

# Feeling Christmas

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Rated PG

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Summary: Following their adventures with the Space Rats, Lois finally feels the spirit of Christmas. Will it last or will a misunderstanding get in the way? A 2008 Holiday Ficathon story written for Elisabeth.

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Disclaimer and Author's note can be found at the end of the story.

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LOIS

Just once, I'd like to *feel* Christmas. Discover it, you know? Unwrap it and be surprised by how wonderful it is, instead of having it shoved relentlessly in my face like half-off coupons at a swap meet.

— From "Season's Greedings" by Dean Cain

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So this was Christmas.

Lois sighed softly as she laid her head against Clark's shoulder and watched the snowflakes flurry past her window. Despite the Atomic Space Rats' affect on everyone in Metropolis, she'd found the Christmas spirit this year. In the end, everyone had gotten the Christmas they wanted: Perry was with Alice, she'd helped clear things up between Jimmy and Angela, and, after decorating her apartment, she'd even surprised herself by preparing a beautiful meal.

But she had been alone, and the realization that she had no one to share her happiness with had threatened to overwhelm her. Surprisingly, she'd been determined not to lose the feeling of Christmas this year, and the universe had rewarded her by sending her Clark. She squeezed his hand ever so slightly just to make sure it wasn't a dream.

Clark never wanted to move. He stood with Lois at her window and listened to the carolers sing while the snow drifted lazily down. It was obvious that he had pleased her by coming over tonight, and that made him happy. The long hug he'd received at the door had certainly made him glad he'd come. Even if his parents hadn't encouraged him to spend Christmas Eve with Lois, seeing her joy would have made missing them tonight worth it.

He couldn't believe she'd taken his hand, and the look she'd given him just before the carolers had made their presence known had been shy and hopeful. Could she really have wanted him to kiss her? He knew he wanted to, but he was probably reading too much into her expression. Over the past few weeks, they'd grown closer, but he didn't want to push Lois faster than she was willing to go. He planned to ask her out on a date, but hadn't been able to work up the nerve yet. Probably tonight. Maybe. Well, soon anyway.

He turned his head to look at her, and she glanced up at him, smiling brightly. "Snowed in, huh?"

He shrugged and smiled unabashedly at being caught out. "It's only a matter of time. The storm is *supposed* to drop a couple of feet tonight..."

"Well, you're just in time. Let's eat." She gripped his hand tighter in hers and tugged him toward the table.

"Wow, dinner looks great, Lois." Clark leaned over the turkey and took a suspicious sniff before turning to look at her. "It

smells good, too. Did you make it?"

"I made the turkey, the stuffing and the cranberries," she admitted with pride.

He pulled out a chair for her, and as she sat, his arms almost encircled her as he shifted her chair toward the table. Her breath caught at his closeness, but she covered cleverly by clearing her throat and reaching for her napkin. Her attempt to distract herself from the romantic thoughts toward her partner was foiled when he leaned down until his mouth almost brushed her hair. The errant thought that he was going to kiss her shoulder flashed through her mind, but she pushed it away. Instead, his head paused next to her ear, and he whispered, "Is it edible?"

"Clark!" She gave a shocked gasp at his audacious question as he skipped away in anticipation of her retaliation. She glared at him as he took the seat next to her, but when she saw the teasing sparkle in his eye, she was unable to maintain her offended expression. "I can't believe you said that."

"Lois," he said seriously as he pulled out his chair. "I may be naive[el] about some things, but I'm not stupid. I wouldn't say such a thing without cause. You've...um, 'cooked' for me before."

Her mouth twisted at his statement. "Just for doubting me, you have to do all the clean-up after dinner."

"Better than getting food poisoning," he said seriously.

She shoved his shoulder in response, and he laughed, raising both hands to signal surrender.

"Just sit down and eat, Kent."

"Yes, ma'am."

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Two hours later, Clark closed the dishwasher and folded the dishtowel over the handle to dry. He picked up his wine glass from the counter and flicked off the kitchen light before moving into the living room. One small table lamp and the twinkling lights on Lois' poor little Christmas tree illuminated the room in a warm, soft glow, and a soft rendition of 'White Christmas' played in the background.

Clark couldn't remember a night he'd enjoyed more. Lois' good mood had continued through dinner, and she'd even been receptive to his teasing. Over the past couple of months, especially since his 'death' and miraculous resurrection, he'd felt like they were growing closer. Although she hadn't said anything, he was starting to feel that she saw him as more than a friend. If only there was some way to know for sure.

As he rounded the couch, his steps faltered at the picture Lois made, sitting on the loveseat with her feet curled underneath her. She was resting her head against one hand and staring into the distance, while her other hand swirled the remaining wine in her glass in lazy circles. He doubted she had any idea just how beautiful she looked tonight.

She seemed content and relaxed, and the small smile playing about her lips informed him that whatever thoughts had stolen her attention were good ones. He moved to her side and settled onto the seat, shifting a couple of times to find a more comfortable position. He quickly gave up and set his glass on the coffee table. He turned toward her and his heart skipped a beat at the soulful look in her eyes.

"Lois?"

"Hmm?"

"Where've you gone?"

Her smile widened a little as she continued to stare at some distant memory. "To the last Christmas that felt this good. I was seven and Lucy was two. I remember Mom and Dad were getting along that year, and my uncle Mike came to dinner on Christmas Eve dressed as Santa."

"It sounds like a nice memory."

Her eyes shifted to take him in, and she smiled, a smile that made him feel just a little warmer.

“Thanks for coming, Clark. It means a lot to me that you’d give up Christmas Eve with your parents to spend time with me.”

He reached over to place his hand against her cheek and brushed his thumb along her cheekbone. “You’re worth it.”

Their gazes locked, and for a moment Lois felt his unreserved adoration. She felt cherished when he looked at her like that, but those deep emotions also scared her. She felt safe with Clark, she always had, but taking their relationship farther — as she wanted and hoped that Clark wanted — threatened to destroy her only emotional sanctuary. Clark was her best friend and her partner. How could she jeopardize that?

Clark watched Lois’ cheeks redden before she dropped her eyes, and he cursed himself for not restraining himself. Sometimes the intensity of his feelings scared him, too, and he should have been more careful. Remembering his forgotten wine glass, he picked it up and mirrored Lois’ actions as she took a quick sip. He pulled away from her physically to match the emotional distance her withdrawal had caused, and an awkward silence settled between them.

