

Merry Christmas, Darling

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Summary: With Clark away on New Krypton, Lois faces the loneliest Christmas of her life. If only a miracle could happen...

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Lois sighed as she looked out of her apartment windows. Beyond the glass, the snow was blowing hard, swirling in gusts, and obscuring the view of the street below. A thin layer of ice and snow clung to the edges of the panes of glass, furthering the claustrophobic feeling that was growing in Lois' heart. As she watched the dancing white flakes, a brief dip in the wind allowed them to fall straight down, before picking back up into a low, howling force, sending the snowflakes sideways once more.

"No view of the stars tonight," she breathed, the words barely making a sound, like the touchdown of snowflakes on the pavement below her windows.

Disgusted and heavy-hearted, she pushed away from the glass, pulling the curtains shut against the deepening twilight. She put her back to the storm raging beyond the walls of her apartment and took stock of the place. It didn't help. It only tore fresh wounds in her grieving heart.

Why, oh why, had she bothered to decorate the apartment?

"Because," she whispered to herself in the otherwise silent, still apartment, "it's his favorite holiday."

It was true. Clark had always loved Christmas. During the brief years they'd so far known each other, something inexplicable came over Clark during the Christmas season. The natural sparkle in his eyes grew. His smile became wider and somehow even more frequent than usual. His entire attitude changed. He reminded her of a child nearly bouncing in place with barely controlled excitement and glee.

At first, Lois had found it mildly irritating, even if she'd already stopped finding Clark a nuisance and had accepted him as her closest friend and confidante. She just wasn't much of a holiday person anymore, so Clark's over-exuberance for the holiday grated on her. But soon, even that irritation had fallen by the wayside. Before long, she'd found that she loved the way he seemed to fairly beam with joy during the holidays. And, what was more, his enthusiasm had rubbed off on her, softening her stance on the holidays.

"God, I miss his zest for Christmas," she said to herself.

She looked around once again at her place. Yes, she'd done the decorating for Clark, but she'd also done it for Jonathan and Martha. They were supposed to spend Christmas with her, all three of them united in the face of the most heartbreaking holiday of their lives. Now, it all seemed pointless. With the snow piling up and the wind blowing in gales, all flights into and out of Metropolis had been canceled. The Kents were stuck in Kansas.

There was no way to get them in for the holiday.

"If only you were here, Clark," she said. "Superman would have gotten them here safely."

Of course, Clark *wasn't* there. And that meant Superman wasn't there either. It wasn't that he just wasn't around, too busy with his duties as Superman to be there with her. He wasn't on *Earth*. He was off, among the stars, fighting in a war to free the handful of surviving Kryptonians from the hands of a madman. At least, Lois had to believe that he was still fighting. She couldn't bear to think of him as injured or dead. No, he had to still be alive. So, whenever she thought of him leading his people on a strange, alien planet, he was always alive and well.

Sometimes, she imagined him in heavy battle armor — all the better to protect him, like a knight stepped out of time from the medieval ages. Sometimes, her mind's eye conjured up thoughts of him in the uniform of Superman — the bright blue and red, slashed with splashes of yellow, the crest of the House of El proudly emblazoned on his chest, announcing to everyone just who he was and what he was capable of. She wasn't sure which image of him made her sadder. The armor and the accompanying thoughts of war that it brought with it? Or the Superman suit — the last thing she'd ever seen him wear, before he was ripped away from her to a new life, a new job, a new wife.

"Snap out of it, Lois," she half-heartedly admonished herself. She sighed again and padded over to her stereo. "Maybe some music," she muttered to herself, hoping to pull herself out of her funk.

She knew, however, even as she hit the power button on, that it was a lost cause. She hadn't truly been herself in months — since that excruciatingly painful summer day when Clark had bid the planet farewell. And, instead of it getting easier to live her life without Clark by her side — as she'd anticipated — it had only gotten harder. Every day was more difficult to face. Every night was a thousand times lonelier. Every milestone seemed more bitter. Already, they had left their planned wedding date in the dust.

Their wedding.

