

# Guilt

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Rated: PG13

Submitted April 2010

Summary: Three years after tragic circumstances, Lois and Clark are still affected. Will they be able to work through their guilt?

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"I've written you a new prescription, Joanne. It should help, but I wish you'd reconsider. The prosthetics they have now are really pretty amazing."

The woman shook her head, causing her short dark hair to shake in an echo of the movement. "No, Dr. Brandt, I won't have my hand amputated, even though now, all its good for is as a paper weight."

The older man frowned. "Look, Joanne, I know that the idea of amputation is not something to be taken lightly, and normally I wouldn't question a patient's desires in such matters. But the pain you've had to live with these past three years is so unnecessary."

The woman stood and accepted the slip of paper with her pain prescription from the doctor's hand. "I know you think you're only trying to help me doctor, but I made my mind up years ago. "This," She held up the twisted wreck of her left hand, "stays."

Lois Lane was glad she'd decided to wear a sweater when a cool autumn breeze struck her as she left the building that housed the doctor's office. Unconsciously she pulled the left sleeve of her sweater down so that it covered most of her left hand. Most of her long sleeved tops had stretched out left arms to facilitate just that, but today she appreciated the added warmth it also provided. The hand, though no longer functional, was quite sensitive to the cold and she dreaded the coming winter season.

She hated the yearly physicals that were required because of her prescriptions. They just brought back the memories of that day so long ago. The day of her weakness, and betrayal of him.

The scars on her back she'd learned to ignore. They didn't hurt, and it took a mirror to actually see them. But her shattered hand was a constant reminder of her failure. She couldn't blame the doctor for his continued confusion over her insistence in keeping the ruined hand when the acceptance of the new technologies of prosthetics could give her a limited set of capabilities she didn't now possess, but more importantly, an end to the constant pain.

The doctor didn't understand. Her maimed hand was punishment. It was punishment she endured... she deserved, for what she'd done. She had destroyed the life of the only man she truly ever loved, and in doing so, had destroyed her own. The twisted and mangled lump of flesh and shattered bones which hung from the end of her left arm was small penance for the deed done, and she would carry it with her until the day she died.

Lois was glad to get out of the wind as she entered the building that housed Jetstar Publications, her current employer. They published a weekly newspaper, The Grantsburg Gazette, and a monthly current affairs and lifestyles magazine called simply, This Month. There was also an internet version of the Gazette that was more of a headline service rather than an in-depth reporting site. Lois was the managing editor of all of them.

Grantsburg was a city of about 50,000 located about

150 miles northwest of Metropolis. Originally a center of the fur trade back in its founding days, the town quickly blossomed into a thriving hub of commerce in north central New Troy. This was largely due to its having grown up on the banks of the Trojan River. The river served as a central artery of trade and traffic through the first century and a half of the state's existence. It wasn't until the Interstate freeway system finally found its way to Grantsburg that the importance of the river waned and the city settled back into its present more relaxed life style.

The city suited Lois' needs. It was large enough to allow her to remain semi- anonymous, yet small enough to not draw the unwanted attention of any national scrutiny because nothing of real consequence ever happened here.

Lois entered the lobby's elevator and took it up to the third floor. Once there she turned left and entered the reception area of Jetstar Publications. Jetstar occupied the north half of the floor; the south half was shared by a small legal firm, and the management offices of the Savings and Loan that took up most of the ground floor.

"Good morning, Jennifer." Lois nodded at the elderly woman who sat behind the small but elegant reception station.

The gray-haired woman gave Lois a big smile. "Good morning, Joanne. How was your appointment?"

Lois shrugged. "Pretty much what I expected."

The woman gave her a sympathetic shake of her head. "Doc Brandt still putting pressure on you, huh?"

"I've come to expect it." Lois stopped at the desk. "Any messages?"

"Nope, but you do have a budget meeting with the staff at three."

"Thanks Jen, is everyone accounted for?"

"The assignment log is on your desk." The woman gave Lois a wink. "I don't think anyone will be bothering you for several hours... if you should want to put your feet up and just veg out for a while."

Lois laughed. "Thanks, I might just do that."

Lois entered her office, as she once again marveled at the woman out front. Jennifer Grayson was a widowed mother of three and grandmother of seven. She was also the owner of Jetstar Publications. She and her late husband started the business together over forty years ago. Jetstar, over the years had had its ups and downs, but was, in the long run, a successful enough business for Jennifer to be quite comfortable, if not actually wealthy. She could easily afford to retire, and heaven knows she's earned it, but she didn't want to.