The stilted atmosphere was broken when a lively rendition of ‘Jingle Bell Rock’ started playing. Never one to squander an opportunity, Clark set his glass down and jumped to his feet, startling Lois. He smiled and reached down with one hand, inviting her to join him.

“Would you like to dance?”

“Here?” she asked, eyeing her living room skeptically.

“Sure,” he said, helping her stand. “There’s more than enough room and you didn’t seem to mind dancing with me in the . . . um, on the night of the Kerth Awards.” He’d almost slipped and mentioned their mid-air dancing before he caught himself. Blundering like that was a sure way to ruin Lois’ Christmas. More and more he’d wanted to share his secret with her, but tonight was *not* the night to do it.

Lois smiled not only at the memory of dancing with him at the Kerth ceremony, but at the Embassy Charity Ball a few of weeks ago. She’d loved every minute she’d been in Clark’s arms and had been irritated when Mayson had interrupted them. Actually, the woman irritated her every time she came around, but when she intruded on their dance, it’d been particularly grating.

Well, he was here with her now with no chance of disruption — and Lois wasn’t about to throw away a chance to dance with Clark. She took his hand and rose to her feet with a smile. Clark’s responding smile threatened to buckle her knees and she was glad of his strong embrace.

He swept Lois into his arms as he moved them around the room, spinning and twirling her around her furniture until she was laughing out loud. Wanting to hear the sound of her laughter again, he sang a few bars along with the music until she placed a hand over his mouth, giggling madly. She sputtered a plea for him to stop, shaking her head even as she winced from the sound of his singing.

Dancing with her in private was much better than dancing with her at a public function; here he could pretend that she was dressed up just for him and there was no chance of interruptions. As the song ended, he moved to dip her so suddenly that she squealed in surprised delight.

They were both grinning widely when he lifted her back to her feet. “You need to follow Perry’s example,” she scolded with a grin. “At least he warns me about his tendency to dip.”

“Ah. If there’s one thing I’ve learned since coming to Metropolis, it’s that the King *always* listens to the Colonel.”

Lois laughed. “Well, you might have the right dance moves to be the King, but you should leave the singing to others.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

When the music shifted to the next song, she snuggled against him again, laying her head on his shoulder as they swayed

to Eartha Kitt’s sultry rendition of ‘Santa Baby.’ She sighed, and her contented hum vibrated against his neck. His hand pressed closer against her back in response as he lost himself in the pleasure of holding her.

“Mmm, I love this song,” she said.

He pulled back in surprise. “You do?”

“Of course I do. It’s funny and sexy.”

“Huh,” he teased. “A hard-bitten newswoman like you? I don’t believe it.”

She narrowed her eyes and pursed her lips at his joking tone before pulling out of his arms. She looked around the room to locate her abandoned Santa hat by the fish tank and grinned at his confused expression. She picked it up and tugged it onto Clark’s head firmly. She swayed away from him before spinning back in character, singing along with the music.

Think of all the fun I’ve missed,

Think of all the fellas that I haven’t kissed,

Next year I could be just as good,

If you’ll check off my Christmas list.

She looked at him coyly from the corner of her eye when singing about the fun she’d missed and when she blew him a kiss at the end of the stanza, he felt a blush rising to his cheeks. Clark was immediately enthralled by Lois’ sensual display. She rarely let down her guard enough to act playful and tonight she was treating him like he was the center of her universe, a position usually reserved for Superman. It was heady.

Santa baby, I wanna yacht,

And really that’s not a lot,

Been an angel all year,

Santa baby, so hurry down the chimney tonight.

Santa honey, there’s one thing I really do need,

The deed

To a platinum mine,

Santa honey, so hurry down the chimney tonight.

He laughed as she acted out the lines, alternately approaching him to walk her fingers up his chest and then pushing away from him when he shook his head, denying her the items she wanted. She pouted for a second and then tapped her chin in thought before holding out her hand to croon the next lines.

Santa cutie, and fill my stocking with a duplex,

And checks.

Sign your ‘X’ on the line,

Santa cutie, and hurry down the chimney tonight.

Clark laughed again when she asked for a duplex and checks. He pulled his pockets inside out and shrugged. She pouted as she sang and then sauntered over to him, beguiling him with her walk. His eyes were drawn down her body as her hips swayed. Lois snuggled into his chest and he hummed with pleasure. He tried to take her in his arms again only to have her wriggle away to mime the signing of her name.

Come and trim my Christmas tree,

With some decorations bought at Tiffany’s,

I really do believe in you,

Let’s see if you believe in me.

As the lyrics shifted to trimming the tree, Lois spun around him to stand next to her pathetic little Christmas tree. She crooked her finger at him in invitation and he found himself taking the involuntary steps toward her. Her triumphant smile really did convince him that she believed in him and would give anything to convince her that he believed in her, too.

Her sensual movements reminded him of the first time he saw Lois singing like this. That performance at the Metro Club had changed his crush on Lois to full-blown infatuation and cemented his fate. He was then, and always would be, hers.

Santa baby, forgot to mention one little thing, a ring;

I don’t mean on the phone,

Santa baby, so hurry down the chimney tonight,

Hurry down the chimney tonight.

Hurry ... Tonight!

Lois held out her hand and wriggled her fingers to indicate she wanted a ring on it. In response, Clark dropped to one knee and placed one hand over his heart while holding the other out for her. His actions shocked her, but she recovered quickly and playing along, slinked forward to sink down to sit on his knee. She placed her hands on his cheeks to whisper the final words of the song. Impulsively, she leaned in to kiss him softly on the lips.

She pulled back, and for a timeless moment, they stared into each other's eyes. The jaunty attitude that had dominated the evening shifted to something a little more tender as she looked into Clark's bedazzled gaze. She stood up and held out her hand to him before folding her arms around his waist and snuggling in for a hug.

"Merry Christmas, Clark."

"Merry Christmas, Lois."