It seemed like the entire universe was out to keep her and Clark from exchanging their vows. Clark had wanted to say them privately to her before he'd left, but she hadn't had the heart to do it. He was already a married man, in the eyes of his fellow Kryptonians. As much as she hated it, she couldn't say her vows to someone else's husband, even if Clark himself didn't put any stock into the idea of an arranged marriage performed in infancy. And, she had to be honest to herself, there was a good chance Clark would never find his way out of his marriage to Zara, or a way to return to Earth.

She couldn't do that to him, to wound his heart like that.

"Thanks for listening to WLEX radio," the smooth voice of the radio jockey said as the stereo turned on. "Next up, more of your holiday favorites."

"Greeting cards have all been sent," crooned a female voice as the music began. "The Christmas rush is through. But I still have one wish to make. A special one for you."

Lois frowned. She'd never liked this song. It always made her so sad, to think of someone being apart from the person they loved on Christmas. She'd been in that boat before — holidays spent alone, eating Chinese food straight out of the carton while she sat in front of her television, because her father was out of reach, her mother was in rehab, and Lucy had run off with her boyfriend of the week. As much as she hated the chaos her family could sometimes bring, the loneliness was infinitely harder to bear.

She reached for the stereo, ready to either find a new station or to turn it off again completely, she wasn't quite sure. But at the last second, her fingertips twitched and refused to obey her mind's command. She dropped her hand and padded away from the stereo. No, she would let the music play. Maybe it would be

cathartic somehow. Maybe, just maybe, it would make her feel closer to Clark. After all, if he was there, she knew he'd want to hear any and every Christmas song that played.

"Merry Christmas, darling. We're apart, that's true. But I can dream and in my dreams, I'm Christmasing with you," the singer continued.

Lois fidgeted with the diamond solitaire engagement ring on her finger. She still wore it, every day, and planned on wearing it for the rest of her life — regardless of if Clark came home to her or not. She loved him, plain and simple. And while her body was forced to remain behind on Earth, her heart was on New Krypton, with the man she loved. It would die on New Krypton, if Clark was unable to keep his promise to come home to her. She knew it without question — she would never love another.

Her mind wandered to the ring's mate — her unworn wedding band. She'd given it to Clark, to remind him of her and all that was waiting for him back home on Earth. It had made her feel better, to give him a little piece of herself that he could physically carry with him. He'd promised her that he would guard it with his life and bring it back to her as soon as he could. She only hoped that he would be able to fulfill his promise, even if it seemed more and more remote of a possibility with every day that came to an end.

"Holidays are joyful. There's always something new. But every day's a holiday when I'm near to you," the song droned on in the background, now only half heard by Lois.

Her heart ached for Clark. To hold him. To see him smiling at her. To hear the husky softness of his voice. Even just some news of him — to know, for certain, that he was alive and well. It was strange, she mused. She'd wasted so much time, in the beginning of their relationship, trying to stay away from Clark. But as time passed and their friendship grew, he'd become an indelible part of her life. Even before they'd begun to date, Lois had felt an immense sadness any day which passed by without at least one phone call from Clark.

Now, months had passed since she'd last heard from him. Months of unbearable pain in her heart and soul. Months where Lois had cried herself to sleep every single night.

Not that she faulted Clark. It wasn't like interstellar email existed, giving him the ability to drop her a quick note before heading out to battle Lord Nor and his forces. She just wished that there was some way to be able to reach out to him, to let him know how much she loved and missed him.

"When you get home, I'm never letting you out of my sight again," she told a framed photograph of the two of them at Clark's first Kerth award win.

Lois would have given anything for just a minute with Clark. One more gentle kiss. One more strong, tight, reassuring hug. One more intoxicating whiff of his cologne. One more precious smile directed at her. One more of his amused chuckles, seared into her mind and savored.

"All the lights on my tree, I wish you could see. I wish it every day. Logs on the fire fill me with desire, to see you and to say that I wish you Merry Christmas. Happy New Year too. I've just one wish this Christmas Eve. I wish I were with you," the singer passionately warbled.

