

A Tempus Twisted Christmas

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Rated: PG

Submitted: January 2011

Summary: Lois and Clark are happily married and ready to enjoy the holidays. Only Tempus has decided to try and ruin all the fun....

Set around Season 4 of Lois & Clark: The New Adventures of Superman; some dialogue taken from the episode 'Honeymoon in Metropolis', Season 1 written by Dan Levine

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Lois and Christmas had never gotten along very well. Christmas to her had always been that sort of obnoxiously cheery family uncle that you had to put up with and pretend you liked, but inside you dreaded seeing whenever he came to visit. Besides, being a newswoman, she had known when she was being sold a line, and Christmas cheer had always been the biggest lie of them all. Her family, when they had tried to get together at the holidays, were always awkward around each other at best and at each others throats at worst. After pretenses of niceness would fail, her mother would disappear with a bottle of gin, not to be heard from till Christmas afternoon. Her sister Lucy and herself had tried on occasion to make it a better holiday. But somehow, the dynamics of her parents--whether married or divorced--always ruined it. Then, when she had moved to Metropolis, she had merely felt lonely when Christmas came around. Too burdened by the memories of childhood to want to try and go home for the holidays, she would just hold up in her apartment, year after year. She'd maybe go to the Daily Planet Christmas party, smile, and say, 'oh, yes, I'm heading out to visit my family tomorrow.' Everyone always accepted her lie, because it was what was expected. Everyone had touted how wonderful Christmas was, and yet she had only ever wanted to merely survive the holiday.

That is, until *he* came into her life. Until Clark Kent. Superman. Her husband.

She had finally seen Christmas through his eyes last year and discovered how wonderfully simple and lovely it could be. Both sets of their parents had come to visit Metropolis for the holiday. Her family, with all their

complications, alcoholism, and cyborg-weirdness... And Clark's wonderful, down to earth, generous parents. She'd never forget feeling the chaos around her starting to overwhelm her when her father had brought in that hideous fake silver tree and his *cyborg*-whatever, and then, Martha and Jonathan had come in with a beautiful hand-picked spruce. Her heart had melted at the simplicity of it, the rightness of it. It was the way Christmas should be.

That's what Clark and his family had taught her about Christmas. Its simple beauty.

And this year it would be different, better even. This year she was Mrs. Clark Kent, and she was deeply in love. This year they were 'flying' out to Kansas to spend it with his folks, thanks to Superman Express. This year she had escaped spending another awkward holiday either trying to avoid her family or even worse, miserably alone.

This year, she could explore the idea of a perfect Christmas. A Currier and Ives, snow on the ground, and surrounded by the ones you love---Christmas.

Something she never thought she would want to do, let alone get the chance to do.

She, Lois Lane, was excited about Christmas. She would never admit it to anyone in a million years, but she had been flipping through Better Homes & Gardens magazines for ideas on how to make their brownstone just perfect for the holidays. Even if they wouldn't be there for Christmas Day, it was still the Season, and she couldn't wait for Clark to see the fruits of her labor. She wanted to give him a magical Christmas. He was magical to her in so many ways... besides just the super ones.

It was magical to her that they had found one another.

It was magical that she had finally stopped being stubbornly independent long enough to see what a great a guy he was.

She had almost missed him.

Thank God Superman is a patient man.

"Can you believe Christmas is only five days away?" Clark asked, coming up behind Lois in the kitchen and wrapping his arms around her lovingly. They had just gotten home from work, and she was sorting the mail.

"No! And I'm still not done shopping! I'm determined to get Perry something nicer than a pair of suspenders this year. Oh, and I found this really beautiful easel that I thought your mom would love, but I have to get to the store before tomorrow if I'm going to get it---"

Clark started kissing her neck, distracting her. "Mmmm... are you doing that on purpose?" she asked, the mail suddenly looking much less interesting.

"Well, sometimes it's the only way to keep you from going into babble mode," he said playfully, kissing her just under her left ear, which he knew would give her pleasurable shivers.

She turned in his arms to face him. "I know of something else that keeps me from going into babble mode," she whispered, getting into his game.

Lois leaned up to kiss him, wrapping her arms tightly around him as she moved in closer.

"Oh yeah?" he asked huskily, "What?"

He caressed her face, gently planting kisses on her nose, her chin, her eyes, until she couldn't take it anymore and brought him to her lips. Suddenly, they seemed too constricted in their work outfits. Lois began undoing Clark's tie, hoping she wouldn't encounter the Suit at that moment as she unbuttoned his shirt, which would hinder her goal. She was relieved for once to not find spandex but just Clark's chiseled, bare chest which she instantly leaned down to kiss, just below his collar bone. Clark trembled deliciously at her gentle touch and brought her face back up to his, meeting her eyes and kissing her mouth with simmering passion as he started to undo the buttons of Lois' blouse. Lois tugged Clark's shirt out from his pants, stroking the lean muscles of his back as she did so. She even managed to undo his belt, but her fingers kept getting distracted by the smooth plane of his abs.

Clark's strong embrace held them up against the counter as things heated up between them. Before they knew it, they were half naked, half lying on the kitchen counter, the mail and Christmas shopping lists utterly forgotten.

Lois paused from kissing him just long enough to ask, "Do you think we could move this to somewhere more comfortable? You may be invulnerable, but I am not impervious to cutlery--"

She didn't even finish the sentence as Clark quickly whisked her up to their bedroom to finish what they had started in the kitchen.

Sometime later, a languorous Lois came down the stairs, utterly content with her life. She had taken a short nap after their lovemaking but had awoken to a note on his pillow. 'S is needed. Will bring home the tree. Love, Clark.' It had made her sigh a little bit to wake up without him next to her, but she had also decided that it would give her some time to start the Christmas decorating.

Lois turned on a Frank Sinatra album, the first crooning notes of The Christmas Song eliciting a tuneful hum from her lips. She had been buying all new decorations since Thanksgiving which she had shoved into the hall closet until tonight. It was their first Christmas in their new house, and she wanted it to look perfect. She had never bothered before with many decorations, usually just a sad little Charlie Brown tree. But this year, she was determined things would be different.

Even though she couldn't wait for Clark to return home, she enjoyed the time putting up decorations on her own. She put up various wreaths and gold and burgundy taffeta streamers around the room, giving it a homey, Christmas feeling that she wanted to wrap around herself forever. Actually, there was someone more tangible she'd prefer to wrap herself around forever, but the Christmas feeling was doing nicely until he got home.

After about an hour of setting everything up, she set the

room aglow with candles and white lights. Lois surveyed her work around the room, enjoying the effect. All it was missing was a home cooked meal.

Lois still hadn't mastered the art of cooking, but the art of takeout she had perfected. Before leaving the Planet that afternoon she had ordered in from the gourmet grocery store a lovely meal for two, complete with a chocolate mousse dessert. All she had to do was set the table.

Lois was opening the wine bottle, or trying to, when she heard the front door open from the kitchen.

She made her way towards the living room with a smile. "I'm glad you're here! I could sure use some super---" her sentence froze on her lips as she looked up, and the still unopened bottle slipped harmlessly to the carpet as she saw it wasn't Clark who had come in her front door.

"Tempus," she whispered in complete shock.

"Surprise! Merry Christmas, Lois!" said the time traveling maniac, in that oily annoying way of his.

Lois tried to gain her composure, even though her heart was hammering a mile a minute. "Clark will be home any second, Tempus," she said with as much courage as she could muster.

"Then I need to act fast. No time for explanations. We'll chitchat on the way."

With that comment, he grabbed her arm and flicked a switch on his device in one motion. Lois felt the pinch of light, her body disappearing from her living room before she even knew what happened.

"Lois, you'll never believe the tree I found," Clark said, opening the front door. He heard Sinatra playing in the background and saw the lovely effort Lois had gone through to decorate the living room for the holiday. He had never seen her so zealous before about Christmas, and it warmed him. He was glad the holiday was finally reaching her.

"Lois?" he called, thinking she was still in the kitchen. Then he stilled. He set the tree down and tried to calm the panic rising in his chest. He could always hear her heartbeat nearby, though he had grown so accustomed to it, he hardly paid attention to it anymore. Now suddenly its absence sent him into a panic. He scanned the kitchen, seeing the meal she had prepared--no, there was a bag from Metropolis Market on the counter--the meal she had *ordered* was set on the table. He lifted his head up and scanned their bedroom.

She wasn't there. Methodically he made himself check everywhere in the brownstone, just in case. The bathroom, the back porch, the laundry room. She had said she planned to stay home all evening... had she gotten a call for a story?

Then he saw it. The wine bottle, laying on the floor, closed with an opener stuck in its cork. It was nowhere near a table. Someone had dropped it.

Lois had dropped it.

Someone had scared her into dropping that bottle of wine.

And, he feared, had kidnapped her.

Clark spun into Superman and headed out the door, desperate to see if he could find a trail.

~1993~

Suddenly Lois found herself in the elevator at the Planet. She felt a little dizzy and remembered hearing a quick, "Have fun! I know I will!" before she was shoved into... here. But she was safe! She was at the Planet!

