

Second Chance

by Dandello (AKA Librarian)

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Rating: K+

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Author's Notes: This is a stand-alone. Written for the 12_days_of_Clois Sounds of Summer challenge. #01 Second Chance.

Lois Lane frowned as she looked through her notes for the article on her screen. She swore softly when she realized the one sheet of paper she needed wasn't on her desk. She scooted over to the neighboring desk - Clark Kent's desk - and rifled through the notes he'd left sitting out. One of the big advantages of having a partner was that there were two of them taking notes, and Clark took very good notes.

She finished the article and pressed the key to send it off to Perry. She leaned back in her chair. It had been a long and hard investigation and despite her early qualms about being partnered with Clark again - she hadn't forgotten his flakiness and his running off for no apparent reason - they made a good team.

When Clark disappeared five years ago - had it really been that long? - Lois had been angry with him for not being there when she found herself pregnant. But she met Richard White and her life settled into a new equilibrium. Then Superman and Clark both came back and she found that her life had restructured once again in ways she could never have imagined. Clark had come back into her life as though a space she hadn't realized was empty had been waiting for him to fill it again. And he was Jason's favorite baby sitter.

But there was something off in the new balance. It was like she was running in place, getting nowhere. She had finally agreed on a date to marry Richard White but it seemed that he was the only person who was happy about it. Clark had been moping around the newsroom like he'd lost his best friend. Jason, who should have been happy, was acting out.

Even Superman was being distant.

A week before she had called for him while on the roof of the Daily Planet. He appeared, crimson cape licking about his booted ankles. He was as perfectly beautiful as always. Not a hair out of place.

"Is there a problem, Lois?" he asked.

"I have a decision to make and I want to do the right thing but I need to know something first..." she said. She wanted a cigarette but she had promised both Clark and Richard that she was really quitting this time.

Superman waited for her to continue.

"Superman, is there any hope for us? You and me? I mean, we have a child together. You must have loved me once, didn't you?"

He shook his head and Lois saw an ineffable sadness in his blue eyes. "Lois... there are

things about me you don't know, that you may never know."

"It doesn't matter. I know you. And I don't mean you the celebrity or you the 'superhero.' If you had no powers, if you were just an ordinary man leading an ordinary life, I'd still love you. Can't you believe that?"

"You're engaged to Richard," Superman said. "He's a good man."

She hadn't seen Superman since that day. She was certain he was still visiting Jason at night but he was no longer staying so they could talk about the child they had together.

Lois scooted over to Clark's desk again. He'd been gone for some time now and she was curious as to what mysterious errand might have lured him from his desk this time. She ignored the coverage of Superman's latest rescue playing on the overhead monitors.

There was nothing on Clark's calendar or in his notes, but she did find two framed photos hidden behind his large dictionary. She remembered the first one from before - a dark-haired child of about three with a pleasant-looking middle-aged couple - Clark and his parents. But there was something oddly familiar about them or rather, the child looked familiar. He looked uncannily like Jason.

"Lois... there are things about me you don't know, that you may never know," Superman had said.

She put the photo back where she'd found it and studied the second one. It was an older couple smiling at the camera. The woman, an older version of the one in the first photo, was dressed in pink and holding a simple bridal bouquet. The man wasn't the same and Lois recalled Clark mentioning that his mother had remarried shortly after his return to the U.S. But Lois also recognized the couple. They'd been outside Metropolis General Hospital during the vigil for Superman. The woman had reached out and spoken to Lois. "He'll be all right," she had said. "He's a strong boy."

What was Clark's mother doing in Metropolis waiting for news about Superman? And where was Clark? In a hospital room admitted as...?

Lois shook her head. "Lois Lane, that's the silliest thing you've come up with since..."

The elevator doors slid open and Clark appeared. Lois put the second photo back and rolled her chair over to her own desk. But Clark wasn't heading in her direction. Richard was standing in the door to his office and had waved Clark over to him.

Lois watched through the glass partition as Richard closed the office door. Whatever Richard was saying to Clark didn't seem to be sitting well with the tall Mid-westerner. Then Clark's shoulders slumped in apparent defeat. A few more words between the two men and Clark headed to his desk.

Lois pretended not to watch as Clark cleared off his desk for the end of the day. Then he sighed.

"Something wrong?" she asked, finally looking up at him.

He shook his head. "I just got an assignment overseas that I wasn't expecting."

"Overseas where?" she asked. Richard hadn't mentioned anything about wanting to send Clark overseas. And Clark wasn't in International - Richard shouldn't have even been talking to Clark about an assignment like that.

Clark shook his head as he snapped his briefcase shut. A pall of resignation had settled over him. She'd seen the expression before, on a face not masked by a pair of glasses.

"I have to go back," Superman said, standing in the door of Richard's airplane. His expression was resigned.

"No," Lois protested. "You'll die if you go back."

He had simply gazed at her, trying to put a brave look on his face - the same look Clark was wearing right now. "Goodbye, Lois."

Then Clark was gone out the door of the newsroom.

Lois sat stunned, for a long moment. Then she slipped her shoes on and ran after him. "Clark!"

He was nowhere to be seen. He hadn't caught an elevator and there was no sign of him in the stairwell.

"Goodbye, Lois."

Defeated, Lois went back to the newsroom. Then she squared her shoulders and strode toward her fiancé's office. Lois Lane didn't stay defeated for long. Now she was angry.