She claimed that she enjoyed 'hanging around the office', and since her Joe died, she didn't know what else to do with herself. Besides, she always said, it was a good excuse to get out of babysitting the grand kids.

At first look, Jennifer Grayson looked just like what she was; a kindly grandmother. But those who got to know her weren't fooled by the externals. The woman had one of the sharpest minds that Lois had ever run across. She only hoped that she was as competent when she reached Jen's age.

Of course, Jennifer knew who Lois really was. It wasn't like she tried to hide it from her, but Lois just didn't want to draw any unwanted attention to herself. That was why she had chosen to use her middle name, and Mrs. Grayson had understood.

Grantsburg was far enough away from the harsh glare of the lights of Metropolis so that the appearance of

someone named Joanne Lane didn't raise any eyebrows, nor would many folks connect her with the recently disgraced wife of Superman and former Daily Planet reporter.

Taking a cue from her husband's past, Lois had adopted a different hairstyle and took to wearing glasses full time. She wasn't sure if the disguise was that good, or that the people just didn't really care. If anyone had recognized her as Lois Lane, no one had mentioned it to her.

Lois picked up the stack of papers on her desk. Besides the log of where her staff was, she also had reports, articles, and budgets to look over. She dropped the pile and sighed. She just wasn't able to focus on them, and she knew why. She glanced at the small digital calendar on the corner of her desk. It told the tale of her mood. It was her fourth wedding anniversary.

Any reminder of her marriage brought flooding back the memories of that faithful day when her and Clark's world had been destroyed by her betrayal of those she loved.

She couldn't stop the rush of those horrible images so she resigned herself to the review of that incident which spelled the end of the world she had known.

It had been planned meticulously. Clark was up at the space station helping out with several necessary repairs, and it was known that he'd be there for at least a couple of days. There would be no answers to calls for help while the Man of Steel was in space.

Within an hour of Superman's departure, Intergang struck. Lois had been kidnapped from the parking garage under the Daily Planet building and soon found herself gagged and bound in some abandoned warehouse near the waterfront.

Apparently Intergang never bought into the idea that Lois Lane's marriage to Clark Kent meant that she was no longer 'Superman's girlfriend' or that she didn't possess a lot of confidential information about the resident hero. They started with drugs.

Lois had written articles, and had talked to actual agents about the kinds of drugs that were used to try and extract information, and their techniques for resisting. She was quite proud of the fact that she had used those techniques to foil their initial attempts. She focused on the inconsequential aspects of their questions and forced her responses off onto tangents. It had been hard and had taken quite a mental toll, but she had resisted... at first.

Frustrated, and not a little bit angry, her captors decided to change tactics. They switched to physical torture. Her back now bore the scars of the burns that were inflicted by the hot poker they had used. She had screamed a lot, but had given them nothing.

Then they had methodically begun working on her left hand. One by one they broke her fingers. Then they shattered her knuckles with a hammer. They also, crushed the bones in the back of her hand, until there was nothing left but a crushed and mangled lump of flesh.

The pain had been unimaginable. She had screamed, and cried out; her face covered in sweat, but she hadn't told them anything. She had won. Or so she'd thought.

She was mentally tired, and physically beaten. Her defenses were at their lowest.

Intergang decided that she was ripe for another round of interrogation using chemical persuasion. So they pumped her full of their most potent drugs once again.

She spilled her guts.

After they had gotten what they wanted from her they dumped her on the docks, to be found by workers the next morning. They hadn't killed her, which at first had puzzled Lois, but later, after the consequences of her encounter became known to her she realized it had been much crueler to let her live.

She was in the hospital when she heard the news of the bomb that had gone off in the newsroom of the Daily Planet building. Several people died, including Jimmy Olsen. Perry White had been badly injured. For the last three years he has spent his time with his wife, Alice, on a beach in Miami... in a wheelchair.

It was sometime later that she heard about the Kents. The bomb that had destroyed their farmhouse had gone off at the almost exact time as the one that had taken out the Daily Planet. Her wonderful in-laws had been killed instantly. It was no wonder that Clark never came to see her while she recuperated. She knew he must blame her for the death of his parents, and their friends at the Planet; as did she.

Lois remembered the 60 point headline in the Star that next day. The one proclaiming that Superman was really mild-mannered reporter Clark Kent, and husband to the Daily Planet's award winning reporter Lois Lane.

Lois understood completely how much Clark must now hate her; yet it could be no more than she hated herself for her weakness, and betrayal. An action which had cost so many good people their lives and had thoroughly destroyed the life she and Clark had together. So, once she was released from the hospital, she gathered up a few of her belongings, closed her bank accounts, and disappeared.