She held on to him for another long moment, listening to his steady heartbeat before pulling away. Clark opened his mouth to say something and then, reconsidering, closed it again. Instead, he smiled at her and placed his hand on her cheek. The feel of his hand and the warmth in his gaze made her stomach flutter — only part of which was due to nerves. She didn't know what he was going to say, but she wasn't quite ready to talk about the kiss she'd given him or the feelings he evoked in her when he smiled.

"Well, it's getting late," she said.

Clark nodded in understanding. He'd learned a lot tonight about how Lois saw him, but she wasn't quite ready to talk about it or accept a date. Maybe he'd angle for something on New Year's instead. "Right," he answered. "I've got an early flight. I should be going."

"Thanks again for coming, Clark. This has been the best Christmas I can remember."

"My pleasure, Lois."

He gathered his coat, and they shared another hug at the door. After a brief hesitation, Clark leaned down and was thrilled when she allowed him to place a quick, but soft kiss on her lips.

"Goodnight, Lois."

"Goodnight, Clark."

As he practically floated down her hallway, he heard her hum a few bars of 'Santa Baby' before she giggled softly to herself. He couldn't keep the smile from his face. Now that he was sure that Lois saw him as more than a partner, it was time to move forward.

A few minutes later, Lois slipped into bed with a smile. She pulled her teddy bear toward her and closed her eyes with a contented sigh.

No one noticed Superman doing barrel rolls as he sped westward through the night sky.

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The next morning dawned cold and eerily quiet. Lois stretched as her clock radio turned on, and then she snuggled back down under her warm covers. She smiled contentedly as she remembered her evening with Clark. She'd had such a pleasant dream last night, and she knew she owed it all to her best friend, partner, and something more. She thought again of the expression on his face after she kissed him and giggled. Definitely something more.

She glanced at the clock and figured that she had a little time before she had to get up. Although Perry always insisted on the staff working half shifts on Christmas Day, for the past several years Lois had volunteered to work so that others could be with their families. That was her official story, anyway. Focusing on work was how she traditionally dealt with the holiday, and because Christmas Day was always a slow news day, she had to work twice as hard to find a scoop.

Given her newfound feeling for Christmas, maybe she'd join

with the others working on the skeleton crew for eggnog and sing-along, a tradition she usually avoided like the plague.

<And in other news, Metropolis received record snowfall overnight, resulting in several minor power outages and one multiple car accident on the interstate. Superman was on the scene to assist, and the Highway Patrol closed the roads soon afterwards... >

The bleak weather forecast interrupted her thoughts, and she tossed off her covers, listening with half an ear as she started to get ready for the day. The newscaster followed up with a report on the closure of Metropolis airport, stating that all morning flights had been canceled due to hazardous conditions. The storm had left a crowd of weary and grumpy Christmas travelers stranded in the terminal, and Lois felt a pang of sympathy for them. On the bright side, she realized, it might not be a slow news day after all.

The newscaster's too cheery voice was wishing all of Metropolis a very merry, very *white*, Christmas by the time the implication of his words sank in — Clark was stuck in Metropolis. She worried for a moment that he was stuck at the airport, too, but remembered that Clark knew about the storm and would have checked on his flight before leaving home. She felt at once both thrilled and guilty. Clark would miss out on Christmas with his folks because he'd stayed in town to spend the evening with her, and now he really was snowed in.

She glanced at the clock again and then dashed to the bathroom to get ready. If she hurried, she'd have time to take Clark to breakfast before work. Remembering her resolve to enjoy Christmas this year, maybe she'd take her half shift today and spend the rest of Christmas with Clark.

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Martha and Jonathan were just setting the table for breakfast when they heard the front door open and close.

"Clark, honey, is that you?"

They both heard the familiar whir of their son spinning into his civilian clothing before he appeared in the kitchen, his arms laden with wrapped packages. "Yeah, Mom, it's me. I just stopped in to drop off your presents. Merry Christmas!"

"Merry Christmas, son," Jonathan replied. "You're not staying?"

"I can stay for a little while, Dad, but Metropolis is buried under a foot of snow this morning, and that means Superman will have a busy day. Besides, Lois knows I didn't fly out here last night. With the airport closure, she might be suspicious if she finds out I'm here."

Martha's grin grew sly as Clark's voice took on a dreamy tone when he mentioned Lois. Her boy had it bad. She set her mug of coffee down on the table and shared a knowing look with her husband. Although Jonathan had never wanted to delve into his son's love life, her curiosity wouldn't be denied. She caught Jonathan's wink before she started her interrogation.

"You were with Lois until pretty late last night. I think I heard you land about three o'clock this morning," she said casually.

Clark smiled knowingly and leaned over to kiss his mother's cheek before stealing a slice of bacon from her plate. Martha's hand snaked out at near super-speed and smacked the back of his hand for his bad manners, but Clark just grinned. "Sorry if I woke you, Mom. I left Lois' place around midnight, but didn't feel like sleeping yet, so I stayed out flying."

Clark was still on a high from his night with Lois. He had intended to fly straight to Kansas after dinner, but instead he had continued on around the world, soaking up the Christmas atmosphere on several continents. He'd taken his time, flying slowly as he thought again and again about how Lois had kissed him, and had found himself over South Africa around eight o'clock Christmas morning.

Unable to resist the impulse, Clark swooped down to a jewelry store he'd discovered on his travels. He knew the shop would be closed on Christmas Day and had only thought to look at some of the displays through the window, but the proprietor had shown up unexpectedly and had seen Clark's longing gaze. Clark had quickly been invited inside, and twenty minutes later Clark had exited the building with an engagement ring in hand. He'd dropped his purchase off in Metropolis before finally returning to Kansas, but in his excitement, he hadn't remembered his parents' gifts until he'd awoken this morning.

"From the smile on your face, I take it things went well with Lois?"

Clark's smile grew. He knew his mom would keep at him until he told her everything, so he decided to come clean. Over bacon and eggs, Clark filled his parents in — from the look on Lois' face when she'd opened the door, to his feeling that Lois was starting to see him as more than just a friend — amid their excited exclamations. After one prompt from his mother, he also told them about his impetuous purchase in the middle of the night.

Martha was beaming by the time Clark paused to take a sip of coffee, but his father looked concerned. "Are you sure you're not moving too fast, son? From what we know about Lois, it may be a while yet before she is willing to risk her heart."