The doors chimed open. She scanned the room, noting it was the middle of the day and not that evening, but it *was* still Christmas time. She had never been so happy to see tacky Christmas decorations in her life!

She saw Clark sitting at his desk and launched herself at him.

"Clark! The strangest thing just happened! I was so afraid," she started, throwing herself into his arms.

"Lois! Calm down, what's gotten into you? Are you okay?" he asked, gently setting her aside. "Don't tell me you've been exposed to that crazy pheromone spray again," he said, wondering what Lois Lane was doing practically sitting in his lap but tempted not to care.

"Nice haircut," Jimmy said to Lois as he whizzed by the two of them, heading on an errand.

<<Jimmy?! He looks like a completely different person!

>>

Lois stood up suddenly from Clark's lap, brushing her pants awkwardly. She looked down at Clark, really seeing him as she hadn't paid that much attention the moment before. <<He looks so young and vulnerable,>> she thought, a cold fear starting to come over her.

Clark noticed a change in her color and was by her side right away. "Lois, are you okay? Would you like to sit down?"

"Yeah, I..." she said absently, making her way over to her desk. She noticed Clark's left hand as he pulled out her chair and sat her down. No wedding band. But still solicitous as ever. It didn't matter where they were in their relationship. Clark had always looked out for her.

He went and got her a cup of water. "Here, drink this."

Her fingers brushed his as she took the cup, and she felt the electricity as she always did now when she touched him. Did he? Even then, did he know? She sipped the water, not looking at him, trying to steady herself, to think.

She glanced around the newsroom, noting it was the old Planet, before the whole Luthor debacle had destroyed it. The knowledge that Tempus had sent her to her own past was just starting to sink in.

She always had a stack of newspapers on her desk, to help her keep track of the local competition. She surreptitiously leaned over to look at the date on the top of the stack. It was as she had feared, Tempus had taken her back to the past. December 20, 1993. Three years ago.

Why? What benefit could Tempus have sending her back to her own past? Before, he had always been set on destroying her and Clark's relationship or worse, trying to kill Superman. What could he possibly gain from sending

her back to the early stages of their relationship?

Then it hit her, looking at the caring tenderness that was evident in Clark's eyes. <<He loved me, even then,>> she realized.

Tempus had sent her just far enough in the past so that she was separated from Clark by time. Their relationship wouldn't start moving into anything serious for at least another year. Tempus had sent her back in time to torture her and show her what she could never have again. For, she realized if she became tempted to try to move her relationship with Clark too far forward too fast, she remembered from her experiences with HG Wells that she could damage the timeline, and thus cause problems in her own time. If only HG Wells were here to help her now!

She held back the tears that threatened to flow. She had to remember how to be the old Lois. The Lois so bent on getting the story that she had almost missed the best man that had ever been in her life. She had to be the Lois Lane that wasn't in love with Clark Kent. The Lois that wasn't *married* to Clark.

She took a deep breath and tried to regain her composure.

"Sorry, Clark. I--I think I'm okay now," she said, trying to steady her voice.

"Are you sure?" he asked with concern. She didn't look in his eyes again. It would be too painful. If she saw that incredible love in his eyes again that had been there even in the early days, she didn't know if she could resist it.

"Um, so, what are we working on now?" she asked, trying to get her bearings on what possible stories they might be covering at this point in their relationship and needing to avoid thinking about Clark's eyes.

"We're staying at the Lexor, remember? Investigating Senator Harrington?" he asked, still looking at her suspiciously.

<<Oh, no. The Honeymoon Suite. With Clark!>> How was she to handle this? How could she not be tempted to want to kiss him, hold him, do all those things married couples do? She'd have to spend whatever was left of the weekend with him sleeping on what must be a horribly uncomfortable sofa, and she had to stay aloof and indifferent. Be just his work partner. She felt sick.

"Are you sure you feel okay? And when did you have time for a haircut this morning?" he asked suddenly.

She slowly reached up to her shorn locks. Clark loved her hair. Well, her Clark did. This Clark *would* be surprised by Lois suddenly changing her look. She suddenly felt very sad and lost. Her hero was right next to her, yet worlds away from where she needed him to be.

Clark's head suddenly swiveled, that look that signaled to her that Superman was needed.

"I, uh," he hesitated.

"Go," she said simply, then blanched when she realized she had to play that she didn't know why he would get that look. "I mean, I got to *go* meet this source. I'll meet you back at the hotel?"

"Yeah, see you," he said, tugging at his tie as he headed out of the newsroom.

~1996~

<<What the hell was that?>>

Lois remembered a flash in the conference room. There had been a man who wanted to talk to her about Senator Harrington... and he had some device in his hand... and now...

She looked around, wary and utterly confused. Lois remembered being pushed down, which explained why she was lying on a bed. She was in someone's house. She sat up, reaching cautiously for a bedside lamp. The room was suddenly flooded with a soft light, utterly charming, and with country blue curtains and an eggshell white down comforter. She noticed it was dark outside, so she had no idea how long she had been out of it.

Lois started nosing around, expecting some bizarre bed and breakfast criminal to pop up any minute. Though this place was way too charming to be any sort of lair.

She peered down the stairway cautiously. She could hear the strains of a Frank Sinatra CD and saw someone had gone through a lot of trouble to turn the living room into a homey Christmas setting. She saw a fir tree set up against a wall, obviously waiting for someone to decorate it. So not likely to be hardened criminals who had her then.

She slipped off her heels in case she either had to make a fast getaway or to at least hear whomever's house she was in before they heard her. Lois made it to the bottom of the stairs, charmed by the lovely house. A trained investigator, she immediately began to search for evidence as to who these people were.

She spotted a picture on the mantle, though from this distance and in this light she couldn't really make out anything. She made her way over and gasped, grabbing the frame. It was a picture of her and Clark! Why would someone have a picture of them on their mantle? Maybe they were sick and dangerous criminals after all! Maybe they had Clark hidden somewhere and were planning some nefarious scheme...

She slowly walked around the room, searching for more clues as to who these people were. Lois spotted some mail on the table and began to sift through the envelopes.

She was distracted from reading any of the names when she suddenly felt a familiar whoosh at her side.

"Lois!" he said, with feeling.

"Superman! I'm so glad you're here! What's going on here? Where am I?" she turned to him asking.

Clark stared at her a moment, his mouth slightly agape. It *was* Lois before him but a Lois that he remembered from a few years ago. Her hair was long and she seemed wound as tight as ball of string.

"Lois, what happened? I brought in the tree, and you seemingly disappeared, and now, you're here, but you're--- well, not quite you," he said, puzzled.

"What do you mean, I'm not me? Superman, I have **no**

idea what happened. I was at the Planet working with Clark on a story about Senator Harrington and---"

"You were working with Clark?" he asked confusedly, trying to grasp why she didn't recognize him. What was going on here? "Wait? Senator Harrington? Didn't we take care of that guy three years ago?"

"We? Don't you mean me and Clark? And what do you mean three years ago? This is the first I've heard of him causing problems---"

Clark sat down and put his head in his hands, his mind beginning to spin about what might have happened.

"Superman, are you okay?" she came and sat by him, that moony-eyed look of admiration mixed with concern on her face that had always fascinated and irked him in the early days of their relationship. <<She doesn't know it's me. It's like this is Lois from the **past**...>> he thought, getting a slightly sick feeling.

"Lois, what year was it this morning?" he began slowly.

"Superman? Are you joking?" she asked with a laugh, and then seeing his serious expression she sighed. "No, you're not joking. Okay, I'll play along. It was... **is** 1993."

Clark grabbed a copy of the Daily Planet off the coffee table, pointing to the date. "It's 1996."

"What? That's impossible! How could I miss three years of my life!" she said, grabbing the paper from his hand. She flipped through it quickly, looking to see if it was a fake. But, no, sports section and all, it was a genuine Daily Planet edition.

"I'm afraid it's not impossible, Lois. Just bare with me a moment as I try to explain. It's all going to sound crazy, but just remember you are holding a Daily Planet paper that says 1996 on it, not 1993." He sighed again, preparing to explain. "HG Wells, the writer, wrote a book called 'The Time Machine,' but the thing is, he also figured out a way to **make** one."

"Superman, you can't be serious!" she started, but he pointed again to the date on the paper.

"You know that just a few minutes ago you were at the Planet, and now you are here, in this house. Something happened to bring you here."

"Point taken," she nodded and waited for him to continue.

"So, HG Wells invented this time machine and he went way in to the future. There, he met a man named Tempus who hates me with a vengeance and does all he can to destroy...me." He thought it might be prudent to leave out her involvement for the moment. But Lois wasn't about to let him.

"Wait, what does this have to do with me? Why would he send me to the future?"

He sighed, thinking as he spoke, "Lois, you and I have always had a sort of--close relationship, right?"

"Well, yeah. I like to think so," she said, her heart hammering. Was this some crazy scheme for Superman to finally admit his feelings for her?

"Well, Tempus is messing with my head, for one," he

said, glancing at her, trying to get over the fact that it was his wife yet *not* his wife sitting next to him.

