

No Greater Love

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Rated: PG

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Summary: A short story of regret, repentance, and forgiveness.

“There is no greater love than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” John 15:13 (NLT)

Author’s note:

Someone said lately that fanfic is to fix. This is my attempt at fixing a particularly spectacular bit of stupidity from the end of Season 2. And from the beginning of Season 3 — you know, Clark’s lame excuse that “I had to know that you’d marry me for me.” Please, like she hadn’t just proved that she loved Clark! Give me a break!

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Clark

My God, what have I done?

Regret, bitter and vile, fills my mind. I never should have agreed to this. I can’t understand why I did. It’s insanity. No, worse—it’s murder. I’m a murderer, and Lois—my brave, stubborn, precious Lois—is dead by my own hand.

I look down at her beautiful body cradled against my chest in a macabre mockery of the countless times I’ve held her in my arms. The strange thing is that she looks exactly the same, but the feel of her ... no, this time is nothing like the others. This time her body lies limp, cold and lifeless.

All the reasons why—the danger to my parents, Lois’s own tear — filled, heart — wrenching pleas for Superman’s help, the lack of time to think of another solution—crumble to dust and blow away. There is no reason. None. Nothing in all of time and space could ever justify what I’ve done.

For just an instant, anger wells up in me. How could she ask me to do such a thing? I never could turn her down when her heart was set on something. How could she put me in this position? Then, as quickly as it came, the anger fizzles away, replaced by overwhelming guilt. The blame is mine, and I’ll carry it forever.

Our conversation of moments ago echoes in my brain, torturing me because I know how it ends and am helpless now to change its outcome.

“Freeze you?”

“Like cryogenics ... people who fall in frozen lakes but get revived? You freeze me with your breath, fast—I’ve seen you do it a hundred times,” which was crazy talk because I know for a fact that I’ve never done any such thing before. There’s a world of difference between freezing a thing and freezing a person. “Then it looks like I’m dead, you bring the body and ...”

“Lois, do you have any idea how dangerous that is? There could be arterial ruptures, permanent brain damage ...

you could die.” See, I was on the right track there. I should never have let her turn me from it.

“Yes. I could die.” Her acceptance of that risk, the fact that she took it on willingly, does nothing to soothe my burning conscience. She didn’t have to offer, it’s true, but I didn’t have to accept. She couldn’t have done it without me.

“But Clark’s parents **will** die unless we help. Please, Superman. You haven’t seen him. You don’t know what he’s going through.” I did know, and it blinded me, corrupted my judgment beyond reason. Even so, it’s no excuse. “He needs me, and I’ve never needed you more than right now. You can’t turn me down. You just can’t.”

That was it. That was the moment when I should have told her no. Even though it meant taking the risk that my parents would be killed, I should have thought of another way. But I didn’t. I teetered on the brink, and then I fell. I agreed.

“All right.”

I saw her surprise. She’d asked me to do it, begged for me to, but I don’t think she really thought I’d agree. I saw that instant of surprise, and then her courage. She wasn’t backing down, and I couldn’t let myself think about what I was about to do. If I had, even for a moment, I would never have followed through.

I never should have.

Then, her last thought before surrendering to oblivion, “If anything happens, tell Clark I love him.” That should have stopped me right there, even though I’d been insane enough to let it get that far.

It didn’t, though. I wince as I remember my next words. “He knows, but I’ll tell him.”

I shake my head, ashamed of my deep — seated instinct to deceive her even as she was proving her love for me beyond the shadow of a doubt. My own voice resounds in my memory, committing us both to the point of no return: “Close your eyes.”

I hold desperately to the memory of my hand on her cheek, the last time I felt the warmth of life in her. I remember the shock in her eyes and the wonder in her voice as she made the connection. “The way you just touched me ...”

I didn’t let her finish. Now that the decision had been made, I wouldn’t let myself think about anything except carrying it through to completion. “Close your eyes,” I said again. She did. Taking a deep breath, I let my hand fall from her face, and I blew.

I’d give anything to go back, to never take that breath. I lay her down gently on her sofa, a pillow under her head even though I know she can’t feel it.

In the back of my mind I know that the clock is ticking. I don’t have much time before Mazik’s deadline.

In a flash of insight that comes too late, I realize that this whole thing—freezing Lois at the risk of her life—was utterly unnecessary. Or rather, utterly futile. Mazik already broke his word after I stole those diamonds for him. Whatever made me think, even for a moment, that he would keep his word about releasing my parents just because I brought him Lois’s body?

I won't do it. I won't bring her anywhere near that lunatic.