Clark nodded. "I know I need to take baby steps, and all I've really decided to do is ask her out. I'm not going to propose to her ... yet."

They finished breakfast amid a genial and loving atmosphere. Before the meal was over, it had been decided that the Kents would accompany Clark back to Metropolis and use the time to visit with Aunt Opal. Since Clark couldn't leave Metropolis, his father had reasoned, he and his mother would come to him.

"Besides," Martha divulged with a smirk, "I want to see this ring."

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Bundled up in the warmest, yet most alluring clothing she owned, Lois set out for Clark's place on foot. The plows were busy digging Metropolis out from under the snow, but the streets still weren't safe for either her jeep or a cab. Besides, Clark's place was on the way to the Daily Planet. She'd just have to walk.

Despite her precautions, she was shivering by the time she arrived at Clark's apartment. She paused in front of his door to remove her gloves and hat and raised her hand to knock when she heard a sound that stopped her cold — Clark's voice accompanied by a much too feminine laugh. Unable to stop herself, she peeked through the glass door to see Clark smiling broadly at a head of blonde hair seated on his sofa. Who could it possibly be? The only person she could think of was ...

Mayson.

Lois felt her heart clench painfully before dropping like a stone into the pit of her stomach. She glanced quickly at her wristwatch, and her annoyance with the bottle-blonde attorney flashed to anger. What was *she* doing here so early Christmas morning? And how the hell did she know that Clark would even be home? He was supposed to be in Kansas.

Lois ignored the obvious answers that flashed through her mind and glanced through the glass again. What she saw practically stopped her heart. Clark was holding a small, velvet jewelry box in his hands and while she watched, he dropped to one knee — very much like he'd done the night before — and opened the box with a shyly hopeful look. Even from this distance, the brilliant diamond caught the light and the beauty of the ring dazzled her.

Her pulse started to race as he took the ring out of the box and extended his hand toward that ... that ... hussy, before she could wrench her eyes away. She leaned against the brick on his

landing and tried to slow her racing breath through the huge lump that had grown in her throat. When she felt the sting of tears in her eyes, she knew that she had to get out of there before Clark or his *fiancee*[e2] discovered her lurking on the stoop.

She tiptoed down the stairs and dashed out of the building. She tried to run, but the depth of the new-fallen snow made it practically impossible. No longer feeling the cold, she sadly trudged through the empty streets of Metropolis toward the Daily Planet. Try as she might, she couldn't stop thinking about how this would change things between them. How could he be her best friend if he was married to Mayson?

Lois couldn't believe how badly she'd misjudged his feelings toward her. Just last night, she was sure that Clark had been interested in more than just friendship. The looks and touches he'd given her had thrilled her, but if he could spend an evening like that with her and then propose to another woman the next morning, she'd severely misjudged things. He really was only a friend.

She refused to think of what she'd just lost, even if it'd been in her own mind. Somehow overnight, the image of Clark kneeling to propose to her had traveled from her head into her heart. Twice she'd had the chance to tell him how she felt — once after her disastrous near wedding to Lex and again after his miraculous return from the dead — but she'd waited too long.

Her depressing thoughts were interrupted when another brave soul passed her on his way to work and called out a cheerful Christmas greeting. She glared at him until he ducked his head and continued on his way. Her wonderful feeling of Christmas was truly gone now, replaced with a Clark-sized hole in her heart.

The man she'd fallen in love with, the best man she'd ever known, was marrying another woman.

'Merry Christmas to me,' Lois thought sourly. Just like every other year, she couldn't wait for it to be over.

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Lois Lane was in a foul mood.

The predominant mood at the Daily Planet was hardly festive. The Christmas Eve night-crew grumbled about being stranded by the storm, while the Christmas Day crew — those few that had made it into the office — complained about the difficulties of getting to work. Everyone, however, had sensed Lois' irritability the moment she'd stepped off of the elevator and had been smart enough to give her a wide berth. If any of them wanted to complain or find a sympathetic ear, they did it out of her earshot; everyone knew to avoid Mad Dog Lane when she had *that* look about her.

Well, almost everyone. No one bothered to warn Ralph. Despite the early hour, he'd already taken advantage of the holiday spirits and, clueless to the warning signs, had tried to use the season of good will to his advantage while Lois was refilling her coffee mug. The resulting verbal castration and the remains of Lois' cold coffee dripping down his face and staining his shirt garnered him more than one look of pity.

Lois plopped back down into her desk chair, still seething from her interaction with Ralph. Taking out her frustrations on the office oaf had been gratifying, but hadn't really made her feel better. She'd done her best to concentrate on her work, but it had done nothing to ease the pain in her heart. Clark and Mayson were getting married. There wasn't anything she could do about that either.

Reflexively, she shoved the thoughts of Clark and Mayson away and reached over to fiddle with the police scanner on her desk. After hearing an update about the city's snow removal efforts and one dispatch for a minor fender-bender, Lois turned the volume back down and reached for her rolodex. If there was anything newsworthy happening anywhere in Metropolis today, then Lois Lane was going to find it.

A frustrating hour later, Lois slammed her handset down.

She'd heard more out-of-office recordings today than she had in the past several months. How could *everyone* be out of the office today? There ought to be a law against it. Even her special sources were out celebrating.

Undaunted, she checked her emails and then rifled through her files trying to find something, *anything*, that she could turn into a story, but found nothing. Defeated, Lois sighed as she slumped back in her chair, rocking it back and forth with her foot. She allowed her eyes to roam across the nearly deserted newsroom, looking for inspiration. Her eyes passed over the small congregation of coworkers at the coffee station and past Perry's darkened office to rest on Clark's desk.

Without her volition, her thoughts returned to last night's dinner. A small, wistful smile played at the corner of her mouth as she remembered her partner's quick wit, their dance and her impromptu performance. Clark had been there for her, whether she wanted him to be or not, and he'd become indispensable to her, both professionally and personally. She'd had few good friends in her life and no others like Clark.

For a moment, she became angry as she wondered if Clark had been toying with her last night. She thought he had been flirting with her, but less than eight hours later, he'd proposed to another woman. It just didn't *fit* with what she knew of him. Her angry thoughts dissipated as quickly as they'd grown as she realized that she had misread his actions, seeing only what she wanted to see. Clark was a good man and would never treat any woman that way. Clark had spent Christmas Eve with her because he was kind, generous, and knew she had been alone. He had only wanted to help her experience the true Christmas spirit.