She looked up at him expectantly, waiting for him to enlighten her. He sighed. How much to tell her? How much was safe to tell her? Could it have any effect on the timeline? He knew that if he could somehow contact HG Wells, he had a way of making one forget the strange events of time travel. So, if he could get her back to her own time, she wouldn't necessarily remember anything he might tell her. But she might also not cooperate once she learned that she was married to Clark Kent/Superman. Again he sighed.

He decided to delay the whole truth. He had always been good at that before, he thought wryly. Maybe he wouldn't have to tell her everything.

"Superman, *what* is going on?" she asked, beginning to lose patience.

"Well, it's complicated," he began, hedging, the old uncomfortable feeling of lying to Lois making him feel ill.

She crossed her arms, "Try me. You tell me I'm suddenly three years into the future, and you leave me hanging? What is it you aren't telling me?"

Clark, er Superman, held up his wedding ring hand. He paused a moment, suddenly serious again. "This is our home. We're married," he said softly.

~1993~

Lois arrived at the Lexor and found Clark grinning with a stack of board games in his hands.

"Ready for some fun?" he asked.

She couldn't help but smile in return. She remembered playing those games with Clark. She had beat him at every one of them, too! And she would gladly and just as easily beat him again.

"Sure," she said, setting down her purse and making herself comfortable on the floor.

As they began to play Monopoly, a gentle banter of teasing between them, Lois chided her former self. How had she missed how wonderful Clark was, even back then? Had she really been that blind?

It took all of her will not to stop the games and tell him what was going on. But fear of what that could do to the ever elusive time continuum kept her quiet. She prayed that somewhere in the future Clark was working on setting things right, because she was afraid any move that hinted of what was going on in this time could do some untold damage somewhere else. She had to play along and hope that maybe she would see HG Wells. He had come to her before when Tempus had messed with things, some do-hickey invention indicating to him that there was a problem. Maybe he would come to her again... or at least go to her Clark.

One thing she knew, she could always count on Clark. He would fix things, somehow. She just had to be--oh, how she hated the word!--patient.

They played a few more games, and Lois' natural competitive nature took over. She beat him as well as she

had three years ago--even though she may have cheated just a little--but with no remorse!

"Lois, why are you *so* competitive?" he chided.

Just then, they heard the tape click, signaling that they needed to put a new one in.

"I've got it," Clark said, getting up to switch out tapes.

Suddenly, he heard footsteps coming towards their room. Clark acted fast, throwing the tripod on the bed and grabbing Lois in one swift motion. He laid her gently over the equipment, leaned over her, and kissed her soundly, just as the maid came in with some towels.

<<Oh, Clark,>> she thought, trying not to give in to his tender kiss too much. <<How could I have ignored you for so long?>> He kissed her with as much passion as ever, proving in her mind that he had always loved her, if she had had any doubt about it.

She gave in to him just a little, needing to feel his reassuring touch, even if it was just for a moment.

When he sat up, she still felt dizzy from his kiss and longed desperately to return to her own future, where she would be safe to act on the desires he had just inspired in her.

"Doesn't anybody knock around here?" she said, recalling the comment she had made back then. Back then, she had been startled and shocked by her response to him, but she hadn't let her mind dwell on it. She had chalked it up to pure chemistry and left it there.

Clark couldn't help smiling a little at her reaction, though he tried to hide it.

"Sorry, about that," he said quickly, not looking her in the eye. "I--just, uh, well, it was all I could think of."

She tried not to be too accommodating, but man, was he cute when he was flustered. "It's fine, Clark. I mean... well, you did what you had to do, is all."

"Sure," he said, gesturing for her to come to the window. "Harrington and Roarke are back," he said, back to the safer territory of their investigation.

She pretended interest as she took the binoculars from him, smirking to herself as she realized how often Clark had been Superman around her, way before she knew his secret. He was obviously using superhearing and supervision to know what was going on across the way. How had she missed that?!

They listened for a moment, and then the shades came down across the way.

"Lead-lined," Clark muttered.

Lois shook her head at yet another clue to his identity she had missed. <<How dense was I?>>

Clark fiddled with the camera, setting it to run in case anything interesting happened across the way in the next few hours.

Lois set the binoculars down on the window ledge and felt an odd discomposure. The lack of activity in this stakeout was giving her mind plenty of time to wander. And it kept wandering back to Clark Kent, whom she wanted to shout all her secrets to then and there. That kiss had felt so

real... she admonished herself on how completely blind she had been back then! She longed to tell him that she was his future wife, and that it was okay if he wanted to kiss her like that again... <<Stop it, Lois!>> she screamed internally. She sighed heavily, feeling utterly frustrated and alone, wishing she could tell him the truth. Is that how he had felt at times, wanting to tell her about Superman? <<Don't flatter yourself, Lois. You wouldn't have understood him now. You needed the time to really get to know him, to get to know yourself.>>

"Clark, I'm going to take a shower and turn in," she said, suddenly needing to get away from him, this man who was her husband but not.

"Sure. I'll keep an eye on things out here."

"I know you will," she said with more affection than she meant to let slip out.

Clark watched her walk away and sighed. She seemed different somehow, though he couldn't put a finger on how exactly. She seemed calmer, more mature, but there was something else that just didn't feel right, and he didn't understand it. Something felt out of place. And that kiss had been something. He had expected Lois to lash out at him or at least reprimand him for taking such advantage. But instead she seemed like she had wanted to give into it, give into him and was doing what she could to restrain herself. He tried to subdue the hopeful flutter in his heart. Could she be hiding feelings for him?

Clark sighed and looked back at the lead-lined windows. It wasn't likely they were to see any more action tonight across the way. He looked over to where Lois had disappeared into the shower a little while ago. Maybe he should get ready for bed as well. He walked over to the closed bathroom door, hearing that she had just shut the shower off. He swallowed, trying not to picture her naked as he could hear the towel being pulled from the rack and being wrapped around her body. He waited a moment and then knocked.

Lois opened the door, her hair dripping wet and a deep burgundy towel wrapped around her petite body. Steam from the shower wafted around her, and Clark tried to look anywhere but her towel. Lois was surprisingly composed, though she couldn't help the smirk that crept to her lips. She had grown accustomed to seeing Clark in *his* towel, but no doubt this was a first for this Clark.

Clark cleared his throat, thankful that it was becoming more difficult to see her since his glasses had begun to steam up, "Uh... I needed to..."

Lois laughed, "No problem. I'll just be a sec."

Lois closed the door again and stifled some more laughter. The look on his face was almost worth the price of admission.

Meanwhile, Clark leaned against the wall and took off his glasses to clean off the steam.

"I'm coming out!" Lois warned as she opened the door again a moment later.

She walked past him into the bedroom as Clark went

past her as quick as he could at normal speed into the bathroom.

Lois started dressing in her pajamas and towel dried her hair. <<Oh, crap! I have to go back in the bathroom!>>

She went back over and knocked on the door.

"What?" he asked from the shower.

Lois opened the door and went over to the vanity.

"Sorry. But I have my eyes closed, Clark. I forgot my talcum powder."

She didn't really have her eyes closed, but she knew saying so would make Clark feel better.

When he heard the door shut, Clark finished his shower and grabbed a towel to wrap around his waist.

Then, Lois opened the door again. "Sorry, I need my toothbrush," she said apologetically.

Lois squeezed behind Clark to grab it.

She was suddenly close to him, too close to him. Okay, so maybe she hadn't seen him in a towel enough for it not to affect her. She felt her heart race, wishing she was with her husband Clark and not this tempting version of him that was completely off limits. She glanced up at him, her toothbrush clasped in her hand like a pathetic sword that could protect her from the onslaught of emotions. Clark seemed to read something in her face that made him step back from her as she seemed to need some space from him, "That's okay. I'm done."

Clark walked out of the bathroom, closing the door behind him. Lois sighed, feeling like she was in a sick mind game. She started to brush her teeth, shaking her head all the while at how she always ended up in these bizarre circumstances.

Suddenly, Clark knocked again and opened the door, reaching in front of her across the counter, "Sorry, forgot *my* toothbrush."

The door shut again and Lois tried to breathe normally.

~1996~

"Married? You and I actually get *married*?" asked Lois, looking like a child on Christmas. "I marry *you*?" she said, trying to take it in.

He nodded realizing he had made a mistake in telling her. Would he ever get this revelation thing right? Well, the cat was out of the bag now... "Yeah, it's... well, it's complicated. But yes, you and I get married. Now, what we need to do is figure out how to get you back to your time and my Lois back to hers," he said, trying to bring her attention back to focusing on how to solve their problem.

But this was too juicy a nugget for Lois to let go of right away. "This is so unreal. I get *married* to Superman! When? I mean, wow!" she said, staring at him in awe.

As she started going over the implications--like that the suit apparently *does* come off!-- she had a hard time breathing.

"Wow! I mean... this is amazing!" she turned to him, her eyes shining with glee, but then she noticed he didn't seem quite so thrilled.