She looked over at the small, obligatory tree she'd purchased for her apartment. Clark would have hated how tiny it was, she mused with a sad smile. He'd been adamant about getting a big, full tree once they were married and in a home of their own. But she hadn't had the heart to get anything bigger. After all, she wasn't celebrating the holiday this year, no more than Jonathan and Martha Kent were. Oh, they all pretended that they were in the Christmas spirit, but none of them were fooling anyone.

It made her heart sag, to see that pathetic little tree. But the star atop it made her smile, even if it was a wobbly, watery smile. Clark had given it to her, the first Christmas they'd spent together.

He'd known she would be alone for the holiday, with her family being unreachable and their friends all busy with other plans. So she'd foregone his usual trip home to visit with his parents, and had, instead, spent the holiday with her. It had been the best Christmas of Lois' life.

She loved that star. Over the short years she'd had it, she'd come to think of it as a symbol of Clark. The sparkle it gave off reminded her of the eternal smile that resided in his soft brown eyes. But, more than that, it served as a reminder of the best friend she'd found in him. That anyone would willingly give up their free time to spend a family-based holiday with her had completely humbled her. But Clark had acted like it was no big deal, because, Lois knew, it *wasn't* a big deal for him to stay with her in Metropolis instead of going home. She'd known, even then, that her happiness had always been Clark's main concern.

"I've just one wish this Christmas Eve. I wish I were with you. I wish I were with you. I wish I were with you. Merry Christmas, darling," the singer finished.

"I'd give anything to have you back," Lois whispered to herself. "I know you're doing the right thing, helping people who desperately need you. But, God, I hate the fact that I let you go, Clark. I wish I'd been selfish and asked you to stay."

The next song started to play on the radio — some upbeat, happy, celebratory tune that barely registered in Lois' mind. Her ears were deaf to the melody as her tears started to fall. She shuffled to the chair she'd long since pulled up to her windows and sat down, though she couldn't remember crossing the room. Blankly, she stared at the curtains, the location of the star Clark had said was New Krypton burned into her memory. She never needed to see that point of heavenly light to know where Clark was. She was constantly aware of its location in the sky, as though it called to her with some unheard voice.

After a while, her grief overcame her. Exhaustion settled over her body and she slept, a deep, dreamless sleep. That kind of sleep was always welcome. It meant that the pain went away for a little while, that her sadness couldn't touch her, that her battered heart got some kind of respite. Of course, she always welcomed the good dreams as well — the ones where Clark was with her and she could at least trick her mind into feeling his body again as she kissed him, hugged him, ran her fingertips over his chest in awe that he was there.

She awoke a few hours later to a growling stomach. A quick glance at the clock told her that it was five minutes to ten. Still Christmas Eve. She sighed. Couldn't the holiday just be over already? Another protest from her stomach prompted her to get up off the chair and shuffle over to her kitchen. She opened her refrigerator and freezer, standing before them in judgment of their offerings.

"Not much in here," she proclaimed with disgust. She'd have to go shopping again soon. "My least favorite thing," she muttered.

She settled on frozen waffles. Plucking two of them from their box, Lois stuck them into the toaster to heat up. For once, the culinary gods were kind to her and the food didn't burn. She skipped the butter completely and dunked them directly into a single-serve packet of maple syrup. It wasn't a great meal by any means, but it quelled the hunger pangs while fulfilling the simultaneous disinterest in eating.

She forced herself to shower next, brushing her teeth after slipping into one of Clark's old sweatshirts that she'd taken. It helped her feel close to him, as though it were his arms around her, not lifeless fabric. Then she curled up on the couch and flicked the television on after turning off the stereo, which was still spewing out an endless loop of Christmas tunes.

"Yeah, I'd be mad too, if Godzilla stomped on my house," she told the TV as she finally found something that wasn't Christmas-related.

She watched for a few minutes, her eyes barely seeing the images on the screen. Her clock softly chimed eleven. She frowned. With her earlier catnap, she knew sleep would be elusive for a while yet, and that it would be pointless to even try. She stretched out on the couch anyway, pulling a throw blanket over herself. A moment later, she heard soft knocking at the door.