She had no doubts that Clark had been interested in her when he'd first arrived in Metropolis. She even suspected that his declaration of love last summer had been genuine. He had wanted more than friendship with her, but she'd been too slow to act, too stubborn to accept the wondrous gift of his love due to her fears. The most caring, gentle, and honest man to ever show interest in her and she'd missed it.

Her eyes lingered on Clark's nameplate until unwelcome tears pooled in her eyes as she realized she'd accepted her deeper feelings for Clark at the same time that he had been falling in love with Mayson. She knew Clark well enough to know that if he was serious enough about Mayson to spend the night with her, then he was in love. His decision to propose wasn't an impetuous decision either; his love was real and long-term.

A Christmas morning proposal was such a Clark thing to do, too. There was no mistaking the look of hope on his face or the shape and size of that box. Any woman would be fool to turn Clark down, and Mayson was no fool. The ache in her chest that accompanied that thought was not just for her stolen future, but for the eventual loss of his friendship. She hadn't dared to risk what she had for something more, and now she had neither.

'It could have been me,' she thought sadly. Mayson now had something that would have to remain in her dreams — a good, honest, kind man that would be devoted to her for the rest of her life. Lois dropped her head into her hands and groaned out loud. Clark may have spent a wonderful Christmas Eve with her, but he'd be sharing the rest of his life with Mayson Drake.

No. She didn't want to think about what she'd lost. She swiped away the moisture from the corner of her eyes and stiffened her back. She started shifting through the files on her desk again when the police scanner crackled to life. Lois heaved a heavy sigh of relief as she heard about a fire — possible arson and robbery — at a downtown jewelry store.

Glad to have a distraction from her depressing thoughts, she grabbed her bag and shrugged into her long coat on the way to the elevator, barely avoiding a collision with a surprised looking Perry on his way out.

'Lois? What're you doing here? I thought I told you to take

the day off.'

'I gave it to Myerson,' she tossed over her shoulder as she dashed into the elevator.

'Then where're you going? It's time for the sing-along.'

'Not now, Perry. I've got a lead.' Lois' terse answer, punctuated with repeated jabs at the elevator button, faded as the doors slid shut.

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Clark stretched one clenched fist above his head and rolled through the chill Christmas air. After the first spate of weather related emergencies, Superman's day had settled into relative peacefulness. As he'd predicted to his parents, he'd been needed as Superman several times as impatient motorists had hit the icy streets. He'd spent half an hour clearing the airport runways so that the stranded travelers could get home to their families before he'd zipped away to rescue two foolish boys that had tried to skate on the too thin ice covering Hobbs River.

He'd also taken time to stop at Coates Orphanage to see the kids, as well as visit his apartment long enough to open Christmas presents with his parents before another traffic incident had called him away. Later, he'd seen his parents safely to Aunt Opal's and promised to stop by for Christmas dinner. Although it wasn't the Christmas day they had all planned, it hadn't been too bad. All that he needed to make his day complete was Lois.

He breathed in deeply and sighed in contentment, the grin of a man in love glued to his face. He was sure that the motorists he'd helped could tell he was besotted, but he didn't care. He was positive that Lois was beginning to see him, her partner and best friend, as something more. He couldn't remember ever feeling quite this hopeful about his life, not since he'd first come to Metropolis and met a certain brunette whirlwind named Lois Lane.

Now that the roads had cleared and the good people of Metropolis didn't need their resident superhero, he couldn't keep his thoughts from his feisty partner. The smile tugged again at his lips as he recalled her sultry display for the twentieth time. She certainly seemed interested in him last night, but could he be reading more into her looks, her words, and her actions than really existed? Did he understand the tenderness in her gaze and her lingering touches correctly as a desire for more than just friendship?

Maybe her playfulness last night hadn't really been flirting. Maybe it was simply a joyful expression of gratitude. Clark started to panic as he second-guessed himself. He had just started wondering about the return policy for his impulsively purchased diamond engagement ring when the shrill call of a siren and a cloud of dark smoke interrupted his anxiety attack.

He sighed with relief. Too much time on his hands was making him feel unsure of himself. He needed to be confident. He needed to be sure. He shook his head; he needed to tend to his duties and put this fire out. Clark turned in mid-air and whooshed toward the business district amid a swirl of snowflakes and a sonic boom.

It turned out not to be much of an emergency after all, and there wasn't much for him to do. The building, a jewelry store in the business district, was empty, and the built-in sprinkler system had kept the fire contained to the western wall. Superman put the remaining flames out as the fire fighters and the police arrived on scene, and then worked with them to assess the cause of the fire. He was finishing his discussion about the smoke and water damage with the storeowner when he heard Lois cursing — something about the snow, rookie policemen and the freedom of the press. Clark smiled, bid the owner a merry Christmas, and turned toward the door.

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Lois knew there was a story here, if she could just find the right person to talk to. She stared daggers at the retreating back of

the policeman. Ha! *Policeboy* is more like it. When did they start letting prepubescent children onto the force, anyway? She'd report his badge to the police chief, of course. Right after she got this story.

Recognizing that the detective was trying to exit the store without talking to her, Lois grabbed his coat sleeve. "Hold on, Zymak. I need the real story on the robbery."

"Lane," the detective sighed. "For the last time, there was no robbery attempt. It was a small, *accidental* fire caused by faulty wiring in a set of Christmas lights."

"Are you sure? Maybe someone planned it that way. Did the wiring catch fire because someone tampered with it? Maybe someone had a grudge against the owner. Oh! Maybe it was a diversion for something else. Did you find any accelerants?"

"Lane, we've been over it; the firemen have been over it, twice! Superman has confirmed it. No laws have been broken. It was just bad luck and an old string of lights."

Lois scowled as Zymak tried to turn away, but held tight to his coat sleeve and brightened again as she thought of another angle. "Perhaps the manufacturer should be bought in for questioning for selling a substandard product?"

"Old decorations. Period. Now, I'm going to write up the incident, close the case and rush home so I can spend the rest of Christmas with my family. I suggest you do the same."