Lois' musings were interrupted by a gentle knock on her door. Not waiting for a response, Jen poked her head into Lois' office.

"Hey, there's a Jerome Clark here to see you."

Lois frowned. "Do I have an appointment I don't remember?"

"No," Jennifer grinned. "But he's quite a hunk."

Lois rolled her eyes. "Okay, send him in. Any excuse to delay working on the budget."

The door closed, then a few moments later there was another knock on her door.

"Come in." The door opened and a tall, dark-haired man entered. Lois dropped the report she'd been holding. "Clark?"

The hair was styled similar to what she was familiar with, but the man standing in front of her had a moustache and wore a neatly trimmed goatee. Many would find the look quite dashing, but Lois didn't really care for it. The look might be a bit different, but it was definitely Clark standing in front of her desk.

"May I sit down?" He indicated the chair that sat next to her desk. She nodded.

Lois' mind was in turmoil. Why was he here? Why now? Why at all?

Clark seemed ill at ease. "You look good," he said. "I missed you."

Lois was thunderstruck. "Why?"

"What?"

"Why would you miss me? Clark, I killed your parents. I killed Jimmy and crippled Perry. I ruined our lives." Her arms flailed around in useless gestures. "If your hate for me was strong enough to stay away for three years, why are you here now?"

She could see that he was stunned by her outburst, but

she couldn't see why that should be. Every thing she said was true. She'd had to live with her disgrace for three long years. She didn't need him coming here now to accuse her of what she already knew she was guilty of.

"Lois, you disappeared. I've been looking for you for some time now. Using your middle name may not seem like much of a new identity to you, but you left no trail. I've been searching the world for you."

"Why?" She could feel some of the anguish of the past coming back. "Is your need to punish me so great that you spent years hunting me down?"

"Wha...? Lois, you don't think... You were tortured. I don't blame you for what happened."

A brow rose in disbelief. "Really. I spent several days in that hospital. Never once did you show up to see me, to check on how I was doing. I was your wife. What else was I supposed to think?" Her voice choked up. "I hated myself for what had happened, so why shouldn't you?"

"You're still my wife, and I could never hate you."

Lois' stare was hard and unyielding. He wasn't going to get away with a statement like that without an explanation. Clark wrung his hands and stared at his feet before he could meet Lois' gaze again.

"Okay, I admit that I was badly twisted up then. My grief over the loss of my parents was even greater than I would have thought. I did come by the hospital, but I couldn't bring myself to see you. I just couldn't face you. Not with the way my emotions were all over the place." His sigh was audible. "Intellectually I knew that you weren't to blame. That you were a victim just as my parents and our friends at the Planet were. But emotionally I still hadn't come to grips with it all. I was weak, and I was afraid."

"Afraid? Afraid of what?"

"You had just been tortured, and had suffered loss just as great as I had. You needed your husband by your side offering you strength and comfort. But I was afraid that I couldn't give that comfort; that I didn't have the strength to support you as I should. I knew I needed time to deal with everything that had happened before I could be of any use to you. My weakness made me a coward, so I ran away."

"Where did you go?"

"Do you remember the tree house I had as a kid, the one I called my Fortress of Solitude?" She nodded. "I spent three days and four nights there, just sitting. I didn't answer any calls for help... I never heard any. I didn't see or hear anything. I just sat there and let my grief tear me apart, and then finally, build me back up again."

"I don't understand."

Clark didn't speak for several moments. It was like he was trying to figure out exactly how to convey to Lois what he went through years ago.

"First off, I was ashamed. I was ashamed that I wasn't where I should have been. By my wife's side helping her deal with her own trauma. But I couldn't move on if I didn't accept, right or wrongly, that I needed to deal with my own emotional chaos first. You were hurt, and had been brutalized, but you were still alive. My parents were dead, and that tore me apart. I knew it was ridiculous for me to think that you were to blame, but looking back I suppose you could say that deep down, in my subconscious, there was probably a part of me that held the notion that you were to blame you for their deaths, and that was the first reaction I had to deal with."

Clark got up from the chair and strolled over to the window. He looked out as he continued. "I'm not going to

give you a play by play of my thoughts and feelings as I sat, trance-like, in that old wooden tree fort. There would be no point. Eventually I came to see that the only way to get past the grief was to accept it, and allow it to play out naturally. Then I could take the good memories, and the love, and find a place to keep it safe in my heart. Knowing that I'd miss them, but that as long as I remembered them, they would never truly be gone."

He came back and sat back down in the chair. "Once I was able to sort through my turmoil, I came back to Metropolis. Even though I still carried a heavy load of guilt, I thought I could be strong enough to help you, but you'd already gone."