"Lois, please, stay with me here. I had to tell you so you would understand why Tempus is behind this, but I need--" he was about to say 'my partner,' but checked himself just in time--"you to focus. We have to figure out how to set things to rights."

She nodded, trying to calm the excited flutter in her heart that she would eventually have her heart's desire. She managed to start focusing on the situation itself. "But how is any of this even possible? I mean, I'm her, I'm Lois Lane! And somehow I'm in my future... so do you think--- erm, *your* Lois is... in my past?"

"That's what I think, yes," he said. "I can't think of another reason why you would be here instead. If Tempus had sent you--her--this is so confusing--but, my wife anywhere else, why send you forward?"

Clark remembered when Tempus had tried to kill him as a baby. He had existed at two different ages in the same time frame. So it was possible that there could be essentially two different Loises, and instead of keeping the 'extra' Lois in the same time, he had sent her forward to him. He couldn't tell this Lois that bit of information, because it precluded having to tell her he was Clark, and one revelation seemed to be enough for both of them right now.

"But why would he do that to us in the first place? What possible benefit could there be for him?"

"I am not sure, except to drive me crazy. Er, us crazy," he smiled crookedly. Then he sobered into a sigh, "I just want my wife back."

She felt sympathy for him, even if she didn't really understand all of the implications. She reached to touch him on the arm. "Look, Superman. I may not be your wife yet--" she paused, feeling a delightful shiver those words evoked. "But we are best friends. In your past, my present, and apparently both of our futures. And that must be what makes and will make our relationship work. I'll help however I can. So how do we fix this?"

Clark felt mixed by her wanting to help. It was typical Lois, but the utter blind admiration in her eyes made him cringe just a bit. A little, small part of him wanted to tell her then and there that he was Clark, just to wipe that smug look off her face. She thought she was married to her hero! And she *was*, but she was still way back in that adoration of Superman stage, and she couldn't appreciate the significance of anything but being married to him. <<"I've created a monster,">> he thought bleakly, feeling her cling to his arm proprietorially all the sudden.

"Look, Lois, this is way more complicated than you are prepared to deal with right now. I don't want to get into the details of why and how we get married. But please, for my own sanity, just--" he was about to say 'back off,' but he could never be that harsh with her. He saw the confused look in her eyes and felt miserable for telling her anything. He just wanted things back the way they were!

"Just what?" she asked slowly.

He gently disentangled her arm from his. "This is all very confusing for both of us, and we need to be clear

headed and think of a solution. So, I just need a little personal space, okay?" he asked, as kindly as he could.

She was hurt anyway, he could see. "I don't understand, Superman. One moment you tell me we're married and the next--"

"Lois," he said, raising his hands defensively, "But we're not married *yet,* in your present. Just treat me as you always have. Forget I said anything. It's just... more complicated than that."

"You keep saying that," she muttered in frustration.

"Now," he sighed heavily, ready to get down to the business of setting things right. "Any chance that Tempus is still in the area?"

~1993~

Lois climbed into the king size bed, feeling awful that Clark was sleeping outside on that uncomfortable sofa. But she couldn't very well invite him to share the bed with her now, could she? She knew that was asking for trouble. Yet, she had grown so accustomed to sleeping in his arms, she didn't know if she would be able to sleep without him. Though she had to try.

She flipped over on her side with a heavy sigh, feeling tears starting to threaten.

She needed Clark. She wanted to be back to her own future, not here in this awkward time when she was chasing Superman and ignoring Clark and was a complete wreck! Tempus was succeeding in torturing her. He had chosen the perfect way to destroy her emotionally, and she resented it.

She pummeled the pillow in frustration and let out a grunt.

"Lois? You okay?" Clark called from the next room.

"Yeah, I'm fine," she called back, wishing her voice wasn't thick with tears.

A second later he knocked on her door. He must have heard her distress and supersped over to it. She stared at the door for what seemed an eternity, debating. She wanted him, *needed* him.

"Come in," she said weakly but knew he would hear her.

He entered and sat cautiously on the opposite edge of the bed.

"Are you all right?" he asked gently, his soft voice calling to her heart.

She infinitesimally shook her head.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

She sighed heavily, bracing herself to try and explain the truth, at least partly, when he started explaining for her.

"It was that kiss, wasn't it? It freaked you out," he said, running his fingers through his hair nervously. "I'm sorry, Lois, really I am. I should have never have done that--" he stood up and began pacing around the room. She couldn't bear to see him so guilty, especially when he had absolutely nothing to feel guilty about.

"I--" she hesitated, trying to stop him, but not certain how she could. "Clark!" she finally called out to him, stopping his self-recrimination.

He turned to look at her, his hands loosely on his hips. He was wearing a t-shirt and sweats and looked so enticing, she felt her mouth go dry.

"I just feel guilty about you sleeping on that horribly uncomfortable sofa," she said without thinking. He looked at her, his mouth slightly gaping, obviously wondering if this was leading where he desperately wanted it to lead.

"And?" he managed to get out.

She felt her cheeks flame, knowing what was underlying his try for composure. "Well, you said the other night that it *is* a big bed. So... I agree. We can share."

Okay, she'd done it. She'd pushed their relationship just a little bit farther than it should go. She almost expected a pit of hell to open up and swallow her, but nothing happened.

She peered up at Clark who was taking out an extra blanket from the bureau.

"Thanks, Lois," he said simply. "That sofa is pretty uncomfortable. I'll sleep on the top of the sheet. You won't even know I'm here. I promise to be a perfect gentleman."

She felt the weight of the bed sink as he made himself comfortable. She turned away from him, terrified that she'd launch herself into his arms if he gave any indication that he wanted her to.

"I know you will," she said quietly, facing the wall.

His hand hovered above her shoulder hesitantly, then landed in a gentle but quick little squeeze. "Good night, Lois."

"Good night, Clark," she said tightly. <<Oh, God, what have I done?>>

~1996~

Clark took Lois with him to scan the city and try to look for Tempus, but he feared it was futile. The fiend could jump time and space after all. The chances that he was lying in wait somewhere he could snag him were close to nil. Honestly, Clark just wanted to be in the sky, to try and get a grasp of his emotions. He wished he could have left Lois at the house and do some thinking on his own, but he knew that would be asking for trouble.

He was freaking out, really. What if he was stuck with the old Lois? That would have been perfect three years ago, but now, after all they had been through together, they couldn't recreate that. His Lois was a different Lois, as different as if they were different people. But he still cared about this Lois, was attracted to her, and that's why he had the sudden need for a dip in the Arctic Ocean. She smelled the same, felt the same in his arms... but it wasn't *her.* And he couldn't let himself--or her!--act on their attraction. It was too weird and too unfair to both of them. Even with full disclosure, if he told her he was Clark, she wouldn't be the same Lois. No, he had to solve this and set things to rights. Fast.

He wished he had saved those plans for a time machine that HG Wells had left him the last time Tempus had come to disrupt their lives. But he had destroyed them, thinking it

was better to do so than let them fall into the wrong hands. Now he wished he hadn't been so prudent. He mentally started calculating how much of the old plans he remembered. He might be able to recreate a time machine, and he might also just create something that didn't work at all, or worse did something it shouldn't do. He needed HG Wells. It was that simple and that complicated.

Clark flew over Metropolis, the city brighter from the abundance of Christmas lights. It was after midnight; there were four days till Christmas. It was supposed to be their first Christmas together since they got married. They were planning on flying out to Smallville, and Lois had been more open than she ever had been about accepting Christmas into her heart. Clark wanted to see that glow in her eyes, by the light of the tree at his parents' house.

"The lights are beautiful up here. I love watching the city from a distance, but it's especially wonderful at Christmas time," he said, wondering if he could prompt any openness about the holiday in this Lois.

Lois harrumphed. "Sure, they look pretty, but they are just concealing selfishness and commercialism."

"Someday you'll see that Christmas is much more than that," he said sadly, hating the pain she felt from all her disappointed Christmases and crushed hopes. It would take a lot more for the old Lois to see the beauty of Christmas, just as it had taken a lot more for her to see the real Clark.

"Well, I'll never like this holiday. It's always disappointed, and it always will," she said, crossing her arms unhappily.

Clark sighed, knowing he couldn't change her in an instant... he had never wanted to change her but only to love her, to show her that there was still good in the world. But this Lois was unreachable now, blinded by her own infatuation for Superman and driven to be a workaholic to get approval from a father she feared never loved her. It hurt him to watch her like this again, having come so far with the Lois he was married to... with the Lois that was lost out there somewhere in time...

All he wanted for Christmas was his wife back, which seemed impossible.

He used all of his Kryptonian telepathic skills, reaching through time and space with one message: "Herbert George Wells, I need your help."

~1993~

Lois awoke in her husband's arms. She never grew tired of feeling those wonderful arms around her, keeping her safe and warm. It was one of her favorite places to be, cuddled close to his chest. Whether it was in bed or flying in the open air, she liked best to be cradled close to him.

"Mmm... morning," she murmured, snuggling in to his chest.