"I'll look into it," she called after Zymak's retreating back. "I'll bet they're using child labor or sweat shops to make poor quality decorations. It'll be the exposé of my career. We're talking Pulitzer!"

Zymak kept walking, a raised hand his only acknowledgement to her rant.

Lois clenched her jaw against the urge to vent her frustration at the detective as he walked away. In the place of a primal scream, she settled for viciously kicking the brickwork under the storefront window. Unfortunately, instead of feeling even a smidgen of satisfaction from the act, her other foot slid on a patch of ice, and with a windmill of arms, she felt herself falling.

Lois expected to hit the cold, hard sidewalk with her backside, but she was surprised and pleased when a pair of strong, spandex-clad arms encircled her and lifted her back to her feet.

"Whoa, there. I've got you, Lois."

Lois turned to thank her rescuer, and when she slipped again on the same patch of ice, grabbed tightly to his forearms to keep her balance. "Superman! Just the person I wanted to see."

Clark flashed her a warm smile before remembering that he was in the suit and he tried to modify his sappy grin into something more restrained, but he was afraid it didn't really work. His heart skipped a beat at how beautiful she looked bundled up in her winter coat and scarf, a pink tinge to her cheeks.

"Merry Christmas, Lois."

Lois' welcoming smile tightened into a slight grimace at his greeting, but at least she managed to keep from rolling her eyes. She forced out a lackluster, "You, too," before releasing his arms and taking a careful step back.

"Are you working?" Superman asked lightly.

"Of course," she replied. "What else would I be doing?"

"I thought you senior reporters got important holidays off? Why are you hard at work on Christmas?"

Christmas again. What Christmas had to do with *anything* was beyond her comprehension. "Well, you don't take vacations from your job," she defended hotly. "Why should I take time off from mine?"

Clark's smile slipped at her petulant response. He knew Christmas wasn't her favorite holiday, but after last night, he thought she would have changed her mind, at least a little. He was also taken aback not only by her utter lack of enthusiasm for

the holiday, but at her response to his teasing. It was risky to act so familiarly while in the suit, but Lois didn't seem to have noticed. In fact, she didn't seem thrilled to see him at all. She was obviously in full-reporter mode, but even the vaunted hero's arrival didn't garner him his accustomed adoring look. Before he could find an appropriate response to her question, though, her face brightened as she reached into her bag and pulled out a pencil and notepad and started firing questions in his direction.

"Superman, what can you tell me about the fire? Was it arson? Did you smell any accelerants? Was the fire used in conjunction with a robbery attempt? Do you know how many thieves were involved and did they get away with any jewelry?"

As she continued with her barrage of questions, Clark's eyebrows rose. He'd heard detective Zymak give his statement about the cause of the fire, and he felt confused about her insistence of foul play. Not wanting to disappoint her, he fumbled for an answer. "Well, there wasn't really any, um..."

"It really was an accident, wasn't it?" she conceded as her face fell. "There's no story here, just a filler piece for tomorrow's city section." She dropped her hands and released a discouraged breath. She hated Christmas and slow news days and blonde district attorneys and...

"I'm sorry," Superman answered lamely, shrugging into the ensuing awkward silence. He watched as Lois morosely stared at the pad in one hand. "Lois, what's wrong?"

"What isn't?" she mumbled. Then louder, "Nothing, really, except that there doesn't seem to be anything newsworthy happening today. Unless..." She trailed off, eyeing the superhero speculatively. "What have you been up to today?"

Lois listened carefully as Superman filled her in on his morning and took careful notes. She asked a few questions about his work with the emergency services, but grew silent as he mentioned his visit at the orphanage, his description of his visit reminding her of Clark. A sad smile tugged at her mouth as she remembered his gallant efforts to organize the toy donations to the orphanage. Maybe she should give her partner these notes, since the orphanage story was just the kind of touchy-feely human-interest piece that Clark was so good at writing. Clark might be forever out of her reach romantically, but for the time being, at least he was still her partner.

Clark trailed off in his recitation, realizing that he'd lost Lois' attention. Her sad expression tugged at his heart and did she just wipe away a tear?

"Lois, are you sure you're okay? You look sad."

"I'm sorry, Superman. I guess I got distracted. It's just that, Clark ... Nevermind. It's not important."

"Clark made you sad?" he asked. "But last night ... I thought you and he had a nice evening together."

"We did. It was nice — better than nice. It was wonderful. But then today..."

"What? What happened today?"

Lois shrugged, not wanting to talk about it, but Superman lifted his eyebrows in silent encouragement. She certainly had his undivided attention and was grateful for his friendship. She couldn't remember the last time Superman had stuck around after a rescue just to talk with her. The fact that he cared about her warmed her heart a little.

Who knows? Now that Lois couldn't have Clark, maybe she should try again to entice the superhero into a relationship. For the first time in months, she allowed herself to think about what it would be like to be Superman's girlfriend, but try as she might, she just couldn't dredge up the same feeling of excitement about it. She would probably always get a thrill from flying with Superman, but it surprised her that she couldn't imagine him in the role of boyfriend anymore. She sighed.

"You know Clark's my best friend, right?"

"And you're his." Superman smiled.

“For a long time, I thought he wanted to be more than friends. And I . . . well, I tried to tell him that day in front of the Planet and then again after you brought him back to life, but I was scared about what would happen! Now I’ve waited too long, and there’s no chance that we can ever be together, because of . . . well, you and he are good friends, so you probably already knew that it wasn’t possible, didn’t you?”

Clark’s mind swam as he tried to make sense of Lois’ words. He was vaguely aware that she had asked him a question, but through the loops and twists of her monologue, he had clearly heard her say, “no chance we can be together” and he was still trying to process it. On the one hand, she seemed to be saying that she wanted to move their relationship forward and had, in fact, been thinking along these lines for months. On the other hand, she seemed to be saying that there was no hope of a relationship developing. Hope filled him with the knowledge that Lois liked him, *really* liked him, maybe even loved him, but his joy was tempered by confusion and uncertainty.

Clark certainly didn’t understand her reasoning. In fact, he had no clue why she thought a relationship with him wasn’t possible. If she wanted a relationship with him like he wanted with her, then what was the problem? He tried to puzzle through her words again, but still couldn’t come up with a reason, so he gave up and simply asked her.