"Guilt? What did you have to feel guilty about? I was the one who spilled her guts and caused everything to happen. It was my betrayal of you which caused the destruction of everything good in my, in our lives."

"That's ridiculous. Once you were taken, there was no way that they wouldn't be able to get the information out of you. We always knew that this situation is one that could've happened someday. We just always hoped that your marriage to Clark Kent, and the subsequent distancing from Superman would dissuade people from thinking that you might share something more than a casual friendship with the hero. It didn't work that time."

Clark jumped to his feet again. "But me, I'm Superman. I should have been there. I should have been able to rescue you. I should have been able to keep the Planet from being blown up." His voice dropped to a harsh whisper. "I should have been able to save my parents."

Lois was stunned. For all his talk of 'working through' his emotions, Clark still carried a heavy burden of guilt. If it wasn't so seriously sad, she'd almost have to laugh. Clark was torn by the guilt over what he'd not been able to do, while she was torn by the guilt of what she had done.

A tear escaped from the corner of her eye. "Clark, this is something that you've had to deal with your whole career as a super hero. You have always known that there were going to be times when you weren't fast enough, or weren't strong enough, or just weren't aware of a situation. You can't save everybody."

His look was bleak. "But I didn't save anybody."

Anger inexplicably flared in Lois. How dare he. How dare he take that which was rightfully hers. She had earned her self-loathing by her betrayal. He didn't deserve to carry that burden. It was hers and hers alone.

"Clark, look at me." He looked up and she captured his gaze. "Nobody would have needed saving if it weren't for me. I was responsible for all those deaths. I was to blame for the loss of Clark Kent, and the destruction of our lives together." More tears began to flow. "I know you're trying to make excuses for me; trying to make me believe that you could forgive me for what I've done, but don't. I don't deserve forgiveness; I don't even deserve your understanding." A hard shuddering breath interrupted her. "I killed your parents, Clark. They are dead because of me; because I didn't have the guts to do what I needed to do."

"Lois, what are you trying to say?"

Tears flowed freely down her face. She had to take a couple of deep breaths before she could continue. "It's said that pride goeth before the fall. It was certainly true in this case." She shook her head, seeing Clark's utter confusion. "Clark, I'm not stupid I knew that I was in deep trouble. I knew that if Intergang wanted something from me, they would be able to get it eventually. Barring, a miracle rescue,

I was doomed. I only hoped that I could hold out long enough to be in a position to mess up their plans.”

“I don’t understand.”

Lois bit her lip. “It was hard, but I managed to hold out against their initial interrogation. They used threats and drugs, but I used everything I knew about those techniques and I held out. And, to my eternal shame, I was proud that I had.”

It was obvious that Clark was still confused. “You should have been. I don’t know how you were able to do it?”

She held up her mangled hand, stopping him from any further comments. “It got worse. After the first go round with the drugs, they thought it might be fun to try torture. They hurt me. They hurt me bad. I screamed, and I cried, and I cursed every one of them until my throat was raw. But I told them nothing.”

Clark looked like he was physically ill. “Oh, Lois, I knew that you had suffered, but I had no idea.”

She cut him off. “Twice they had put me to the test and twice I had beaten them. The pain was incredible, but the fire of my pride pushed it to the background. That was my fatal error. My success fueled my pride and opened the way to an arrogance that I shouldn’t have been able to embrace. I had beaten them twice, and I thought that I could do it again.” Lois’ tone suddenly turned harsh and brittle. “I was a fool.”

“Lois?”

“Clark, if I had retained some of my rationale, rather than my pride, I would have realized that my time was about up. I was physically and emotionally traumatized. My defenses, which required a steel-like focus, were down. When they brought the drugs back out I knew that my time had run out.”

Clark spread his hands in bewilderment. “I still don’t get it. You were trapped. I wasn’t there to rescue you. What could you have done?”

“I could have died.”

“What!”

“Once the situation I found myself in became obvious I knew there was a good chance I wouldn’t survive the ordeal. So the critical goal became, not to give up any information that could compromise Superman. I had no illusions, and I was willing to give my life to save you, and what you stand for.”

“Lois, no...” Clark tried to reach for her, but she pulled back.

“No, don’t you see? That is what I should have done. I should have allowed the physical torture to kill me. I shouldn’t have fought so hard to stay alive.”

“Never apologize for living. Besides, how could you have done that? How could you have *allowed* yourself to die?”

“I don’t know, but I should have tried. But I didn’t. Instead, Lois Lane the unconquerable came to the forefront and I had to take them on by myself. And I lost. And because I lost, everyone lost. Your parents, Jimmy, Perry, the Daily Planet; and let’s not forget, our lives as we knew them. All gone, because I was too proud to admit that just maybe this time Lois Lane couldn’t win.”