"Where is Clark going?" she demanded, not bothering to shut the office door.

"Tazaristan," Richard said. "We need boots on the ground there."

Lois knew about the situation in that country. The UN had stepped in to prevent genocide during the region's most recent outbreak of civil war. It had been going on long enough that the rising body counts were no longer front page news, but not much news was coming out of the area in any case - journalists and news crews were among the favorite targets of the warring natives. Most news organizations had pulled their people out months ago.

"Clark isn't a war correspondent," Lois pointed out, fuming.

Richard shrugged. "Now he is. It'll be a good opportunity for him."

Lois glared at him. "Since I know that's a lie, what's your real reason for sending him into a warzone?"

"I told you, we need boots on the ground there."

"And I know there's more," Lois spat.

Richard folded his arms over his chest. "Okay. I wanted him away from you and Jason. I don't like how he's latched on to you."

"He's my *partner* for God's sake," Lois yelled. "Perry made the assignment."

"And you didn't seem to mind much," Richard yelled back. "You spend more time with him than with me."

"We've been working!"

"And Jason? The way he latched onto Jason is just..."

"Is what, Richard?"

"It's a little creepy."

"So you just go ahead and send him off without a word to me?" Lois asked. "Does Perry know what you've done?"

Richard's expression turned hard. "I asked Perry if I could borrow Clark for an assignment."

"You underhanded sonofabitch," Lois said in cold fury. She pulled off the engagement ring and threw it at him. It bounced off his chest and landed on the floor.

"You just can't stand the fact that Clark and I are friends and Jason likes him," Lois continued.

Richard stared at the ring. "Lois, I just..."

"You just what?" Lois demanded. "Decided you needed to run my life? What was going to be next, have Perry put me covering the school board so I'd be safe and home to cook dinner for you every night?"

"Lois, I would never..."

"No, you just sent my partner overseas to die," Lois spat. "I thought you were a good

man, Richard. Even Superman accepted that as a fact. Now I'm disappointed to find that my judgment was so wrong."

With that she stalked out of the office, slamming the door behind her. She ignored Perry White standing in the doorway to his own office as she wiped her face with the back of her hand. She was not going to give anyone the pleasure of seeing her cry.

"Lois!" Perry called after her. She ignored him as she headed for the elevators and the roof.

"Goodbye, Lois."

"How could I have missed it for so long?" she murmured to herself as the elevator rose. She had realized peripherally that Richard had a jealous streak. She had never imagined him capable of being so vindictive as to send Clark away.

And Clark? *"Goodbye, Lois."*

He had Superman's little dimple in his chin and the same coloring, the same height, even the same intonations as Superman when he thought no one was listening. But it was the photo that had clinched it - toddler Clark looked just like Jason had at the same age. She knew beyond any doubt that Superman was Jason's biological father. The other conclusion was obvious once she looked at all the pieces to the puzzle.

"Lois... there are things about me you don't know, that you may never know," Superman said.

"I'm always around," he told her.

Had she once known who he was when he wasn't off on some spectacular rescue? She wasn't sure and she wasn't sure it mattered.

The elevator doors opened and she stepped out onto the observation deck.

"Clark, I know you can hear me," she said to the air in a conversational tone. "We need to talk."

She waited, wishing she had a cigarette. Lighting up almost always got his attention.

"Is something wrong, Lois?" he asked quietly from behind her.

She whirled, trying to cover her start. "I swear to God I should put a bell or something on you."

He gave her a bemused smile. "Sorry if I surprised you."

She took a deep breath to calm her nerves. "That's okay," she managed to say. "It's been a bad day. Did you hear Richard and me a little while ago?"

He managed to look both guilty and puzzled. "I try not to eavesdrop on people."

Lois chuckled but there was no humor in it. "Well, if you *were* listening in, you already know that I won't be marrying Richard after all."

"May I ask what happened?"

"He did something I consider unforgivable. He knowingly chose to put a friend of mine in deadly danger to get him out of the way."

"I'm sure there was a reason..."

"Don't defend him, Clark," Lois ordered. "You don't know him the way I do."

"My name is Kal-El," he reminded her softly.

"I know that," she said. "Last week I told you that I knew you and if you were just an ordinary man leading an ordinary life, I'd still love you."

He nodded somberly.

"The last time when you and Clark both disappeared, you didn't say goodbye, but he did," she said softly. "I didn't pay as much attention as I should have. I figured he'd be gone for a

few months and if I really needed to get hold of him, I could just call his silver-haired old mother in Kansas. The same silver-haired woman who was waiting vigil for Superman outside Metropolis General. The same woman who had a little boy who looks way too much like *our* son for it to be a coincidence."

"Lois, you remember what happened the last time you gave in to this delusion..." Superman said. There was a warning tone in his voice but there was also a familiar quirk in the corner of his mouth that said he wasn't being too serious.

"I promise not to jump out of any thirty-story windows to prove my point, okay? But please believe me - I have no intention of letting Clark disappear. Not this time." She stepped close enough to him to lay a hand on his blue-clad arm. "Give me another chance. Give *us* another chance."

Superman ran his thumb over her cheek. "An ordinary man leading an ordinary life?"

"Clark Kent is hardly ordinary. After all, he can keep up with me."

"And sometimes goodbye is a second chance."

"Barbarians at the Planet" was written by Dan Levine & Deborah Joy Levine