I know I have to leave. Tearing myself away from her feels like tearing my own heart out. I reach a trembling hand down to smooth her hair. A wave of tenderness and sorrow washes over me. I bend down and softly kiss her cold lips.

That's when I hear it, far below the level of normal human hearing. Her heartbeat! It's slow, but it's steady. She still has a chance!

I scoop her up and fly to Met General as fast as her human body will tolerate. I hand her off to the ER docs with a few words about a mistake with super — cooled air. I want to revive her with my heat vision, but one of the doctors stops me. Apparently they have safer ways of warming her up.

I wish I could stay with her, but I have to try to rescue my folks. I tell the medical team that I'll return as soon as I can. They're already hooking up various tubes as I leave.

My next stop is the Twelfth Precinct. Inspector Henderson assembles the S.W.A.T. team in record time, and I fly the entire truck full of officers to the old airfield. A quick scan of the buildings shows Mazik and St. John. They seem to be arguing. My parents are nowhere in sight, but a lead lined room gives me a good clue as to where they are. I focus my hearing on the room. It's a few minutes past Mazik's deadline by now, so I'm relieved to hear my Mom and Dad talking calmly to each other.

Turning my attention back to Mazik and St. John, I give the S.W.A.T. commander a detailed report of their location. They have one handgun and a small lead lined box. I can guess all too easily what that contains.

Since my folks are behind closed doors and therefore not in immediate danger of being shot, the commander decides on a surprise attack. In a matter of minutes, it's all over.

I desperately want to hug my folks, but I'm in the Suit and we have an audience. Instead, I catch their eyes as I tell Henderson that I need to check on Lois at the hospital. He offers to see the Kents safely to Clark's apartment after he debriefs them. My mom makes a very subtle 'shoo' sign at me, and I know they'll be okay.

Lois

The first thing I'm aware of is the shivering. My entire body is shaking and I have the worst case of the chills that I've ever experienced. Then I notice the sounds. There's a steady beeping noise that seems vaguely familiar, and a rhythmic sort of swooshing that I don't recognize. I try to roll over and curl up in a ball, but something pulls at me when I try to move. I want to open my eyes and look around. I don't have the energy to manage it.

Finally, I hear a kind, concerned voice. I think it's talking to me. "Lois? Lois, can you hear me?"

I frown. It's a woman's voice, not the one I wanted to hear. I try again to open my eyes, but it isn't quite working.

"Clark?" I say. Or I try to. I'm not sure it's loud enough.

I hear footsteps and another voice, male this time. "Is she talking?" it asks.

"She's asking for her partner," says the woman.

"Is he still here?" That's the man again.

"Hasn't left all night. Hasn't eaten or slept, either," she tells him.

I know I can open my eyes if someone will just help me. "Clark?" I try again.

"It's okay, Lois," the woman tells me. "You gave us a scare, but you're going to be okay. Can you open your eyes and look at me?"

"Mmmm ... " That's all that comes out.

"I'd better send him in," says the man.

I hear retreating footsteps and someone moving around me, and then finally the voice I've been waiting for.

"Lois!" It's him at last. "How is she?"

"She's breathing on her own. Strong heartbeat. Her temperature is still a few degrees below normal, but she's going to be fine. The shivering is a good sign. It means her body is trying to warm up on its own," the woman explains.

"Can I ... "

"Yes, you can touch her now. Talk to her. I think she's trying to wake up."

I am awake. I just can't seem to open my eyes.

I feel him lift my hand in both of his. I vaguely notice something warm and ... Plastic? ...graze my arm. His hand feels so good in mine, strong and gentle, just like he always is.

"Clark?" I say again.

"Oh, God, Lois. I'm so sorry." His voice cracks, and his next words are barely above a whisper. "Come back to me, please." He lets go with one hand and uses it to brush the hair out of my face. Then he cups my cheek, just like he did before.

At last, my eyes open. I lift my free hand and place it over his on my cheek. "Clark," I smile. I'm so happy to see him. He looks awful—uncombed, unshaven, face drawn and weary—but I don't care. I'm just so glad he's here.

He smiles back, but it's weak. He opens his mouth to say something, but he stops and looks up at a woman in a nurse's uniform.

I'm lying in a hospital bed with an I.V. in my arm and a monitor clamped onto my finger. Wires are attached to my chest and that steady beeping is coming from the monitor next to my bed. I turn to the other side and am shocked to see dark red blood running from my arm through a couple of tubes to a machine. That's where the swooshing noise is coming from.

