

Bittersweet Chocolate

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© 20-Feb-09

Rating: K+

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Written for the 12 days of Clois. Prompt: Bittersweet

Lois wasn't overly fond of February. February in Metropolis was cold and wet and generally miserable. The highlights, if you could call them that, were the Monday holidays and Valentine's, a celebration she was personally convinced was nothing more than a merchants conspiracy to get people to spend money to prove the validity of their relationships.

So why then was she out with a bouquet of flowers and a box of chocolate slogging across a sodden lawn to sit under a tree in the cold?

Lois didn't have an answer for that except that it felt right. She opened her box of chocolate and took a piece, savoring the sweet and bitter taste.

"So, Lois, what are you doing for Valentines Day?" Clark asked. At eight months on the job he was still the new kid in the newsroom. Lois tried to ignore him. He was good, but he was also annoying in his preternatural cheerfulness.

"Borneo Gazette? Give me a break," she had said when he told her the paper he'd worked for before coming to the Daily Planet. She couldn't fathom why Perry had bothered to hire a hack from Smallville. She couldn't have made up a name like that.

"The competition'll do you good," Perry had said when she tried to object to Kent being assigned to the city beat - *her* beat. "Not only does this guy show proper respect for his editor-in-chief... not only does he have a snappy, punchy prose style, but I swear to you that after forty years in this business, man and boy, he is the fastest typist I have ever seen."

Then, to add insult to injury, Perry assigned them to work together. "You want a task force for this investigation?" he had asked.

"It's big, Perry," she told her boss. Threats against EPRAD and their newest space endeavor had come to her attention and as much as she hated to admit it, it was more than she could handle alone.

"You can have Kent," Perry said.

"Kent?"

"It's him or nobody," Perry told her.

She had conceded the point, took Clark Kent under her wing and cracked open the story. Perry kept them together, saying they were a great team. The problem was that Clark had an obvious school-boy crush on her while she had her eye on someone far more exciting - someone who could fly. Someone she was meeting that evening.

"Lois?" Clark repeated, breaking her from her reverie.

"Oh, yeah, you were asking about my plans for tonight," Lois said. "I don't do Valentine's Day."

"Gee, Lois, I've always thought Valentine's was a fun holiday," Clark said. "Trading cards and candy with your friends? You don't think that's fun?"

"Clark, I really hate to burst your bubble here, but Valentine's Day is just a merchandizing ploy by the card and candy makers to fill in that retail void between Christmas and Mother's Day," Lois said.

Clark's innocently cheerful expression disappeared into disappointment as he looked down at the little red candy box in his large hands. "So, you don't want the card or chocolates?"

"But I didn't get you anything," she protested mildly. Clark's hopeful innocence was making her feel like a heel. It was like kicking a puppy or telling a little kid there was no Santa Claus.

"That's okay, Lois," Clark said, handing her the box of candy. "I know how much you like chocolate."

She opened the box and took out a piece. It was a dark, sweet and bitter. It wasn't cheap dime store candy.

"So, if you don't have any plans," Clark continued, "maybe we can have dinner?"

"I'm sorry, Clark," Lois said, trying to let him down easy. "When I said I didn't do Valentine's, I didn't mean I didn't have plans for tonight."

"Oh." Clark's disappointment was almost palpable. "I guess you're meeting..." He did the sideways motion with his hand that he used to indicate Superman.

"It's an interview, Clark," Lois protested. "That's all."

He nodded and gave her the little half smile that indicated he didn't believe her but it wasn't worth fighting with her about.

She felt like an utter jerk. Clark was a good guy and no doubt one of the few people in the world she could call a friend. But she had warned him not to fall for her. "I have three rules," she told him early on. "Never get involved in your stories, never let anyone else get there first, and never sleep with anyone you work with."

She hadn't told him that she'd broken every one of her own rules in her career at the Daily Planet.

But damn, Clark knew where to find great chocolate.

"Good evening, Ms. Lane," Superman said as he gently set down on Lois's terrace. She was expecting him but he still had the capacity to surprise her when he arrived. More than once in the previous months Superman had failed to make it to her terrace as he promised in notes she had found on her desk.

It was cold out, but Lois had left the terrace door ajar for him. On the dining table she had her glass of wine, the remnants of the box of chocolate Clark had given her, and her notepad.

"Good evening," Lois returned the greeting. She had her list of questions prepared, but as usual she had misplaced them. His perfection still flustered her.

They chatted for a few minutes and he answered the few questions she remembered. Then she asked, "Did you have anything like Valentine's Day on Krypton?"

He gave her one of his infuriatingly mysterious smiles. "No. I suspect they would have been amused, possibly even horrified, to find that the fertility festival of Lupercalia was so diligently observed in modern America. But I think they would have appreciated chocolate."

He took the last piece from the box and popped it into his mouth.

Over the next few years it became almost a ritual. Clark gave her a box of delightful chocolates for Valentine's - he never did tell her where he got them - and Superman took the last piece when he visited her.

But it all stopped when both Superman and Clark Kent vanished.

"Surprise," Richard White said from behind her. With a flourish he placed a heart-shaped box of chocolate on the desk in front of her.

"You shouldn't have," she protested. They'd been dating off and on for four months. He was a pleasant companion, intelligent and thoughtful. They liked the same films, the same music, the same books. They had fun together. But he wanted to take their relationship to the next level and she was balking for no real reason she could think of except that her last physical relationship had left her pregnant, even though she didn't quite remember being intimately physical with anyone in the recent past.