“Who the hell...?” she muttered under her breath.

For a brief moment, she wondered if it could be Steve, who lived on the eighth floor. He and his wife, Kim, had no children of their own, but had made it a tradition since they’d moved into the building five years before, to dress as Santa and Missus Claus and visit each of the apartments with young children. The parents usually slipped the two a gift for each child, for Santa to deliver on Christmas Eve, to spark the Christmas excitement and to tide the kids over until the morning. It was a cute tradition, Lois had to admit. But what could the two want with her? And at this hour of the night?

She got up and cautiously moved to the door.

“Who is it?” she asked.

“Ho, ho, ho,” came a deep male voice from the other side.

“Steve?” she wondered as she worked the locks, after a brief glance through the peephole revealed that, whoever it was out there, was too far to one side to see. She freed the last lock and pulled the door open. “Steve, I think you have the wrong...”

“Merry Christmas, Lois,” came the reply as she abruptly cut off her own words.

Lois felt herself staring. For a moment, she was unable to speak. Then, finally, in a wobbly, untrusting voice, “Clark? Is that really you?”

“It’s me. I’m home.”

“Oh, God.”

The words bubbled up as a sob. Her body sagged as her knees gave out. But Clark was right there, catching her in his arms, just as he always had. Together, they embraced, wordlessly taking in the moment of blissful reunion.

“Are...are you really back?” It was nearly impossible to squeak out the words. “Forever? Or did they give you a day pass to come visit?”

“I’m home, Lois. Really home. Forever. I’m done with New Krypton. And, more importantly, it’s done with *me*.”

“I’ve missed you so much,” she said as she stroked his face in disbelief. If this was a dream, she was going to make it count.

“I missed you too,” he said, just before capturing her lips with his own.

“Come inside,” Lois said, as their lips parted. “You’re freezing cold.” She paused as realization dawned. “Why are you so cold? You don’t get cold.”

“No, I usually don’t,” he admitted as he followed her into the warmth of her apartment.

“Then...why?” Lois asked, concern flooding her.

“I walked here. There aren’t any cabs out in this weather.” He shrugged, as though it didn’t bother him in the least.

“Walked?” Lois asked. “But you can just...you know.” She made their mutual gesture for flying.

“My powers aren’t fully back,” Clark said he hung up his sodden coat on a peg. He ran a hand through his hair, brushing out some of the half-melted snowflakes. “I haven’t had much time to soak up the sunlight.” He shrugged again. “It’s not a big deal.”

“What happened? How are you here? What about your people? How did you get back? When? Can I make you some coffee? Tea? I’ve been keeping some of that oolong you like, just in case. Hot chocolate? At least, I *think* I still have some left. Maybe some...”

Clark smiled at her, stopping her deluge of questions before she could even start in earnest. Lois’ heart skipped a beat at that well-missed sight.

“Hot chocolate sounds great,” he said, following her into the

kitchen. As Lois got everything ready, he leaned against the countertop and ran his fingers through his hair. “I have so much to tell you,” he said after a moment. “But I guess...let me start with your questions. I’ve only been back an hour. Maybe less. Zara and Ching dropped me off at my place so I could change. I couldn’t wait to get back into my regular clothes instead of that strange Kryptonian clothing I’d been given. It was comfortable enough, but it wasn’t...comfortable,” he finished weakly, gesturing helplessly.

He took the mug of hot chocolate that Lois had cooked up in the microwave and carefully sipped at the hot liquid. He closed his eyes in bliss, as though he was tasting the most delicious thing in all the universe. Maybe he was, Lois realized.

After a moment, he continued. “It was soft enough and it fit sort of like my Superman costume, which was almost nice in a way. But it was just...functional, I guess. It lacked a heart. Everyone wore roughly the same thing every day. It didn’t allow for much...personal expression. Anyway, I had to wrap your Christmas present before I came over.” He gave her a grin.