"Don't worry," the woman tells me. "You were so cold we had to run your blood through the dialysis machine to warm it. Now that you're awake, I think we can get you off of that. In fact, why don't I leave you two alone while I go ask the doctor if we can turn that thing off?"

She leaves the room, closing the door gently behind her. I turn back to Clark and give his hand a squeeze. "You saved me," I tell him. "I could hear people talking, and I wanted to wake up, but I just couldn't do it until you came." I smile at him.

He's not smiling back. He shakes his head, guilt etched in every feature. "I didn't save you, Lois. I almost killed you. I never should have agreed. I never should have done it."

Suddenly, I remember. “Your parents?” I ask, afraid of what his answer might be.

“They’re fine. I brought Henderson and the S.W.A.T. team out to the airfield where I was supposed to bring you, and they caught Mazik and Nigel St. John.”

Still holding my hand in one of his, he brings his other hand up and runs it through his hair. “Don’t you see? It wasn’t necessary. I put your life at risk for no reason at all. I don’t know how you can even stand to look at me.”

He tries to pull his hand from mine, but I won’t let go. The shivering has stopped and I feel almost comfortable now. “Clark, stop,” I tell him. “You can’t blame yourself. We both did what we thought was right. We didn’t even have time to think straight.”

“You didn’t need time to think. You were willing to risk your life for my parents, for my sake. And I’m so ashamed that I was willing to risk your life too.” He turns his head away, not able to meet my eyes.

“Not all that willing, as I remember. I really had to beg to talk you into it.”

He looks back at me, his eyes wide. Neither of us has said it out loud, but now I’ve made it clear. I know who he is. To my relief, he doesn’t try to deny it.

“It doesn’t matter. I still should have said no.”

I really wish I didn’t have those tubes in my other arm. He’s in dire need of a hug, and I badly need to give it to him. “You said you knew.”

He gives me a questioning look.

I remind him, “I said, ‘Tell Clark that I love him,’ and you said, ‘He knows.’”

He nods mutely, his face still a mask of remorse. I squeeze his hand again. “Well, part of loving someone is taking risks, even huge risks. And look how it turned out: your parents are safe, Mazik and St. John are in prison, and I’m going to be fine.”

“Lois, you could have died, and it would have been my fault.”

“I didn’t die, and it would have been both our faults. Don’t forget that it was my idea to begin with.”

He shakes his head. “It was crazy. I never should have ...”

“You’re right. It was crazy. And we never should have gone through with it.” He looks at me. He seems relieved that I agree with him. “It was a mistake,” I continue, “but it was the best we could think of at the time.”

He shakes his head again. “I should have ...”

I cut him off. “We both should have, but we didn’t. We can’t change that, and we can’t drive ourselves crazy thinking about what might have happened. I’m okay, and I love you.”

In a brilliant flash of insight I realize that I’m never going to argue him out of his guilt. But maybe I can distract him out of it.

It’s worth a shot. I put on a teasing pout. “Now, Clark, that’s three times that I’ve told you I love you, and you haven’t told me what you think of that. You do love me, too, don’t you?”

His eyes go wide in disbelief. He brings his hand back to my face in what is quickly becoming my favorite gesture. “Do you even have to ask?” he says tenderly.

I pretend to be bashful and give a little shrug. “Well, you know, a girl likes to hear it straight from the horse’s mouth.”

He drops my hand and brings both of his up to hold my face. He leans close and says, “Lois, I love you with my whole heart, with everything I have and everything I am.”

Despite all the tubes, I manage to get my hands up to his face in the same gesture. “And I love you, Clark. I may need a little time to relearn some parts of who you are, but never doubt that I love you. And as long as we love each other, we can handle everything else.”

Finally, he smiles. “I don’t think there’s anything in the world that you couldn’t handle,” he says.

“There’s nothing in the world that we can’t handle together,” I correct him. “Now, are you going to kiss me before that doctor gets back or not?”

He does, and it feels both familiar and new at the same time, just like Clark himself. You’d think that a revelation like today’s would change everything, but it doesn’t. He’s still Clark, whoever else he is.

Afterward, we lean our heads together, neither of us wanting to let go. I close my eyes to savor the moment, and I imagine he does, too.

“I tried to tell you the other day, before Mazik called,” he says. I remember that. “I should have told you long before,” he whispers.

“Yeah, you should have,” I agree.

“I was afraid,” he offers.

I open my eyes. “Afraid to trust me?”

His hands still cradling my face, he lifts his head. His eyes never leave mine. “No. Afraid to lose you.”

I move one hand to brush his hair back in a soft caress. “You won’t. I told you, I love you.”

“I know. I love you, too.”

And in the end, that’s all that really matters.

THE END