

Guilty Until Proven Innocent

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Summary: Alone in her jail cell, on trial for a murder she didn't commit, Lois reflects.

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Author's Note: Just one naughty word in this.

Guilty.

Everyone seems to believe that I'm guilty.

Whatever happened to the idea of "innocent until *proven* guilty?"

I haven't even taken the stand yet and, already, I've been condemned by the masses. People are calling for my blood. But I didn't do it. I'm innocent. I swear it.

When did it become "guilty until proven innocent?"

I know. I know. We've all done it before — assumed someone was guilty of something without knowing all of the facts, even if the person was, in fact, innocent. I know I've certainly done it before. I've probably done it more than I even realize. Because, really, who among us really even thinks about something like that, unless we discover that our snap judgments were wrong? Or maybe we're just too arrogant to entertain the notion that we don't really know most people half as well as we think we do.

It's weird, being on the other side. I mean, sure, we've all been on the other side — as the one accused of something we didn't do. But the thing is, it's usually not something this huge. It's always smaller things — being accused of misplacing something we never touched, or of saying something we never uttered. But this... this is a matter of life and death.

It's surreal, being accused of murder.

Unsettling.

Terrifying.

Rotten.

Depressing.

For years now, I've been a source of truth and justice, long before my husband took up the cape of Superman. For years, I've been a pillar of trust for the world, or, at the very least, I've tried my hardest to be. And then, in one miserable second, everything shattered. My reputation. My freedom. My marriage.

Oh, I know Clark believes me. I know he'll always stand by me, no matter what happens during my trial, or what the verdict is. I know he's working overtime, trying to prove to the world that I didn't kill anyone. But, let's face it. My story *does* seem far-fetched, at best. Who would believe that the gun just fired by itself? Even *I* wouldn't believe it if I hadn't lived it. But Clark did. He believed me without question from the moment I told him my story. I hadn't doubted that he would, but I'd be a liar if I didn't say that it made me breathe a sigh of relief when he took me at my word. I felt like...like the world stopped spinning for a moment.

Like I could catch my breath. Like the world went back to being sane for a heartbeat or two.

But as much as I love and trust Clark, I have to accept the fact that it's entirely possible that he won't be able to prove my innocence.

What then?

At best, I'll be locked up for the rest of my life, rotting away in a jail cell not unlike the one I'm sitting in right now. Clark will visit me when he can. I'll see him through a thick sheet of bulletproof glass and hear his voice over a telephone. Only it won't be his voice. It'll be the distorted, fuzzy mimic of his voice that will reach my ears. Our touches will be imagined as we press our palms to the glass, and we'll have to pretend that it's each other who wipes away our tears. And when visiting hours are up, we'll go back to our own places and nurse our broken souls.

At worst...I don't even want to think about it. Because at worst, I'll be executed. A hypothermic needle filled with poison will slide into my veins and steal my life away. All of it will be done on display, so any friends or family of the deceased can see "justice" being done. And when my heart stops and my last breath wheezes out of my lungs, my husband will be a widower.

He doesn't deserve that.

Oh, God, of all the people on this planet, he is the *least* deserving person to suffer that kind of pain.

And it's all my fault.

It's all because I was stupid. Trusting and stupid. And because I wanted the story. I never stopped to think. Never stopped to check the safety of the gun. Never stopped to question what was going on. Until it was too late and a man lay dead at my feet and I became the only logical suspect.

Stupid.

Everyone knows that you should never, ever, ever, under *any* circumstances, point a gun at anyone or anything unless you intend to shoot it.

And I did. I pointed that damn gun right at his chest. It's my fault he's dead, even if I didn't pull the trigger. If not for me, Sykes would still be alive.

Maybe I *am* guilty.

Guilty of being stupid and reckless.

Maybe this is some kind of cosmic karma. Maybe it's payback for all the times I've gone into an investigation with the assumption that a person has been guilty of some wrongdoing. And, I'll admit it, it's happened a lot. More than I can even really accurately recall. And, what's worse, the higher profile the subject of my investigation has been, the more convinced I've been that they've been in the wrong. Of course, I've always done my best to keep my investigations as unbiased as possible. It's what any good reporter worth her salt would do, but sometimes, it's really hard to keep opinions and assumptions at bay. And sometimes, during the course of my research and sleuthing around, my mind has changed and I've become convinced of their innocence.

Of course, the opposite has occasionally proven true as well. Once in a while, I'll be sure that someone is innocent, only to find out that my gut instinct has been wrong. It's a rarer occurrence, but it *has* been known to happen, as much as I hate to admit it. That's always made me angry — when I've allowed myself to be duped by someone corrupt or outright evil. It's always made me fight even harder to not be taken for a fool again. Like Lex. God, that one still hurts the most.