"Lois..." he said, half asleep, his arm automatically going around her, hugging her. "If this is a dream, then I don't want to wake up."

Those weren't the words of her husband. Those were the

words of a man who wasn't used to sleeping by her side. Her eyes flew open and she quickly scooted away from him.

He sighed resignedly. "I'm sorry, Lois. I promised to behave like a gentleman..."

"You did, Clark. You didn't do anything wrong... you just... scared me, that's all," she said. <<More like scared myself,>> she thought.

Clark sat up in the bed, his hair looking delightfully rumpled. Lois clenched her fists in the sheet, resisting the urge to run her fingers through it. She scooted over just a bit more, distancing herself from him as much as she could without falling off the bed.

He ran his fingers through his hair for her, and she suppressed a sigh. <<He's gorgeous, and I can't do a thing about it.>> Clark looked at her a little shyly, "Lois, am I missing something here?"

"What do you mean?" she asked hesitantly, but she was pretty sure she knew exactly what he meant. He meant the way she couldn't keep her eyes off of him. He meant the way they had woken up together like lovers, tangled in each others arms.

She saw his jaw clench a little as he thought. He was resolving to say what was on his heart, and Lois didn't know if she would be able to resist letting him.

"Don't, Clark," she said suddenly, trying to stop him before he poured his heart out to her or worse, she to him.

"Why?" he asked simply.

She hadn't prepared herself for that. She thought this old Clark would back down immediately if she asked him to, but he seemed determined to confront her.

"Because... I ... don't think I can say what you want to hear," she ventured, not looking at him, knowing she was breaking his heart.

"Lois, why did you ask me to sleep here last night? And why..." he couldn't finish.

<<... why did it feel so right sleeping side by side?>> she finished silently for him, feeling horrible for confusing him.

He looked at her helplessly. "What is going on here? Yesterday you barely agreed we are partners and *maybe* friends, and now all the of the sudden it seems... well, is there more going on here?" he asked quietly, gesturing vaguely to the space between them.

She admired his courage. Especially facing the Lois that she knew he would be talking to during this point in their relationship. She wanted to tell him the truth... but would he even believe her? And what if there were consequences?

She sighed. At the same time, if she told him, maybe he could help her. He was Superman after all. If anyone could figure this out, he could.

She decided it was worth a shot. Besides, she suddenly realized that if there was any wrinkle in the time continuum, then it might signal to HG Wells that things needed to be fixed, and he could find her! Maybe she *needed* to try and upset the time line in order to be found!

She sat up in bed, her pulse beginning to race as she

realized she had to tell Clark everything. She turned to him to try and begin to explain. "Clark, look at me. This is going to sound really crazy and far out there, but I really need your help," she started earnestly, knowing she'd awoken the boy scout in him with that plea.

He sat up straighter, all ears, just as she expected he would. "What is it, Lois? You can tell me anything."

She felt herself melt a little at his open resolve to help her with whatever she needed. She loved him so much!

"You're right that things have been a little... less strained between us. There is a very specific reason why."

She sighed, hesitant. How to tell him and not make him think she's crazy?

She decided to start with evidence. Clark could understand building up a case, just as she would.

Lois held up her wedding ring. "See this?"

"Yeah, it's the ring Perry gave you for the stakeout. So?" he asked, totally thrown by her remark.

She slipped it off her finger and handed it to him. "Take a look at it. It's real."

He took it from her and read the inscription, "I've loved you since the beginning..."

<<...and I'll love you till the end,>> she mentally finished the inscription that was on Clark's ring, feeling her throat constrict with tears.

"So, he got you an authentic wedding ring?" he asked, puzzled.

"Clark, *you* gave me this ring. Or rather, you will give it to me," she said softly, all the emotion of what that meant to her evident on her face.

"What? Lois, you're acting a little strange here. What do you mean? This honeymoon thing is pretend, make-believe, remember?" he said gently, shocked by the depth of emotion he was hearing from his partner.

She shook her head, deciding to try another angle.

"Look at me, Clark. Do I look exactly the way I looked two days ago?" she asked wryly. "My hair is shorter, sure, but don't I look just a bit older? Aren't I calmer? Don't I seem... married?" she asked, hoping he would see what was so obvious to her.

"Married?" he asked cautiously, turning the ring in his fingers as he contemplated it. "But... Lois... what do you mean, *I* gave you the ring?" he asked, knowing that he would darn well remember giving Lois a ring and *marrying* her, if it were true!

"The truth is Clark..." she took a breath, rushing out, "this crazy fiend sent me to my past. I'm from our future. From 1996," she said, not looking at him.

When she didn't hear a response, she turned to him, suddenly watching him carefully. She knew she sounded crazy, but now that she had decided to tell him, she had to make him believe her.

"Lois... what are you talking about?" he asked softly, feeling more perplexed by the moment. If this was a joke, he thought it was cruel, and he couldn't let her see what it was doing to him.

"I mean that we get married. In about 3...no, thanks to a clone and an alien invasion, actually 4 years. We go through hell together, Clark. But we get through it and end up together," she said honestly.

He watched her closely, perplexed and yet intrigued by the earnestness in her voice and by what she was telling him. It was unbelievable, yet he wanted to believe her. How wonderful to think that they get married?!

He froze all of the sudden, realizing he had a foolproof way to test if what she was saying was for real. "Then... do you know...?" he began hesitantly.

"That you're Superman?" she asked with a warm smile. It felt good to surprise him like that. "Yeah, I do."

"Really?" he asked, wondering if it were that simple. The secret that he protected so fiercely, could it ever be accepted so readily and openly as Lois seemed to accept it?

He sat staring at her a moment, then looked at the ring. Slowly, he handed it back to her. She grasped his hand as he did so, begging him to believe her, to reassure him. "Look, I know it's crazy. But, just to be fair, it's not everyday that men fly either."

He gave her a wry smile. "Good point. But, can you explain this all again, slowly?"

She didn't let go of his hand but moved closer to him as she tried to explain. "I promise you this isn't some trick. Well, it is, but it was played on me, not you." At his puzzled look she tried again.

"There is this man, Tempus, and he's from way in the future. Apparently, you and I create this Utopian society, and Tempus resents it. He met up with HG Wells who actually built a time machine--"

"The writer?" he asked, suddenly finding her story harder to believe. <<Utopia? Time machines?>>

She could see she was losing him. "Clark, think of it this way. What do we always say when investigating stories that seem so outrageous?"

"That they're more than likely to be absolutely true."

"Exactly. Look, I'm not making this up. Anyway," she said, more resolved now to tell him everything she knew. "Tempus, this gun-happy psychopath, took HG Wells hostage and has been wreaking havoc on our lives for the past couple of years. Just when we think we've got him beat--"

"Just one question... where are *you*? I mean, my Lois, from this time? I've read about Doppelgangers, and theoretically it's possible that the same person can exist at the same time in two different incarnations--"

She squeezed his hand. "I don't know for sure. I think she's--my past self, is with my Clark. Well, you, in the future. But don't worry, *you* in the future, have experienced time travel before. I know he---*you* are working on a way to make it right."

Clark sat back, trying to absorb everything she was telling him. <<*My* Clark. She actually referred to me as *hers*...well, a version of me...>>

"Why tell me the truth now? Or more to the point, why

did you *not* tell me sooner?" he suddenly asked.

She sighed with relief. "I guess that means you believe me?"

He nodded. "I think I have to. But you didn't answer my question."

She swallowed. "Well, again this is all theoretical, but *if* you manage to time travel, you can affect your future by interfering with your past. I was afraid of what could happen if I told you everything now. But then I realized that I *had* to tell you, in *order* to disrupt the time line... see, Wells has this way of knowing if our time lines get out of whack. He monitors the future and does what he can to protect Utopia. So, I figured if I said something and it caused a problem somewhere in the future---"

"He could track you down to this time and place," Clark finished.

She smiled, "Exactly. Besides, I let you sleep here last night and woke up in your arms... and you had some legitimate questions that I couldn't continue to ignore. And, you are my partner, no matter what, and I figured if anyone could help me figure this out, you could."

He reached for her, and she willingly fell into his arms. "Is it okay if I just hold you for a little while?" he asked softly as she made herself comfortable on his chest.

"Yeah, I think so," she whispered, closing her eyes, both of them imagining it was the Clark she was married to that she leaned on.

He gently stroked her arm. "I've dreamed so many times of holding you in my arms when I'm not in the Suit. I always hoped you see the man beneath. I guess it's a relief to know that eventually, you will, and we get married. I mean, you do love me, right?" he asked, his voice vulnerable, rumbling under her ear in his chest.

She sat up and looked at him, trying to make him understand. "I love who you will be, Clark. We go through so much together in the next few years. The connection we have is eternal, yet it's those challenges in life that truly bound us as one. You are him, yet you aren't yet. Do you understand?"

"Yeah, I think so," he answered sadly, wishing time were more fair to him.

He settled back into the pillows a bit more, and Lois settled in to lay with him. They were quiet, both contemplating the future.