But there *was* the awful coincidence of her and Clark Kent being assigned to go undercover as newlyweds at Niagara Falls only a month before he left the *Daily Planet* to go 'find himself'. She couldn't imagine what would have gotten her into bed with Kent - not that he wasn't tall and good-looking in a geeky sort of way, but she'd had her sights set a bit higher.

She *could* imagine being giddy with desire for one certain superhero.

If Superman had simply crooked his finger at her she would have leapt into his arms and into his bed, completely disregarding any possible repercussions. Some part of her thought that was exactly what had happened. She dreamed about making love to him in a crystal palace. But she also dreamed of Clark Kent and oddly enough sometimes she couldn't tell the difference between the two men.

Then Superman vanished too and Richard White, Perry White's nephew, showed up at the *Daily Planet* needing someone to show him around town while he settled in to his new position as Assistant Editor. To no one's surprise they hit it off and he wasn't put off when she told him she was expecting a child even though they both knew there was no way the child could be his. He accepted the fact that she wouldn't tell him who the father really was. She wasn't certain she even knew who it was. Her dreams didn't explain much.

The baby kicked and she rubbed her belly. "He's a little restless today," she said.

"It could be a 'she'," Richard responded with a grin.

She shook her head. "No. It's a boy." Somehow she knew it was true. She had already painted the second bedroom in her apartment blue and yellow. Sunshine colors for an April baby.

"Well, why don't you open the box?" Richard suggested brightly.

Lois slipped the white ribbon off the box and started to take the lid off. Then she realized she had an audience besides Richard. Jimmy was standing nearby with his camera and other in the newsroom had stopped to watch and listen.

With a shrug of resignation she took the lid off the chocolates. Inside the box, right in the center, was a velvet ring box. Richard reached in, pulled it out, and opened it for her as he dropped to one knee. It was a solitaire diamond ring.

"Lois Lane, will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?"

As Jimmy snapped away with his camera, Lois discovered she had nothing to say. She popped one of the chocolates into her mouth and simply nodded.

The chocolate wasn't nearly as good as the ones Clark used to bring her.

"Are you sure you want Perry to print this?" Richard asked her. She had just handed him a print out of her editorial *Why the World Doesn't Need Superman* by Lois Lane.

Metropolis. For five long years the world has stared into the sky, waiting, hoping and praying for his return...

...We wait for our savior's return though it will never happen and we realize it was better had he never come at all.

"It's a little harsh, isn't it?" her fiancé asked, handing her back the sheet.

"It's past time the world moved on," she replied.

"Heck of a way to spend Valentine's Day," Richard commented. "I thought you were working on that city council story Perry gave you."

"I've already sent it in," she said.

"People are going to say this is from an angry ex-girlfriend," Richard said.

"Do I look like I care what people might say about it?"

"No."

"Then you shouldn't care either," she told him. She peered into the box of chocolates he'd given her that morning for Valentine's Day.

One piece left. Richard started to reach for it and she swatted his hand away. Only one person had ever been allowed to take the last piece of chocolate from her and he'd been gone for five long years. He'd never even said goodbye.

She took the last piece and bit into it. It wasn't nearly as good as the chocolates Clark used to bring her and, not for the first time, she wondered where he'd gotten them. She missed the dark and bittersweet chocolate he brought her.

Another Valentine's Day passed. Spring became summer and summer turned to fall. Lois's editorial had become the stuff of legend and she was awarded a Pulitzer for it.

Then Superman returned and so did Clark Kent and all hell broke loose.

"Were you in love with him?" Richard asked.

"He was *Superman*," she responded. "Everyone was in love with him."

"But were you?" he pressed.

"No."

She knew even when she said it that it was a lie. And she knew he knew.

Then Richard was dead and Clark was there with her and so was Superman. Only they were the same man. Her long ago dreams had been telling her the truth even if she hadn't recognized it then.

It was Clark Kent who had made love to her in the Arctic fortress. It was Clark who was her son's father.

Clark and Jimmy pulled her through Christmas by simply being attentive friends. They both knew they couldn't fill the Richard-shaped hole that had been left in her life any more than Richard had been able to fill the Clark-shaped hole that had been left six years earlier. It took Clark's return to fill that hole but Richard was dead. There would be no miraculous return to fill the space in her heart.

"So, Lois, what are you doing for Valentines Day?" Clark asked.

"Nothing much," Lois replied. It was too soon for her to be considering romantic idylls. The hurt of losing Richard was still too raw.

"If you don't have any plans," Clark went on, "maybe I could take you and Jason out to

dinner. Just friends."

"You don't have to do that you know," she protested mildly.

"I want to," he replied. "I also brought you this." He handed her a little red box of chocolates. "Happy Lupercalia."

She opened the box and popped one of the chocolates into her mouth.

It was as good as she remembered - dark and bitter and sweet.

"I missed this," she said. "Thank you."

She rubbed her swollen belly. "Clark and I are expecting another baby," she said conversationally. "But I expect you figured that out. It's due the first week of June. Clark and Jason are both hoping for a girl." There was no answer but she wasn't expecting one. She took another chocolate and bit off a piece, chewing it slowly.

"He really does know where to find the best chocolate," she said after a moment. She looked down. There were only two pieces left.

"I thought I'd find you here," Clark said from somewhere nearby. She looked up to see him standing beside the bench, his hands in the pockets of his overcoat.

"I still miss him," she said. She nodded to the marble plaque - Richard Peregrine White March 24, 1971 to October 11, 2006 Beloved son, Beloved father.

"He was a good man," Clark said simply.

Lois nodded and struggled to her feet. She placed one of the last two pieces of candy in her mouth. She held out the box to her husband of ten months. "Richard never did understand that the last piece was always reserved for you."