She looked even more rattled than he felt. "I ... I'm not sure what you're suggesting."

"This ..." Clark flicked at the cape with something very close to contempt. "This isn't who I am. This is what I do."

She leant forward. "You want me to get to know you as a person, not as a superhero? Is that what you are trying to say?"

He nodded.

Lois leant further forward and offered her hand. He stared at it, yearning for her touch. He shouldn't take it. But once she knew he was Clark, she would never again ...

He couldn't take advantage of her.

But he did. Because to refuse would hurt her more.

Once his hand was ensconced hers, she spoke. "Superman, you know I'm your friend. We will always be friends. You can come and hang out here anytime you want to. We can chat. And watch movies. And drink coffee. But I can't be anything more than your friend."

"I already hang out with you."

"Not really. An interview here, a rescue there, a chance meeting -"

"You already know who I am when I'm not in the suit," Clark said. "You know the real me better than almost anyone else. You spend hours with me every day. I frustrate you. I annoy you. I bring you coffee. I confuse you. I watch your back. I trail behind you as you chase down a story."

Lois laughed, but it was forced and without a trace of humour. "Superman," she said. "You make it sound like you've been stalking me."

"Not stalking," he said. "Not really."

"Then what? How can you say you watch my back and -"

"I'm the one you're angry with right now."

"I'm not angry with you, Superman," she said with such gentleness, his stomach twisted into a sickening mass of apprehension. "A little concerned, maybe. You seem upset. And confused. Have you considered a vacation? Or therapy?"

"You *are* angry with me," he insisted. "If you recognised me — the real me — you'd ... you'd ... you'd probably grab two fistfuls of my hair and shake me until my teeth are rattling around my throat."

"No," she said with a fabricated smile. "That's not you, that's C ..."

The most ominous silence Clark had ever experienced pervaded the room. Lois's eyes widened and fastened on him. Comprehension slowly dawned in her face, leaving total disbelief in its wake.

He resisted the urge to back away. The tirade was coming. He knew it was coming.

She released his hand and sank back, looking so much like a little girl hopelessly lost that he had to grasp two clumps of the sofa cushion to stop himself going to her.

"I'm sorry, Lois," he said, knowing he was offering a droplet of water when a Pacific Ocean was required.

Still she said nothing.

She had paled.

Her eyes hadn't left him.

Clark stood. "I'm sure you'd rather be alone," he said quietly. "I'm sorry, Lois."

He stood and turned towards her door.

Lois watched the swish of his cape as he walked away.

His shoulders were stooped, his head low.

Superman was walking out on her.

More importantly, Clark was walking out on her.

Clark!

In a flash she'd rounded him and was standing with her back against the door and her hands flattened next to her thighs.

"That's why you left?" she asked in a strangled voice.

"That's why I always leave," he said. "Not because I'm scared of commitment, not because I'm scared of being close — *really* close — to you, not because I don't know how I feel about you, not because I'm scared to come right out and say that I love you, but because someone *always* calls for help right when I so desperately want to be with you."

There was enough there to keep her head busy for a week. And that was without the mind-rupturing realisation that she was talking to Clark Kent — who was dressed in a body-hugging blue suit and a flashy red cape. "When you walked out tonight, you said 'I can't do this'."

"I can't," he said. "I can't go on lying to you. I can't go on pretending I'm two people. I can't go on hurting you."

"Why didn't you tell me? Before now?"

"Because I was scared."

Superman? Scared? "Of what?"

"Of how angry you'd be. Of how cheated you'd feel. Of destroying whatever it is I have ... " He glanced to the floor.

"Whatever it is I had with you."

Memories blitzed her mind, connections buzzing.

So that's why ...

That explains ...

That's how he knew ...

That's where he went ...

"When Clark was shot at the gaming club a few weeks ago, he wasn't ... you weren't really dead?" Lois asked.

He shook his head as shame heated his face. "No. I wasn't dead ... but I thought my life as Clark Kent was over — and that was worse than being dead."

"Why?"

"Because as much as I enjoy helping people, and saving them, and making a difference in their lives when they need it most ... the most important parts of my life — to me — happen when I'm Clark Kent."

You actually look like Clark, Lois thought. Now that you've pushed aside that austere barricade and allowed me to see you as you really are — you look more like Clark than Superman.

"What's the best part about being Clark Kent?" she asked.

He looked into her eyes, opening himself further, making no attempt to hide his anguish, his helplessness, his certainty that they were acting out the final throes of their friendship. "Being with you," he said quietly.

"You can be with me as Superman."

He shook his head. "No," he said. "No, I can't be with you — not in the way I want to be."

"Then why am I talking to Superman about this?"

Without warning, he spun — out of the suit and into the tan jacket and black shirt he'd been wearing earlier.