“Lois, I honestly have no idea what you’re talking about. Why can’t you and Clark be together? I think you’re perfect for each other.”

Lois’ eyes narrowed as she regarded Superman closely. His look of confusion was both genuine and a little adorable. It was obvious that he knew nothing about Clark’s intention to marry Mayson, nor did he suspect at how serious their relationship had become. Superman simply wasn’t that good of an actor.

Superman was close to Clark, probably even considered Clark his best friend, and Lois had expected Superman to know about Clark’s deepening relationship with Mayson. The fact that he didn’t soothe her heart just a little. At least she wasn’t the only one being left out of the loop. If Clark hadn’t shared his feelings with either of his two best friends, then the only possible explanation was that Clark wanted to keep his engagement with Mayson a surprise — or a secret.

She hesitated now that she was faced with telling Superman about what she’d seen. Maybe it was to give Clark the chance to tell them himself. More likely, she didn’t want to tell Superman about it because if she didn’t confirm it out loud, she could pretend that Clark’s engagement wasn’t real.

Lois’ expression softened, and she smiled sadly. “It’s not my place to say. Look, I’m sure that Clark can tell you more than I can. Forget I said anything.”

“Forget . . .?” Superman paused mid-response as one of the firemen called his name. ‘Not now,’ he thought frantically. He was practically itching to figure out what was going on in Lois’ mind, but she had already taken a shuffling step back. She tipped her head in the opposite direction and shrugged her shoulders.

“I’ve got to get back to work anyway,” she said. She raised her hand that still held her notebook. “Thanks for the quotes.”

The fireman stepped in between them to ask his question, but Superman levitated a foot in the air in order to call out desperately, “I’m sure this’ll only take a minute, Lois. May I fly you there?”

“Thanks, anyway,” she said as she started to move away, stepping backwards. “But I think I’d like to walk.”

Superman continued to watch her as she turned around and started to shuffle up the street, kicking clumps of snow out of her way as she went. Clark felt more confused than ever. Last night he’d been so hopeful about Lois’ feelings for him, but now she not only felt that a relationship with him was impossible, but she also wasn’t enamored by her hero anymore either. She’d never

turned down the chance to fly with him before! Something serious had happened and he was determined to find out what it was.

With a firm nod to himself, he settled back on the ground and focused his attention to the waiting fireman. The sooner he finished with his Superman duties, the sooner Clark could find out what had gone wrong.

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As Lois sent her final story to the printer, she leaned back in her chair and stretched. It hadn’t taken long to write up the Superman stories; there wasn’t much to them, after all. For a few blissful moments, however, it had been enough to take her mind off of Clark. Now, though . . . Determined not to think about her partner again, she turned to look around the office and saw instead the cheery decorations she’d complained about a few days ago. She frowned as the multicolored bulbs and lights on the Christmas tree sparkled gaily, seeming to mock her inability to find joy in the holiday.

The sad thing was that she still *wanted* to love Christmas. She had had such high hopes this year and up until this morning, she had really gotten it. The much vaunted, but elusive spirit of Christmas had filled her heart with love and friendship and hope. Before she knew it, her eyes had filled with unshed tears. She had known how risky it was to open up her heart. She’d been hurt so many times in the past that she should have known something would go wrong.

Not this, though. She hadn’t expected Clark’s engagement. She had been so confident that she’d never lose Clark and now nothing would ever be the same. Her throat closed up painfully at the thought, but she couldn’t cry, not yet. Taking a deep breath, she leaned over her desk and placed her head in her hands. She concentrated on forcing herself to breathe evenly and didn’t notice when the elevator arrived and disgorged its lone occupant.

As soon as he entered the elevator, Clark lowered his glasses and scanned the newsroom for Lois. There were few people in the office now. The few staffers that were working had been joined by a few of their colleagues for the annual sing-along in the conference room. Clark smiled as Perry sang Elvis’ “Blue Christmas” and Jimmy was laughing with his arm around Angela’s shoulder. Those not singing were talking softly over glasses of eggnog and enjoying the show. Everyone except Lois. She was sitting at her desk, staring forlornly at the Christmas tree.

‘Perfect,’ Clark thought to himself as he pushed his glasses back into place. He could talk to Lois in relative privacy and — if he could work up the courage — ask her to join him for Christmas dinner. Right after he found out why she thought they couldn’t have a future together. It had been torture talking with the firefighter earlier, and with half his attention still on Lois, he hadn’t been able to come up with an excuse not to join the men at the fire station for some quick holiday cheer. It had taken him the better part of an hour to get away.

The elevator arrived at the newsroom, and Clark stepped out hesitantly. Now that he had arrived, his jumbled emotions sprang to the forefront. Would she be happy to see him? Would she accept his invitation for dinner tonight? Would she talk to him about her concerns? She *had* to know how he felt about her; she already knew everything about him — everything except his dual identity — so what was holding her back?

Clark looked toward the conference room again and saw that everyone else was still inside. Lois was alone, leaning over her desk with her head in her hands. He was so preoccupied with his thoughts that neither Lois’ posture nor the slight waver in her breathing registered. Instead, he stole up behind her and leaned over her shoulder to ask softly, “Working hard?”

Lois jumped at the softly murmured question at her ear. Her eyes widened, and her heart thundered when she saw that it was

Clark, who jumped back to avoid a collision as she abruptly stood up.

“Clark! What are you doing here?”

“Can you believe that my plane got snowed in?”

Lois tried to smile in response to his teasing reference to their dinner last night, but it was a pathetic attempt. She thought it would have been better if Clark hadn’t joined her for dinner last night, but had left for Kansas when he was supposed to, then he wouldn’t be engaged to Mayson and Lois’ world wouldn’t be crashing down around her. Unable to meet his delight-filled eyes, she ceased her inner babble and turned to her desk. She picked up a file with faked disinterest and forced herself to respond.

“That’s too bad.”

Clark’s smile faded a little at her dull response and at the moisture in her eyes. It was obvious that she’d been fighting tears. Lois had told Superman that her sadness was due to something Clark had done, but he still had no idea what it could be. He was determined to get things out in the open, but Lois’ barriers were up at full strength. Getting her to talk might take a little finesse.

“So how did things go today? Any Pulitzer winning stories I should know about?”