“Clark, you being here is present enough,” Lois told him. “Believe me.”

“Maybe, but this was *important*,” he said, handing her a small box wrapped in silver foil paper. “Come on. Let’s sit on the couch. Then you can open it.”

Lois took the box and examined the outside for a moment. Then she gave him a teasing grin. “What is this? A New Kryptonian rock that says ‘My fiancé went to New Krypton and all I got was this lousy paperweight?’” she ribbed him.

Clark chuckled as he led her to the couch. “No. Sadly, I didn’t get a chance to tour the gift shops. Just open it.” He set down his mug on the coffee table and watched her in earnest.

“Okay.”

Carefully, she tore the nearly expertly placed paper. A small box — dark blue with white snowflakes — appeared beneath the paper. Curious, she dropped the paper to the floor and opened the lid to the box. Her breath caught in her throat as she saw her wedding band laying inside, still on the silver chain she’d purchased so that Clark could wear it around his neck.

“I told you I’d keep it safe and return it to you,” he said softly. “Lois Lane? Will you still marry me?”

Lois set the box down in a daze. All she could do was launch herself at Clark in a hug. She nearly cried in sheer happiness as his arms encircled her again.

“Yes!” she almost laughed in her joy as she kissed him. “Yes, Clark.”

She felt the tension bleed out of his body, as though he’d been afraid she might reject him.

“Thank you, Lois,” he whispered in awe. He smiled softly. “You know, this is the first time I’ve taken it off my neck?” he mused. “Since the moment you placed that chain around my neck, before I left, I’ve kept that ring close to my heart. Just like my thoughts of you. It got me through so many rough times out there, on New Krypton.”

“I’m glad I could send at least something...some part of me...with you,” Lois said, snuggling into his chest.

“It was more than just a piece of you...a piece of home, Lois. It was...I don’t know. Pure hope, I guess. Hope that I could still come back to you. That I could fix the problems on New Krypton and come back to where I truly belong — at your side.”

“Does this mean that you and Zara...?” She had to ask, had to know for sure.

“We’re no longer married in the eyes of the Kryptonians,” he answered.

“How?” she breathed in gratitude and awe.

“It’s a long story,” Clark said, his eyes shifting to some place a million miles away, as though he was seeing the ghosts of the past. “After Nor was killed, I used my status as their leader to appeal

for an annulment of the marriage. Well, Zara and I *both* did. After all, she was the heir to the throne through birthright. I was just the one chosen to rule alongside her. It took some persuasion, but enough of the Elders agreed. The marriage was deemed void.”

“How did you...?” She could barely finish the question.

“How did we persuade them?” he asked, a twinkle in his eyes. He took up his mug of hot chocolate again and drank from it. “A fair number of them didn’t trust me as it was. They thought I was too soft to effectively lead their people, because of the way my upbringing on Earth shaped me, even though they readily admitted that I’d at least done well enough to command their troops against Nor and his followers.”

“Too soft?” Lois asked, shocked that anyone could think that of Clark. “You’re one of the strongest people I know. You’ve got such an amazing heart.”

Clark nodded. “Maybe, but strength of heart isn’t valued the same way out there that it is here. I was deemed soft because I refused to kill, even in the heat of battle. I wouldn’t condemn the prisoners we took to their deaths, even though Kryptonian law was pretty explicit in what’s to be done with traitors.”

“That’s insane!” Lois said, angry now. “Since when is valuing life a bad thing?”

Clark sighed and shrugged. “Like I said. It’s a whole different world. Not much of it made sense to me. Anyway, the Elders also knew, even if Zara and I tried hard not to let it show, that the marriage we were in was nothing more than a sham, upheld to prevent Nor from claiming her as his bride and seizing the throne. In the end, they saw that they were helping no one by keeping the marriage intact.”

“So...” Lois began carefully, her interest piqued, as she sipped her own hot chocolate. Part of her had felt sorry for the other woman, even amid her jealousy. She knew Zara was trapped in a marriage that wasn’t of her choosing, and that, if she could have, she would have chosen her bodyguard, Ching, for a husband. “Zara is... what now? Single and waiting for the next pig to come along and force himself onto her?” She felt incredibly angry at the thought.