It's always been hard, to not take those moments personally. Mostly, I think, because it's always hit so close to home. After all, more than once, I've put my trust and faith into people in my personal life, only to be burned in the end. Each time, I'd swear to myself that it was the last time, but then, months or years later, I'd make the mistake all over again. It's why I refused to even entertain the idea of giving Clark the time of day when Perry first paired us up as a team, back when Clark was the Planet's newest

hire. I vilified him in my mind — he was just going to ride my coat-tails. I'd do all the work and he'd get all the credit. Maybe he'd even flat out steal a story or two. Because, hey, let's face it, it wasn't unheard of for me to fall into that trap.

So I pushed him away. I tried to hate him. I was overly gruff with him. I — shamefully! — stole one of *his* stories. I became everything I'd ever hated about the people who'd hurt me. To be completely frank, I was the world's biggest bitch to him.

But he saw through all of that. Even without his x-ray vision, he could see behind my stony exterior. He saw through my defensive walls. He looked right past the Ice Queen that everyone had so rightfully branded me. And he saw me. The real me. The lonely girl silently crying out for that one person who would never let me down, would never hurt me, would give me a reason to trust and love again.

He stepped up to that role and won my heart. He freed me from my internal, emotional prison.

If only he could free me from this *actual* prison.

I'm not taking about bending the bars and holding my hand as I step through the gap. Although, I have to admit, the fantasy of that *is* rather appealing. To just fly away in the arms of the man I love, never to be seen again. But, no, it's just a fantasy and nothing more. *I have* to stay and fight. *I need* to clear my name.

I can't condemn Clark to a life where everyone thinks he's a criminal too. Because that's exactly what will happen if Superman breaks me out of this prison cell. He won't be able to make rescues. He'll be forced back into completely hiding his powers. He's a strong man — he'll be able to do it for a day, a month, a year. But, eventually, something will happen — a disaster so huge, he cannot ignore it. And he'll go to help. He won't be able to stop himself. That's when the world will tear him to shreds. God forbid some wackjob gets his hands on some Kryptonite. Superman — the super criminal — will be eliminated.

If he saves my life, he'll be forfeiting his own.

I can't let him do that.

I won't.

The world needs him. It doesn't need me. As much as I hate to say it, the world doesn't need Lois Kent the way it needs Superman. He helps more people in a single day as Superman than I ever could in my life.

I did his job, once. Thanks to a red Kryptonite laser, for a few days, just before we got engaged, I had his powers. Superman was forced to the sidelines, while Ultra Woman stepped up into the void of his absence. It was grueling, and I was more than ready, willing, and happy to get his powers transferred back to him. For the first time in my life, I really understood Clark. I knew *exactly* how demanding superhero work is. I knew *exactly* how crushing it is to arrive too late to save a life, or to have to pick and choose what cry for help to answer, and which to ignore.

It's safe to say, I had my fair share of mishaps during those few days. Wrong choices I made. Calls for help that I simply had to shut out. Being too slow, even as I broke the sound barrier as I flew, to prevent a tragedy. I blamed myself a lot during my time as Ultra Woman.

But nothing compares to how I feel now.

I did this to myself. This was not a circumstance that was out of my control. I accepted the gun. I pointed it at Sykes. Even though I never touched the trigger, I'm the one who killed him. The shame and the guilt threaten to drown me. My self-loathing burns my soul. In a way, I guess I deserve whatever fate the judge eventually gives me.

I don't want to die.

I'm scared.

Just thinking about my life slipping away on death row, or strapped to a chair awaiting a lethal combination of chemicals to be injected into my veins, or — at best — living caged like an animal terrifies me. I don't know which is worse. Living day after

day knowing that my life is wasting away in a situation that will never, ever get better? Or knowing that every beat of my heart might be the last, knowing my husband is looking on, wanting to rage against the world?

If I die, I'm scared it might change Clark.

Will he still have a desire to fight for truth and justice, when the justice system has so badly failed him? Will he fling aside the cape of Superman and kill the hero just as surely as poison killed his wife? Will he decide that it is no longer worth being Clark Kent, and cease to exist in the world at all? Can a Kryptonian die of a broken heart?

I couldn't stand it, if I cause my husband to become a different man.

I'm scared too that, if I'm found guilty, my entire legacy will be forever muddied. Everything I've ever done — none of it will matter. Oh, sure, maybe to the people I've managed to help, my work will have mattered, at least a little. But to the rest of the world? My only reputation will be as a killer.

I know, it's vain of me to even care about something as shallow as my reputation. But... I can't help it. I've worked so hard for so many years to make a name for myself. To be a beacon of truth and a source of change for the better. To be known as unequivocally trustworthy. To be someone who not only had the power to change the world, but who actually went out and did it.

It makes me want to scream, to cry, to rage against the world and everyone in it. It makes me wish I had even an ounce of Superman's powers left, so I could bend these bars, step out of this cell, and prove to the world that I am innocent.

Instead, I sit here on this barely adequate cot and wait for an unfair trial while the world screams for my blood before I've even been proclaimed guilty. Alone in this dark, quiet — for once! — jail, I know that I'm guilty unless Clark pulls off a miracle and finds something to prove that I'm innocent.

All I can do is hope and pray... and try not to get my hopes up too high.

THE END