“It was pretty slow, but I was able to get a few pieces together for tomorrow’s paper.”

“That’s right. You talked with Superman earlier.”

Lois looked up from her file, her feigned apathy replaced immediately with a frown. “You’ve seen Superman today?”

“Yes.” Clark congratulated himself on the completely true, if misleading statement. “He told me that you spoke to him. He seemed concerned about something you said.”

“What was that?” she asked warily.

“Well . . .” Clark paused. Could he ask her straight out? What if he really had misinterpreted her words from earlier? “He said you were concerned about our future relationship.”

“Well, who wouldn’t be?” she exclaimed, throwing her arms in the air. “I mean, we were best friends, Clark, but do you really think our relationship wouldn’t change with an extra person in the mix?”

“An extra person?” Clark swallowed roughly, trying to control the fear that was growing in his belly. “What extra person?”

Lois slapped the file on the desk and stood, crossing her arms defensively. “I stopped by your place this morning. I realized that you’d been snowed in for real and wanted to take you to breakfast. Clark, I saw you through the window.” At his bewildered look, she sighed impatiently. “You had company — someone that I didn’t expect to be at your place this morning — and an engagement ring.”

“You saw that? Look, Lois, I can explain. . .”

“What’s to explain? You obviously wanted to keep this part of your life a secret, but how long did you think you could keep this from me, anyway?”

Clark noticed that the news staff had begun exiting the conference room, and most of them were paying close attention to their conversation. He leaned in a little closer to her and lowered his voice. “Lois, I know you’re mad, but could we go somewhere private to discuss this?”

“Mad? I’m not mad. I’m hurt. Discovering that you haven’t been completely honest with me makes me wonder if I even *know* you, and that hurts. It really hurts, and you know what? I *am* mad. Were you ever going to tell me?”

“Well,” Clark started hesitantly, looking around at their colleagues nervously. “I’ve been meaning to tell you for a while, but the time just didn’t seem right. I really came over here to invite you to dinner.”

Lois stared at Clark in stunned amazement. “You’re inviting me to dinner?”

“Yeah. It’s a family thing at my Aunt Opal’s place, but everyone would be thrilled if you came.”

“What about Mayson?”

“Mayson who?”

Lois’s scowl deepened both at his guileless expression and at his subterfuge. “Your Mayson. Mayson Drake. What do you mean, ‘Mayson who?’”

“My’ Mayson?” Clark stared at her in bewilderment.

Nothing about this conversation was adding up. If she was furious about the discovery of his secret identity, why was she asking questions about Mayson Drake? Come to think of it, if she’d discovered his secret this morning, why hadn’t she said anything to Superman earlier? Clark threw up his hands in frustration. “Lois, I honestly have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Lois’ eyes narrowed as she regarded Clark closely. His look of confusion was both genuine and a little adorable. It was obvious that he didn’t have a clue what she was talking about. Clark simply wasn’t that good of an actor. “I’m talking about your secret engagement to Mayson Drake. A blonde woman was sitting on your couch this morning, and I saw you propose to her. What are you talking about?”

Clark’s eyebrows shot up as the pieces slid into place, creating a very different picture than he’d been imagining. He smiled in relief and stepped close to Lois. He cupped her chin with his hand and smiled at her. “You’ve got it all wrong, Lois. I’m not engaged to Mayson.”

Her anger was diffused immediately, swiftly replaced by relief and then confusion. “But I saw. . .”

“...Something that is going to take a lot of explanation and some significant groveling on my part. Trust me, though. I’m not in love with Mayson.”

“You’re not?”

He shook his head and raised his other hand to frame her face and stepped closer to her. “I’m not. I’m in love with someone else.”

Lois saw again that same look of unreserved adoration. Like the night before, she felt cherished and completely loved, but instead of scaring her, those deep emotions thrilled her, filling her with a deliciously warm feeling. It was like she’d been given not only a second chance at life, but all of those disappointing Christmases from years past were washed away with this one joyful gift.

“And who do you love?” she whispered.

His eyes twinkled as he grinned tenderly at her. “I think you know.”

Her breath escaped in a happy sigh as she smiled back at him. “I love you, too.”

Time stood still as she basked in the knowledge that Clark loved her. His answering sigh of contentment and happiness confirmed that he’d wanted to hear the words from her as much as she had wanted them from him. Her hands stole up his chest and slid around his neck as they inched closer to each other. Lois saw his eyes drop, and as she watched his mouth inching closer to her, she felt the warmth drop into a swirling anticipation.

She knew he was going to kiss her, but a little thought niggled at the back of her mind and demanded immediate attention. She pulled her head back slightly and narrowed her eyes suspiciously. “What secret did you think I was talking about?”

Clark chuckled and shook his head. “I’ll tell you later.”

It stole her breath when Clark reached around her to pull her body against him and bent down to kiss her. His kiss was tender, yet strong; an equal give and take that represented so well their partnership together. As he started to pull back, her hands slid into his hair and she pulled him down to her, unwilling to let him go. The second kiss was more demanding, but Lois welcomed it.

She ignored the catcalls and whistles from her colleagues and let herself get lost in the feeling.

Christmas might just be her favorite holiday, after all.

THE END

Disclaimer and acknowledgements: We all know that the characters aren't mine; I only borrowed them. I also stole a few lines from the episodes "Season's Greedings" by Dean Cain and "We Have a Lot to Talk About" by John McNamara. No offense or infringements were intended, just good fun.

I would also like to pay homage to the fabulous Eartha Kitt, who died last Christmas as I was writing this story. I've included most of the lyrics to "Santa Baby" as a tribute to her talent and spirit.

Thanks to Kathy and Carol for the read through and to Erin for fixing it for the archive. This story was written for Elisabeth. Sorry it took me so long to finish it.

Here are the three things Elisabeth wanted in her fic:

1. L&C banter and/or flirtation
2. A misinterpretation
3. Free time

[e1]Though having the accent mark above the "i" here as it was is, indeed, correct, the formatting on the archive tends to freak those out, so I simply deleted it. Just so you know that there's a method to my madness. :)

[e2]For the same reason above, with the fanfic archive freaking out at accent marks, I deleted this one. Also, I added that second "e" because when you're referring to the female, it's 2 "e"s. A man is with one.