“No,” Clark said with a shake of his head. “She’s already married.”

Lois made a noise of disgust in her throat. “Gross. Did the Elders even give her time to take a breath between your annulment and her remarriage?”

“It’s not what you think,” Clark said with a sly smile. “She married Ching.”

“But...how?” Lois stammered, both happy for Zara and confused. “I thought some kind of law said she had to marry a nobleman.”

“Exactly,” Clark said, his smile turning mischievous. He peeked over the rim of his mug at her, which only added to his impish look.

“I’m a little lost,” she admitted with a shake of her head.

“Before Zara and I approached the Elders about dissolving our union, I used what power I had as their leader to make Ching a nobleman. I raised his status high enough to make his House a Ruling House. A minor one, to be sure, but it was enough.”

“You...made him a noble?”

Clark nodded. “Think of it like...like receiving a knighthood. Someone deems you worthy of the title, so they just...bestow it on you.”

Lois nodded in turn. “Well, I can’t believe I’m saying this about those two, but...I’m really happy for them. Especially since it means that you get to be here, on Earth, with me.”

“Me too. They weren’t bad people, Lois. They...they became close friends of mine, while I was on New Krypton. They were...we *all* were...just...” He sighed, appearing to look for the right word. “Duty-bound,” he finally settled on. “As strange as it sounds, I’m going to miss them.”

“Well, that may be,” Lois said, “but I’m not going to pretend that I wasn’t insanely jealous when Zara told us that you two were married.” She shook her head. “Anyway, it doesn’t matter anymore. All that matters is that you’re home.”

“I missed you so much,” Clark replied softly.

“I missed you too.”

“I hated every moment I was away from you,” he continued, looking down into the depths of his drink. “It was strange. I was amongst people who shared my heritage, but I’ve never felt...well...quite so much like an alien before. There were all these weird customs, strange foods, bizarre phrases. I’ve been to every country on this planet, Lois, and I’ve never felt so out of place.”

“There had to have been something good out there,” Lois said, hoping to lighten Clark’s sudden somberness.

“There was *one* positive thing,” he slowly admitted. “Some of the Elders...some of the older ones, like Trey, were people who’d known my parents. I learned so much about them. More than I’d ever hoped to know. They sounded like such incredible people. It kills me inside, knowing that I’ll never personally know them.”

Lois smiled tenderly at him. He sounded so emotional, so choked up, it was hard not to cry tears of happiness and heartbreak for him.

“There, you see,” she said, forcing down the lump in her throat. “I told you there had to be a bright side.”

“Yeah,” Clark agreed, though it sounded only half-hearted. “I’m glad I got the opportunity to know my parents, even if only second-handedly. But there were times when I felt like it wasn’t worth the cost — being away from you and Earth and all the people I care about. So many times, I was terrified I was never going to see you again. When it seemed like I’d never find a way out of that marriage. When I thought for sure that I was going to die on the battlefield.”

Lois’ heart sank. “Did you see a lot of battle?” she whispered, her voice so light it was almost non-existent. She set aside her mug.

“More than I wanted to,” Clark answered evasively. “I couldn’t tell you how many hours or days I was out there, fighting. But, it was enough. And when I wasn’t actively fighting, I was surrounded by experienced military personnel, planning our next moves. Ching was invaluable in that department, even if we didn’t always see eye-to-eye on things.”

“You said before that Nor was killed?” Lois asked, needing know about the circumstances that had freed Clark from his imagined obligation to help a world full of strangers.

Clark nodded in a detached manner. “We learned that one of the Elders was a spy, so I had our own spies track his movements. Eventually, we were able to pinpoint a few, select locations that seemed likely hideouts for Nor. I gave the command for a few of the elite squadrons to raid the locations and bring back Nor, alive if at all possible. Think of it like a S.E.A.L. team mission, but trickier in a way, because all of the raids had to happen simultaneously, to prevent Nor from getting wind of what was happening and escaping. It turned out that we were right and that one of the locations was housing him. He put up a fight and was killed in the struggle, but not before killing three of our own.”