Clark was shaking his head in denial. “Lois, no, you fought as hard as you could. But to feel guilty because you didn’t die is crazy.”

“Is it?” Lois’ voice rose as she stood up. “I think the consequences say different.”

Suddenly their debate was interrupted by the door opening.

Jennifer shut the door behind her and stood glaring at the pair for a few moments. “As interesting as this little conversation may be, I don’t think you want any one else listening in. I can hear you both out in the reception area, and I can’t say when any of the staff won’t be coming back in.”

Clark dropped his head and Lois looked shamefaced. “Jen, look, I’m sorry but...”

“No buts,” Jennifer cut off Lois’ reply with a chop of her hand. “This silly debate ends now.”

Clark looked up at the older woman. “Silly?”

Jennifer marched over and planted herself on the corner of Lois’ desk, putting herself between the two of them.

“I don’t mean to butt into your personal business, but let me ask a couple of questions.” Lois looked like she was about to say something, but Jennifer didn’t stop to allow it. “I take it from what I overheard that each of you blames yourselves for the tragic events of three years ago.”

Lois flopped back down into her chair. “Of course he does. It’s a pattern with Clark. He takes the blame for every bad thing that happens in the world, whether he was there to do anything about it or not.”

“I take it you don’t blame Clark for what happened back then?”

“Oh course not, Clark wasn’t anywhere near Metropolis at the time. He had no way of knowing what was happening.” Lois breathed an exasperated sigh. “But I, on the other hand was...”

“Hush.” Jennifer barked out the command, then turned toward Clark. “And I take it that you don’t blame Joanne, or Lois, for what happened?”

“Of course not; she was a victim.” Jennifer held up her hand to stop Clark there.

“Okay, two more questions. One for each of you.”

Jennifer looked at Clark first. “Do you still love her?”

“More than anything.”

“And you Jo-, Lois, do you still love Clark?”

Lois bit her lower lip, as more tears slipped from her eyes. “Yes.”

Jennifer got up from the corner of the desk. “Okay then, I’ll make excuses to the staff as to why there will be no budget meeting.” She walked over and opened the door. “I’ll expect your resignation on my desk by the end of the week.”

Lois jumped up. “Jennifer!” She frowned at the only friend she’d had these past three years. “I know that you think you’re trying to help us. But it’s not that simple.”

“Isn’t it?”

“No; just putting us back together doesn’t change what happened, or what it’s done to us.”

Jennifer shook her head. “Look, the way I see it, if you’re together you can keep telling Clark that he’s not to blame for what happened, and he can keep telling you you’re not to blame. Eventually, you’ll convince each other and can put this whole horrible mess behind you and finally get on with the lives you both deserve.” She gave Lois a wink, and then closed the door behind her.

Clark turned to Lois, his hands spread in a gesture of confusion. “Lois?”

She saw the helpless look on her husband’s face. It brought back so many memories of when they’d work together and she’d make some illogical leap of intuition and he’d have no clue as to how she’d done it. It was somewhat

comical, but she couldn't bring herself to laugh. Her smile was sad, but it was a smile. "I think I've been fired."

Clark scrubbed his hand through his hair. "Look, I know that there is no way we can go back to our old lives. Clark Kent, and Lois Lane have dropped out of circulation, and it's not likely that they'll ever be able to come back; at least not back to Metropolis. But there are many places in the world where Jerome Clark and Joanne Lane should be able to go and enjoy the sights."

Lois came out from behind her desk and sidled up next to him. She looked up into his eyes. "But what about Superman?"

Clark placed his hand on her cheek. The familiar sensation almost caused her knees to buckle. "Superman doesn't belong to any one city, any one place, any more. These last three years he's become a citizen of the world. Superman helps out when needed where ever he happens to be." He moved his hand up and let his fingers glide through her hair. "There have always been so many wonderful sights I've wanted to take you to see, but we never had the time. Well we've got the time now. What do you say, Lois. Do you want to see the world... with me?"

"We both know that this will not suddenly make everything all right. We still will have our demons to work through, but like Jennifer said, maybe we can help each other through it." She put her arms around his neck. "Yeah, I think I'd like to see the world... with you. And maybe after some years of traveling, Joanne and Jerome can find some quiet little town to settle down in and just be an old married couple. What do you think?"

Clark smiled. "Works for me." He leaned down and captured her lips with his. After they broke for a breath, his smile was even wider.

"One thing though." Lois reached up and traced his moustache and beard with her index finger. "This has got to go."

Fin.  
THE END