Then Clark stood there ... contemplating her ... awaiting his sentence.

Now she had enough to keep her mind busy for a month.

She glanced to his hair — sitting in perfect-just-stepped-out-of-the-hairdresser waves, despite having been gelled to his scalp just seconds ago. She *should* grab it and shake him.

Except ... this was Superman.

Lois pushed off the door and stepped past him, walking away.

She took ten slow, deliberate steps. She turned.

He stood there with all the panache of a melting snowman.

He was the strongest man in the world.

Yet he stood there, in crestfallen acknowledgement that she held his happiness in the palm of her hand.

Choices.

She could make this the best Christmas she'd ever had — not that that was saying much. Or she could give vent to the humiliation of discovering that she'd been blind for over a year.

She closed in on him, stopping within touching distance, but careful not to touch him. "Lucky for you, it's Christmas," she said, trying to keep her tone even.

His expression shifted from dejection and moved through confusion to give birth to the tiniest seed of hope.

"And also lucky for you Christmas is the season for giving," she continued.

His mouth fell open, but it didn't look like speech was going to be possible any time soon.

"And I haven't given you my gift yet."

He nervously smoothed his hair, and it took every last ounce of Lois's self control not to burst into giggles. She stared at the floor, knowing that controlling her mouth may be possible, but that the amusement in her eyes could not be denied.

Recovered, face impassive, she lifted her head to face him.

He had not perceived the dissolution of her anger. He was still stranded on what he thought was a precipice.

From the look on his face, it was the most hazardous precipice he'd ever encountered.

Lois's heart melted a little more.

Yes, he deserved to be put through a gristmill.

Backwards.

But ... she still cared deeply for him ... maybe even loved ...

And it was Christmas.

"My gift to you is a second chance," she said.

He swallowed, his throat jumping like a yo-yo.

Lois took his hand from where it hung listlessly by his side.

She walked to the window. He followed. At the window she turned. She pointed to the floor. He stood where she directed.

And there they were, back at the window, looking at the empty sidewalk where the carollers had been.

Lois looked up at him. "Last time we stood here, you really wanted to kiss me, didn't you?" she asked.

He nodded.

"Here's your chance," Lois said. "Your second chance."

His eyes slid slowly to her mouth.

From below, the opening notes of a carol slid through the silent darkness.

If Clark heard, he showed no indication.

His mouth approached.

Her eyes slid closed.

His lips met hers with the slightest of touches.

Then left.

Before she could protest, he was back. His mouth was on hers, and his hands were cupped around her head.

Clark kissed her.

The world swayed.

He kept kissing her — softly, gently, yet with a thoroughness that said he intended to make the very most of his second chance.

When he moved away, he looked into her eyes with a half-smile. "Lois," he said. "Please believe that I am so sorry for how I handled this."

"I thought you handled the kiss quite well, actually."

He glanced to his feet, but she still caught the smile he'd tried to contain. "You know I didn't mean that."

She brushed the lapel of his jacket. "Tomorrow, when you fly me to Smallville for Christmas, I want us to stop somewhere and

talk this through.”

He nodded his agreement. “Will you forgive me?” he asked.
“For everything?”

Lois smiled and then nestled into his chest. His arms cuddled her against him, holding her close. “Did you say you loved me?” she enquired.

“Yes.” His voice resonated differently from his chest.

“Did you mean it?”

“Yes,” he declared it with such fervour, his voice shook.

She leant back so she could see his face. “Would you say it again?” she asked. “Please?”

“I love you,” Clark said. “I have loved you since I first saw you in Perry’s office.”

“The day in the park ... you were telling the truth?”

“Yes.”

“The day in front of the Planet you were -”

“Not telling the truth. I thought -”

“You thought our friendship could be salvaged if you took away the pressure of something more.”

“Yes,” he admitted bashfully.

“That was dumb.”

The mouth — the mouth that had so recently plied her with such expertise that her heart still danced — *that* mouth curved into his perfect smile. “Very dumb.”

Clark edged closer, wanting to kiss her again. Lois pressed two fingers against his mouth and gently held him at bay. “Do you want to kiss me?” she asked with a shy smile. “Or do you want to hear how I feel about you? I can’t do both at the same time.”

Her options had stunned him. “Ah ... ” He lifted his hand and skimmed his fingers through her hair, as if he couldn’t quite believe they were here — like this. “Lois, you’ve already made this the best Christmas of my life.”

“I love you, Clark,” Lois said.

He smiled on a big breath.

A breath that began, but never finished.

Because then she kissed him.

THE END

Three things I want in my fic:

1. Season 1 or 2
2. A reveal where it’s Superman that admits he is really Clark Kent (instead of the other way around)
3. A happy ending

Three things I do not want in my fic:

1. Angst
2. Amnesia
3. HG Wells