“I’m sorry,” Lois said, sympathetically rubbing his back.

Clark sighed heavily. “It didn’t surprise me, after all I’d seen Nor accomplish on the battlefield. Still, all three of them were good men.” He paused and looked around Lois’ apartment, appearing to take in everything about the place. “I like the tree,” he said after a moment.

Lois blushed a little and let him change the subject. “Really? I imagined that you’d hate how scrawny and tiny it is.”

“Really,” he assured her. “You could have just a *picture* of a Christmas tree taped to the wall and I’d still think it was the most beautiful tree in the world. Because, right now, it’s *our* tree.”

“Our tree,” Lois repeated with a nod. “Still, I promise, next

year, you and I will find the biggest, fullest, most beautiful tree our home can contain, and we'll decorate it *together*."

Clark chuckled. "Deal."

Lois tucked herself into his side and luxuriated in the warm, solid mass of his body against hers. She smiled contentedly as his arm encircled her. For a long moment, neither one of them spoke, until, at last, Lois couldn't stand the absence of his voice any longer. For too many months, the sound of his voice had been missing from her life. She needed to hear it now, as much as possible.

"Do your parents know you're back?" she asked quietly.

"Not yet," Clark admitted, sounding a little sheepish. "I was in such a rush to get here, to you. I thought I'd call them in the morning. Or, if my powers allow, I thought I'd surprise them, like I did with you."

"They're going to be so thrilled," Lois replied with a smile.

"I've missed them."

"They've missed you. I've talked to them almost every day since you left."

"Thank you, Lois. For being there for them, when I couldn't."

He sounded a little ashamed of himself, for his recent absence.

"You know I love them," she said, letting him know, by the tone of her voice, that she considered herself lucky to know the Kents. "They are so proud of you," she added, wanting to lighten the burden in his heart, "for being brave enough to go to New Krypton, to help your people."

He shook his head. "One thing I've learned? The Kryptonians aren't my people. Maybe they were, once, before I was sent to Earth. But not anymore. The people of Earth are my people. Still," he said, forcing a smile, "it's nice to know that they think I did the right thing. I'm so thankful that you and my parents had each other. They love you, Lois. They have, ever since they met you, back in Smallville during the Cornfest."

Lois laughed a little as the embarrassing memories surfaced. "Oh, God, I was so mortified by my uh...assumptions and the way I spoke without really thinking. I was so sure they were going to hate me and refuse to let me stay at their house."

Clark chuckled. "Hardly. They saw, even before we did, maybe, how good we were together. They always knew that we just...fit together."

"And soon, we'll be bonded together for life," Lois said, reaching up and cupping his cheek, as he'd so often done to her. "Soon we'll be married."

"The sooner the better, as far as I'm concerned," Clark replied.

"I was thinking," Lois said after a moment. "All of this," she gestured vaguely, "has taught me something. I don't need the big wedding. I don't need all the...stuff...that goes along with it — all the things my mom's been harping on. The live doves, the bell ringers, the huge reception with the extended cocktail hour and the Viennese hour with seventeen different cakes. All that matters is that you and I start our life together, with a few close friends and our families there to witness our union. What do you think?"

"Lois, it's never been about all the trappings and trimmings for me. I just want to say my vows and become your husband. You can have the huge, over the top wedding if you want, or we can fly off to Vegas tomorrow and get married in one of those cheesy little twenty-four hour chapels. I just want to be with you."

She snuggled even further into his side. "God, it's *so* good to feel you next to me. I dreamed of this so often. But to have you here with me for real? It's just beyond perfect."

Clark kissed the top of her head, sending shockwaves of electricity through her body. She could feel him as he craned his neck to check the time. "Hey, it's after midnight. It is *officially* Christmas morning."

"This is the best Christmas of my life," she sighed in contentment.

"Mine too."

"Merry Christmas, Clark."

"Merry Christmas, Lois."

THE END