~1996~

Lois wanted to cry. She was--or *would be* married to Superman, yet he seemed like he wanted to be anything but married to her. She didn't understand it, and she wished he would elaborate on details. Would she change so much in the next few years that now she seemed immature to him? Flying in his arms was wonderful as always, but she couldn't help feel he was being distant with her emotionally.

She missed Clark. Where was he, anyway? If this was their future, surely there was a future Clark as well. Was he married too? She felt a jealous pang, and she didn't

understand why. Why would she begrudge happiness to Clark?

She suddenly remembered the picture of them on the mantle, which stirred a whole other bunch of other questions in her mind.

"Can I ask you something?" she said, turning to Superman.

"Sure," he said, half listening to her as he was scanning the city midflight.

"What is Clark doing these days?" she asked.

That caught Clark's attention. He lost altitude for a second but quickly regained equilibrium.

"What happened?" she asked, clinging more tightly to his neck.

"Sorry, I got distracted. Clark? You want to know what happened to Clark?" he asked eyeing her carefully, surprised by her question.

"Yeah. And why do we have a picture of me and Clark on *our* mantle?" she asked, her voice rising as she was starting to think in some ...interesting directions.

"Well, it's complicated," began Clark, using his favorite phrase when being elusive with Lois.

"How complicated?" she asked, her cheeks flaming. "I mean... there's nothing... unusual between the three of us, is there?"

Clark looked askance at her. She didn't think...? OK, so they were in a sort of weird threesome, but *nothing* like he could see was churning in her head.

"Lois, it's not like that," he said, choking back a laugh.

"Oh... okay then, I guess that's a relief. That would be... awkward, I guess," she finished lamely, cheeks still flaming.

She was silent a minute, hoping Superman would elaborate. When nothing seemed forthcoming, she cleared her throat and tried again. "Um, so are we still working together? Is he married?" she finished in a small voice, wondering why she felt that pang of jealousy at the idea of him being married.

He grinned. "Yes to both questions."

"Oh," she said, her face dropping, telling by Superman's expression that apparently Clark was happy with his situation. "Who does he marry?" she asked, her voice suddenly full of sadness.

Clark slowed down and stopped scanning the city. Did this Lois of the past care about him? Had she cared, even if she hadn't realized she cared back then?

"What is it, Superman? Why are you so quiet?"

Clark had swept back around near the Planet. He landed them on the roof of building.

"Why are we here?" she asked.

"I need to tell you something," he began, realizing he'd misjudged her. "And it's easier to talk to you when we're not flying."

She swallowed nervously. "Is it about Clark?"

He nodded. What could it possibly hurt to tell her the whole truth?

He was about to spin out of the Suit and show her, when

he saw a diminutive figure of a man step out of the shadows.

"HG Wells! Thank goodness!" said Clark, grateful to see the time traveler.

"Superman! I have a perplexing problem. I was working with the soul tracker, when I found a bizarre anomaly. It seems as if Lois is getting younger, not older."

"Who is this?" asked the Lois in question. "Wait. Is this Mr. Wells, the writer you told me about?"

Clark nodded, walking over to Herb. "Well, it's even weirder than that. Tempus has sent my wife Lois back in time and brought Lois from a few years ago here to me."

"Oh, dear. Well, I see. That explains a few things, I suppose," said HG Wells. "I think we can fix it. I'm trying to track Tempus and have the Council deal with him immediately. He keeps jumping time though, and it has been nearly impossible to keep up with him."

Clark turned to Lois. "Are you ready to go back and see Clark?" he asked with a smile.

Wells gave Clark a questioning look. Superman shook his head. <<No, she doesn't know.>>

She smiled, "Yes, take me back... but you were going to tell me about who Clark married?" she prodded, her mind churning with possibilities.

"Just let me handle this, Superman," HG Wells said, stepping between them. He turned on his machine and whispered something to Lois...

~1993~

Clark looked over at Lois, his future wife, admiringly. The thought warmed his heart. He felt he could take that thought and hold it to him until his Lois--*when* he got her back--would see him for who he truly was. The thought that Lois could accept him completely was breathtaking to him.

He saw this woman as his Lois, for she *did* in a sense, belong to him, or would. Yet he knew that he wasn't quite her Clark in her eyes. This hurt just a bit, having an understanding and loving Lois just within reach, but he thought he could understand. He loved Lois now, and he just couldn't help but admire the woman she would become. He sat back in his chair, watching her, and beginning to wonder about the Lois of his time. Was she cast ahead somewhere in the future? Or somewhere else entirely? He hoped that she was with his future self, as this Lois conjectured was most likely. Would he tell her that they marry? How would she react? When and if she came back, would she know that he was Superman? He felt his heart speed up at the thought, knowing that his Lois might not be so receptive to the idea. But could seeing a glimpse of their future bring her around to seeing how much he loved her? He hoped so, as much as he hoped to have her back. As fun as it was to see his future before him in this Lois' eyes, he was starting to look forward to the journey of Lois falling in love with him. Secure in the knowledge that it would happen someday, he could be content to wait until it did. That is, as long as both Loises could be sent back to their

correct place in time.

Despite not being in her time, Lois was definitely in her element, deftly flipping through files and pulling together memories of the Harrington story as she worked to recreate her notes. Though now she needed another yellow pad. She usually kept a reserve in her desk, but even those were gone. In annoyance she pushed back from her chair and headed to the supply closet.

It was dingier than she remembered. When they rebuilt the Planet, everything was much more organized and the lighting was better in places like the supply closet. As it was now, a single light bulb with a chain string was all there was in the center of the small room. She had forgotten the moment of childish fear she always had when she would reach for it, that blind moment of feeling in the dark always terrified her.

Her hand searched for the string, and she hated the racing of her heart that came from fearing dark shadows as a child. Suddenly, a hand grasped her forearm, and she gasped in earnest. The light came on, and Tempus' face was before her.

"You!" she hissed. "What do you want with me?"

"Aw, thought you'd be happier to see me, honestly. Actually, your husband in blue is hot on my trail so I've had a change of plans. I'm taking you where he'll never think to look for you."

Suddenly, a flash brighter than the dim light bulb was in the room as Tempus pressed a button on his machine.

"You'll never get away with this!" Lois said as she disappeared into time once again.

~1993~

Lois had a horrible headache. She couldn't remember where she had been, but she knew that Superman, as usual, had rescued her. They were suddenly at the Planet again, along with a charming old man in a bowler hat.

"Clark!" she called, heading over to where she spotted him at his desk.

His eyes went wide as he realized it was *his* Lois.

"Lois, what happened to you? You... you disappeared," he stood up, pulling her into a hug.

"I don't remember much, but Superman rescued me," she said, gesturing over her shoulder. "I was sort of out of it for a while..."

"Superman?" he said in shock, seeing his double come walking towards him.

Superman was talking to an elderly gentleman in tweed but looked up when he heard Clark say his name.

'Superman' nodded to his former self. "Erm, hi Clark," he said, shaking his hand. Then he whispered super-low, "Can I talk to you in private?"

"On the roof," Clark super-whispered back.

"Lois, I'll be right back. I have to... go meet a source. I'll meet you back at the Lexor, okay?" Clark asked, squeezing her hand gently in good-bye before heading to the elevator.

Lois watched him leave, shaking her head. "He's always

doing that," she grumbled.

HG Wells came over to her. "Don't worry my dear, someday you'll understand why," he said, winking at Superman.

"Lois, you'll be all right now. I have to leave. But... I'll see you later," he smiled, enjoying just a bit of her old blind admiration for him. Though what he had with Lois now was infinitely better. It would just take some time.

"Yes, well, I should be going too," said HG Wells, indicating to Clark that he'd meet him up on the roof as well.

"Merry Christmas, Lois," said Superman, heading out the window.

Lois waved and made her way over to her desk. She sat down, seeing she was much further along on the Harrington case than she remembered. She started shuffling through papers, puzzled.

"Am I missing something?" she asked aloud as she settled back into working on the story.

Jimmy came by and stopped as he stared at her. "Didn't you get your hair cut this morning? I could have sworn you had real short hair earlier..."

She looked up at him, utterly confused. "No. Why would I do a thing like that?"

Clark went to the roof and met Superman already there.

"Well, that was interesting," laughed Clark. "And it will help solidify the myth that we're two different people for quite a while."

Superman nodded, but needed to cut to the chase. "You seem to understand what's going on here. Any idea where *my* Lois is?" he asked.

Clark looked at his future self in sympathy. He wanted to help in any way he could to set things to rights. But all he could do was shake his head, "No, she went into the supply closet, and not even a minute later, you all appeared, while she apparently disappeared."

"She's definitely not here," said Superman, indicating with his hand that he had scanned the building.

"She said something about a guy named Tempus sending her through time..." Clark said, trying to be helpful.

"Yeah, I know. He's messed with our lives before."

Superman turned to HG Wells. "Are you picking up anything on the soul tracker device?" he asked.

"I'm working backwards on Lois' timeline. No anomalies yet... I'll keep looking. Though I wonder if it would be more helpful to track Tempus?" Wells asked, uncertain.

"Do both, if possible," said Superman, running his hand through his hair anxiously.

