

Valentine Blues

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Rating: K+

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Lois Lane-Kent thrummed her fingers against the table top as she waited for Ellen Lane to arrive. Valentine's Day and she was having lunch with her mother instead of her husband of less than a year. Of course, that *was* the crux of the problem. Clark had promised to take her to lunch at Joe's Crab Shack on the waterfront, had made reservations a month in advance, and now he was wearing the blue spandex suit and fighting a massive chemical plant fire in California.

That was now the story of her life. She had a husband, but he was never around. "I'm always around," he had told her. He lied.

Lois had been left with a table for two and she wasn't about share it with a stranger or even a co-worker, although Jimmy had volunteered. Her sister, Lucy, was having lunch with her own husband somewhere, so in a last ditch effort to stave off eating alone in a crowded restaurant, Lois had called her mother to join her.

"So, he hasn't shown up yet?" Ellen Lane asked, sliding into the seat opposite Lois.

"I doubt I'll see him home much before midnight," Lois admitted. The TV in the bar was showing GNN's coverage of Superman's efforts to put out the massive fire.

A waiter came by and took their drink order - an Italian soda for Lois and coffee for Ellen. Lois ran her hand over her belly. At four months along, she still wasn't showing much, but the child within was letting itself be known - it didn't like it when she had caffeine. Jason hadn't tolerated caffeine either, keeping her awake with his frenetic movements. She hadn't been able to have coffee, cola, or chocolate, until after he was weaned.

"So, what happened?" Ellen asked. "I thought the two of you were taking a long weekend off?"

"We were," Lois said. "But then..."

"He got called into work?"

Lois nodded. "I was really hoping he could make some time for *me* today. Instead, the planet has my husband at its beck and call, as always." She didn't mention how upset she'd been when she saw Clark's head come up and his eyes go unfocussed as he watched something she couldn't see. He was gone almost before she realized it. He was gone and she was furious.

Ellen chuckled. "Maybe now you appreciate what Richard went through with you."

"That's not funny."

"It wasn't meant to be," Ellen told her. "God knows how many times Richard had something planned and you were off after some silly story nobody was going to read, coming home at all hours. Do you think your father and I didn't know?"

"Richard knew how important my work was to me," Lois said. "He understood."

"And *you* know how important *his* work is to Clark." She studied Lois's face for a long moment. "Unless there's something else going on? Is he cheating on you?"

"Mother!"

Ellen shrugged. "He's a good looking man, if you can look past the glasses and the slouch, and that timid thing he has going. And some men don't find their wives attractive when they're pregnant."

"That's not it," Lois protested. "Clark would never... He would never do that."

"According to Ron, Clark's been spending an awful lot of time with that Prince woman with the Department of Meta-human Affairs."

"Ron is an idiot," Lois stated flatly. Her brother-in-law was one of the worst gossips in the Daily Planet newsroom. But Clark *had* been spending a lot of time with Diana Prince, both as Clark and as Superman. Diana and Clark were working on a series explaining the activities of DoMA to the general public. As Wonder Woman, she worked with Superman dealing with major threats to humanity. Lois could cheerfully hate the Amazon, except she was as upright and honorable as Clark was.

"Diana is a source and a friend," Lois told her mother. "And I already told you, Clark would never do that. He's a good man."

"So was Richard." Ellen said.

"Mom, I thought we agreed not to discuss Richard."

"You were engaged to the man for five years, Lois," Ellen stated. "He's out of the picture for six months and you not only jump into bed with the man who left you alone and pregnant, you marry him. And now you're having marital problems?"

"It's not like that."

"Then what is it?" Ellen asked. "If it's sex... well, you know it won't hurt the baby, and there are books if Clark's a little... innocent? And I know a marvelous little sex shop over in Racine that's very tasteful and very discrete..."

"Mother!"

"It was just a suggestion." Ellen's expression turned more serious. "Has he hit you or Jason? Done anything, said anything, to hurt either you?"

It was a wretched, probing question and Lois was horrified her mother would suggest it. "Of course not, Mom. Clark would never do that. He's one of the most gentle people I know. And he adores Jason."

"Then, what's the problem, dear?" Ellen asked more gently. "You were nearly in tears when you called me."

"He's not here!"

"I can see that."

Lois just shook her head. She couldn't explain to her mother. She couldn't tell her where her son-in-law had disappeared to so suddenly. And it had been happening more and more in recent weeks. Lois was frustrated and getting tired of it. The stress of being pregnant wasn't helping, either. She could no longer tell if her reactions to his absence was due to hormones or fear that she was no longer attractive to him, or both.

"Lois, if you're looking for sympathy, you're looking in the wrong place," Ellen said. "I've been married to the U.S. Army for thirty-six years. Your father was overseas when you were born. The army wouldn't even tell me where he was. I lost count of how many holidays he missed because of some emergency deployment to some godforsaken corner of the planet. Oh,

he'd promise to be there. Every year he'd promise he'd be home for Thanksgiving, for Christmas. And more often than not, he'd be gone because some dictator decided to do something incredibly stupid."

"And you buried yourself in a bottle to cope," Lois stated.