"It will be all right. You'll get her back," said Clark, putting a hand on his Doppelganger's shoulder. He was suddenly so curious about his future. "What's it like?" he asked.

Superman turned to him, "What do you mean?"

"I mean, being married to Lois. Is it as wonderful as I

imagine it would be?" Clark asked hopefully.

Superman grinned, "Better. The best... it took us a long time to get there... but now... everyday is..." he gestured around them, indicating the snow that had fallen this afternoon and the holiday lights on the streets below. "Everyday is Christmas with her. You never know what you will get, but it's always a wonderful surprise."

Clark smiled with understanding. "You'll get her back, don't worry."

Superman laughed ruefully. "You have as much blind confidence in me as your Lois."

Clark smiled in return. "I can't help but admire you... er, us. You--*we*--manage to marry Lois Lane, after all."

While the 'twins' continued to gently congratulate each other, Wells made a discovery.

"Clark! Er, Superman! Whichever. I think I found her. But we must hurry!"

Superman turned to Clark, "Thanks for taking care of her while she was here," he said.

"How do you know I did anything?" he asked.

Superman smiled, "Because I know me. And I know what I would do if Lois had come to me from the future and told me she was my wife."

With that, Superman turned to HG Wells. Clark was about to make his way back into the Planet building, but Wells stopped him. "Just a moment, my boy. It's not fair for you to know everything that's transpired and Lois to have forgotten it all."

Clark looked disheartened. "I have plenty of secrets. I can keep this one as well," he said, not wanting to lose the knowledge that Lois and he would eventually marry.

"Yes, but to keep the timeline in tact, you must forget. Things will happen in time. Just be patient," he said kindly.

"Wait, when Lois told me what was going on, she said she had hesitated because she was worried about what it might do to the timeline. Has anything occurred because of her telling me the truth?" asked Clark.

Herb smiled kindly, "No. Because your love is destined, it doesn't matter *when* you fall in love. Just that you *do*. That's why Tempus won't win. He can't keep you two apart. Love will win out."

Clark and Superman shared a smile.

"But, you can't *force* your destiny, either. You have to let it happen naturally. Which is why, I'm afraid you have to forget that you are destined to marry Lois Lane."

He suddenly leaned over to Clark and whispered something in his ear...

Tempus was having trouble with his time machine. He wanted to cast Lois Lane way back in the past, and then maybe way into the future... just to keep that Boy Scout husband of hers and Herb from finding her before Christmas. But the machine he had was somehow constricted to her lifespan only; something he would need to look into when he returned to his own time. He growled in frustration as he couldn't get the machine to cast her back to

the Stone Age, which is where he would have liked to leave her.

It had been fun leaving Superman with a Lois he couldn't deal with anymore... too bad Herb figured out a way to fix that... So, maybe he wouldn't need to switch Loises to destroy Utopia... Instead, he suddenly had a more devious, ingenious plan in mind. Tempus decided he would find moments of deep sadness in her life to torture her with... If he was stuck within her lifespan, then so be it. He would simply cast her perpetually to those moments of loneliness in her past, before that big blue boy scout ever showed up... if he could keep her away from Superman long enough, then Utopia would be destroyed... forever!

Merry Christmas, Metropolis!

~1973~

Lois was freezing cold. She found herself standing outside in the dark, by a townhouse in the snow. The snow was compact, as if it had fallen a few days before, and with the temperature dropping, it had become a hard sheet of solid ice. She only had on some flats, pants, and a wool sweater. And it certainly wasn't enough to take the bite out of the cold. She looked around, realizing that she recognized the neighborhood. It was where she grew up, just outside of New Troy, in the suburbs.

She spotted her parents' house across the street, a few doors down. Curiosity sent her over to investigate.

She saw a young girl sitting on the stoop in her p.j.'s. She was crying. As Lois got closer, she realized she was looking at her six year old self.

"Are you okay?" she asked gently.

A pair of big brown eyes, tears streaming down cherub cheeks looked back up at her. Her lip was trembling, and Lois wanted to take that little girl in her arms and comfort her.

Little Lois shook her head.

"What's the matter?" asked Lois, making a move to sit next to her young twin on the step.

The little girl looked warily at the stranger. "I'm not s-s-p'osed to talk to strangers."

Lois smiled. "I'm your Aunt Lois," she said, trying to think fast to get the girl to talk to her.

The little girl looked up at her in sudden companionship, "My name's Lois, too."

Little Lois held tight to a white teddy bear. Lois asked his name.

"His name's Charlie. He's my best friend," she said, hugging the bear tight to her.

Lois looked down at the little teddy bear, suddenly remembering her childhood friend. <<'Charlie'... that's sometimes Clark's alias when we are undercover,>> she thought with a sad smile, thinking too of the bear he had won for her in Smallville.

"Why were you crying, Lois?" she asked her childhood self, already having a good idea why.

"It's almost Christmas, and mommy and daddy are

fighting. I want to decorate the tree. Lucy and me got the decorations down, but mommy said we couldn't decorate till daddy came home from the hospital. But when he came home, he wanted to work on his robots. Mommy got mad and locked herself in her room... I don't like it when mommy does that," she finished sadly.

"My parents were always fighting, too," Lois said truthfully, realizing that her mother was probably an alcoholic even back then.

The little girl's lip started trembling with tears. "I wish Charlie could fly me away from here," she said sadly.

Lois gave her a smile, realizing her little girl dream eventually comes true. "Maybe you will fly away someday, Lois. You just have to believe."

Little Lois looked up at her, the open childhood hope on her small face breaking Lois' heart.

"Do you really think I could?"

"I *know* so," said Lois confidently, wishing *her* 'Charlie' would come fly her away, too.

It was awfully cold outside, and Lois knew that her young self shouldn't stay out much longer. Yet, she didn't want to be left all alone in the cold either.

"Isn't it about time you go to bed? It's awfully late and cold out here," said Lois.

Little Lois yawned, "I s'pose. Could you tell me a story?" she asked, tugging Lois into the house.

Lois hesitated, wondering how she would explain her presence if anyone else saw her.

"I could tell you one out here?" Lois offered halfheartedly, though the cold made her awfully tempted to take her younger self up on her offer.

Little Lois instantly understood her new friend Lois didn't want to be seen by her family. She could understand. She didn't always like to be around them either.

"Come with me. I'll sneak you in," said her companion, tugging Lois through the alleyway towards the back of their townhouse. At the last window before stepping into the backyard, little Lois turned and with aplomb worthy of the current Lois Lane said, "Boost me up. I'll have you inside in a jiffy."

Recognizing herself in the little girl, Lois couldn't help but laugh. She had *always* been good at getting in to any building she chose.

The small brunette peeked over the window once she was in. "I'll meet you around back!" she called, pointing towards the screen door around the corner.

Lois met her young twin at the screen door, memories flooding back to her of growing up in the house. The familiar scents of home hit her suddenly as she came inside, and it made her want to cry. She had been such an open, trusting child. What had made her so driven and afraid of opening up along the way?

Lois walked past the living room, seeing that the Christmas decorations had been pulled out and waited to be hung on the artificial tree. Little Lois tugged her past the room to her own small bedroom.

Lois looked around her childhood bedroom in awe. Drawings and half-written stories lined the wall. She had such an imagination, especially back then.

"You like to write?" asked Lois, wondering why the feeling that she wanted to cry wouldn't go away.

"Yeah, Daddy says you can't make money writing. But I don't know what that means," little Lois said offhandedly.

Lois walked slowly along the wall, reading some of her earliest stories. Some were typical about princesses and rescues, and others more analytical, even for a six year old about school friends and her family.

Suddenly, little Lois pushed her into a closet. "Hide! I hear Daddy!"

Lois found herself in her tiny closet, watching from slats in the door as her father come into the room. She was shocked by how young he looked.

"Lois, I told you not to leave your crayons at my work station! What were you doing in there, anyway?" he asked, setting her box of crayons on her nightstand.

Little Lois took out a piece of paper and handed it to him. "I was writing a story about your robots, and I needed to see one up close."

He gestured to all her pictures on the wall, "First of all, you waste way too much time on these stories! All they do is litter your room! And second of all, you know that my work room is off limits! You are grounded to your room for the rest of the night!" he said sternly, slamming the door behind him.

Little Lois stared after the door, her picture fluttering to the floor at her feet. Lois opened the closet and went to her, her heart breaking at seeing the streams of tears suddenly falling down her little twin's face. Lois gathered her into her arms.

"It's okay, Lois. Everything will be okay. You just keep writing," she whispered, hating her father's selfishness, hating what she knew it would do to her down the road. "Just keep writing, keep writing," she said over and over, that being the one thing that she knew would eventually drive her to become a reporter, that would send her to the Planet and eventually, to marry Clark Kent. "Just keep writing..."

Suddenly, a light flashed in the room. It was Tempus! But this time, he had a different device, a large mirror-like window.

"Isn't this scene touching?" he asked, poking his head through, making the rest of his body appear blurry on the other side of the window.