"I was an army wife, Lois," Ellen said. "It's hard to have a meaningful career for yourself when you move every few years, when you're the one left to raise the kids, and believe me, you were a handful all by yourself and Lucy was no walk in the park either. And I was so jealous of the army having first right of refusal for his attentions. Yes, I made mistakes, and I sometimes wonder why your father stuck with me."

"Why *he* stuck with *you*?" Lois asked. "*He* was the one who left you alone with two kids."

"Lois dear, I married a military man, just like you married a journalist as hard-headed and driven as you are," Ellen explained. "I married your father with my eyes open. I knew it wouldn't be easy. You knew going in that Clark had a career he loved more than anything, just like you."

"Is that the problem, we're too much alike?"

"You tell me."

Lois sat back in her seat. She had to admit, she and Clark were alike in many ways. They both set themselves to extremely high professional standards, neither of them tolerated malfeasance or fools, both of them thought that a free press was essential to a free society. And neither of them saw much wrong with working as long and hard as they needed to, to get the job done - although in Clark's case, it was two jobs and he was a perfectionist in both of them.

"So, how did you work through it?" Lois asked. "How did you stay together? How did you get over being jealous of the world?"

"I didn't," Ellen said. "I just made sure he never found out how jealous I really was."

"So you lied to him about how you felt?"

"No. I simply came to the realization that Sam wasn't actually doing anything to make me jealous. He was just doing his job. *I* was the one with the jealousy issue."

"Is that enough? Just not letting him know I'm angry that the world takes precedence over his wife and son?" Lois couldn't keep the disbelief out of her voice.

"Not really," Ellen admitted. "But tell me, when he does come home, are you relieved that he's okay, that he made it through whatever he was doing? Are you happy to see him when he walks through the door?"

"Yes," Lois admitted. Thinking back, she realized she was glad to see Clark come through the door to their house at the end of a long day tracking down a story, glad to see him coming out of the elevator at work adjusting his tie and smelling of smoke after a good rescue. She was the only one who ever saw how distraught he became after a rescue where he couldn't get there in time, where he failed despite his 'superness'. She was the one who held his hand and soothed his brow when things went wrong - and he did the same for her.

On the TV monitor, the news coverage had switched to a talking head. Lois knew from experience that Superman was preparing to leave the scene, letting the local rescue and recovery workers finish the job of cleaning up. Superman had made fast work of the fire. Even the news people covering the story said he seemed to be in a hurry to get it handled.

"Lois, hold onto that and talk to him. I didn't raise a quitter or a weak sister. He doesn't need to know you're jealous of the world. But he does need to know that you need him too."

Clark's a smart guy. He'll figure it out."

"And if he doesn't?"

"Honey, for all the stupid and hurtful things your father has done over the years, and there were a lot of them, like wanting you to be the son he wanted instead of the daughter you are... For all that, I was never angry enough at him to divorce him, although I was frequently angry enough to kill him. But not matter how bad it was, he always came home to me as soon as he could."

"Is that the trick?" Lois asked. "Just deciding it's going to work."

"No dear," Ellen said. "It's deciding it *will* work. It's deciding that it *has* to work."

"And that's all it takes?"

Ellen smiled gently. "That... and knowing that marriage is never a fifty-fifty proposition. Fifty-fifty means you're only giving half your effort, and you're keeping score. Lois, you're not in a race with your husband, you're not opponents. You're a team, you and him. It doesn't matter who scores, because you both win or you both lose. It's that simple."

"What about never going to bed angry?"

"You already know that one."

"Uh, Lois?" Clark's voice said from just beside her. She looked up to see him standing beside the table. His tie was awry and there was a chemical tang about him - he hadn't gone home and showered yet. He was also holding a bakery box and a single red rose.

"I'm so sorry..." He handed her the rose. "Mom sent along a box of your favorite chocolate cookies, but with carob instead of chocolate."

"Your mother is a saint," Lois intoned solemnly. She held the rose to her nose. To her surprise, it actually smelled like a real old-fashioned rose. Clark probably picked it from his mother's garden on his way back to Metropolis.

"Did your source pan out?" Lois asked.

He nodded. "It may be the break I was looking for."

"Pulitzer worthy?"

"Kerth, maybe."

He was still standing, waiting for her reaction.

"Sit down Clark," Lois ordered.

Clark grabbed an empty chair from a nearby table and sat down. "I'm so sorry..." he began again, the familiar worried and forlorn look on his face. "I know I promised we'd have lunch together..."

"Our first Valentine's Day together and you're off chasing down a story," Lois stated.

"Lois..."

"You can tell me about it when we get home. You owe me dinner... and more of your mom's cookies."

"Okay..." He still sounded worried. "You're sure you're okay? You were awfully upset when I... well you know."

She glanced at her mother. "Mom and I had a talk. It seems I fell into an old trap... I married a man just like my father, dedicated to the whole freakin' planet. But I knew the job was dangerous when I took it. And they made it work." Lois beckoned her husband closer and whispered in his ear. "But if I find out you've been hanging out with Diana Prince, they'll never find your body."

"I can live with that."

She nodded. "Take me home, Farmboy. I've had enough of being blue on Valentine's."