Lois felt her smaller self tremble in her arms with fear. "Who's that?" she asked.

"Why, I'm Tempus, Lois. So nice to meet you," he said, grinning madly at the little girl.

"Stop scaring her!" cried Lois, trying to cover her younger self's eyes from a scene that would surely give her nightmares.

He stepped out of the window and pulled Lois back through with him. The last thing she saw was her younger

self reaching for her, tears on her face and fear in her eyes.

"We've missed her again, Clark. I'm so sorry," said Wells. They had arrived in 1973, where Wells had last tracked her.

They were in a park, at night, in Lois' childhood neighborhood.

"Are you sure?" Clark asked, already listening for her heartbeat and tempted to take to the skies to scan the area.

Wells nodded. "Yes, she's here, but it's only her six year old self. I'm sorry. Tempus seems to be moving faster, I don't understand it," he said, fiddling with his device.

Suddenly, a time window flashed before them. Clark was on his feet, praying that it was Tempus with Lois. But instead, a mild Utopian stepped through.

"Hello, I'm Andrus, Utopian Peace Keeper," said the diminutive man. "I've come to help stop Tempus."

Wells looked at him earnestly, "Has anything happened in the future? How is the time line?"

"Things aren't exactly as they should be, no. Because Superman and Lois are separated, there are elements of our society that are starting to fall apart."

"Oh, dear," said Wells. "It seems it is this last jump in time then that has disrupted things?"

"Yes. When you left, you found an anomaly as you said, that Lois Lane appeared to be getting younger. But when she jumped to this time, it tore her away from Superman, thus creating ripples in the future."

"I see," said Wells, thinking. "Which is why while she was with your earlier self, Clark, there was no problem. As long as she meets you and is in your time line, you will always fall in love, always marry, always create Utopia. But if she is disappeared forever in that before time, then all will be lost."

Andrus nodded. "We have scientists working to limit Tempus' machine. So far, we've been able to keep him limited to Lois' current lifetime, in her past. Narrowing down *when* she will be should prove useful. But it's imperative that we find Lois Lane and return her and Superman their correct time. She and Utopia are literally lost without you," he said, turning to the Man of Steel.

Clark wasn't feeling too brave at the moment, knowing that Lois was floundering, lost out there, somewhere in her own past. He crossed his arms on his chest, trying to summon his Superman focus, to take control and not let the fear of losing Lois to time take over.

"What can we do?" he asked.

"Well, that's why I've come," said Andrus. "Tempus stole a time window, which is allowing him to jump much more quickly, making him harder to track. I brought an extra window, especially made for you, Mr. Wells. You can travel in it Superman, as long as you are with Mr. Wells. If you catch up to Tempus, you must get him to use *your* window alone, which will send him into eternity, thus solving our Tempus problem permanently!"

He handed Wells the compact device for the window.

"Hold on to your regular time travel device as well, and after you get Tempus through the other window, you can restore Superman and Lois to their rightful time."

Wells eyed the window device. "Why does this sound much easier than I think it will be to accomplish?"

"I'll make sure it happens," said Clark confidently, feeling that they had some hope after all to rectify the situation. "We have three days till Christmas. Let's see if we can't bring my wife home before then."

Andrus lifted his hand, "Actually, it's imperative that you do exactly that. You *must* find Lois Lane before Christmas. If she is not returned to her time by then, Utopia will be destroyed. I told you that effects are already beginning to be felt. In another three days, Utopia will be lost forever."

"Then we must act quickly. Mr. Wells, can you track where she is now?"

~1985~

Lois found herself in a crowded mall, being pushed and shoved as shoppers hurried to their destinations, parcels banging around every which way. It was a complete nightmare; over cheery music blared from hidden speakers, the glare of chintzy lights and commercialism screamed obnoxious holiday cheer at her. Lois felt like screaming herself, for the world to stop.

She stepped to the side, out of the way of oncoming people traffic and tried to take stock of where she was and--she gulped--*when*. She didn't think it was likely that Tempus had conveniently dumped her at home, so as she recovered from the abrupt time travel, she started looking around for clues as to her time and place.

The mall looked oddly familiar, though the clothes in the window shops seemed awfully dated. She realized that she must be was somewhere in the eighties. Bright colors, legwarmers, and teased hair abounded. She walked listlessly through the mall, wondering what she would find around the next corner.

She still felt bereft from leaving her six year old self behind, and shivered as she suddenly recalled nightmares of a man in a window trying to steal her away... Funny, that memory hadn't existed before... She just hoped that was the only ripple effect that had occurred with Tempus' tampering with her life.

Lois wandered aimlessly, feeling lost and lonely. She knew Clark had to be trying to find her, but she wondered if HG Wells was with him. She had to hope that he was, and that somehow, they'd catch up to her and to Tempus.

She just hoped they did so before Christmas... she couldn't face Christmas Day like this, stranded in time.

Lois came to a record store and paused suddenly. It looked familiar... oh, yes! She remembered now. Lucy used to drag her here on the weekends. She had had a crush on one of the the checkout boys, a guy who was too old for her and no good, Lois remembered immediately surmising. But being her older sister, she would go with her, if for nothing

else, than to keep an eye on her.

Lois suddenly got chills up her spine as she spotted her teenage self with her sister, Lucy; it was so weird to see their former selves. It was even stranger than seeing her six year old self, for this Lois was almost a woman at eighteen. Lois watched, fascinated by the play of her own younger features, mentally making comparisons to what she knew she looked like now and how she looked then.

Once the initial shock of seeing her younger face wore off, she noticed the garish Christmas outfits her and her sister were wearing. They had hideously teased hair, cheesy Christmas sweaters, and high top sneakers. Lois cringed at the fashion sense of the eighties. What had people been thinking?!

She looked around to see if that no-good crush of Lucy's was working, but she barely remembered what he looked like... Curious as to what her and her sister were up to, she walked casually towards them and picked up a George Michael album to hide behind as she came up near them to spy.

"Lucy, mom would not go for a record, come on!" said Lois, crossing her arms in frustration.

"Not for her, silly! For me!" said Lucy, making eyes at a boy working across the room.

<<Oh there he is... Yup, just as smarmy as I remember him,>> thought Lois, eying the tool sporting a Don Johnson look with a teal suit coat and black t-shirt underneath.

"Luce, it's Christmas! You might get just what you want under that tree," said Lois, barely able to conceal that she had already bought the record Lucy had her eye on. Younger Lois suddenly noticed what was distracting her sister and sighed.

"Lucy, come on, let's get out of here." Lois tried.

Lucy shook her head, making eye contact with Don Johnson again. "Not yet, he just spotted me," she whispered.

Lois groaned in frustration. "Would you give it up, Lucy? He's too old for you! Besides, we have to meet mom and dad soon, and we've barely done any Christmas shopping!"

Lucy rolled her eyes. "We have enough. Besides, it will be just like it is every year... Mom will get us sweater sets and dad a gift certificate, or if we're lucky, some jewelry."

Lois tried pulling her away from the albums and away from making eyes at the no-good boy across the store. "How do you know what *I'm* getting you, then?" asked Lois, trying to get Lucy's attention by pulling the album she was holding out of her hand. "Come on. We got to go meet mom and dad."

"Fine," Lucy relented, sending another smile over her shoulder at the boy before walking off with Lois.

Lois followed her younger self and her sister out of the record store. She tried avoiding being jostled by shoppers and yet still keep up with them. Lois stopped when they did, keeping her distance a few feet away, pretending to be interested in a shop window.

She saw they had spotted their mother.

Ellen Lane would have been an elegant, beautiful woman if life hadn't dealt her some tricky cards. As it were, her eyes were a bit sunken, and her make-up a bit too bright. She plastered on a smile when she met the girls, but it never reached her eyes.

Lois struggled to choke back tears at the sight of her. She suddenly remembered what was coming.

"Let's go, girls," Ellen said stiffly.

"What about Dad?" asked Lucy, looking around.

Ellen could play the doctor's wife to a tee. She could be witty and charming at get-togethers. She could avoid the slights by her husband when he preferred to talk to his colleagues over her. She could even ignore him giving up a career as a surgeon to pursue his crazy obsession with cyborgs. "They are the way of the future, Ellen. I have to be there when it happens," he'd say, and she'd smile supportively, even though she'd want to smack him. She'd lasted through dinner parties, luncheons, lonely evenings at home with the girls, always poised, always there to support what Sam thought he had to do.

But right there in the middle of that crowded mall, two days before Christmas, it happened; with carols playing in the background, bright Christmas lights, twinkling, Ellen Lane lost her resolve and burst into tears.

"What is it Mother?" said teenage Lois, touching her mom's arm.

Her mother brushed her off, struggling for composure. If her daughter touched her again, she'd fall into a sad puddle and never recover. "Not now. We need to get home," she said, digging in her purse for her car keys. Then, unable to focus enough to grab hold of them, her bag fell off her arm, spilling its contents all over the waxy mall floor. Shoppers stepped over her belongings, completely avoiding the woman and her two girls struggling to pick up the contents of her purse, completely avoiding a family falling apart.

"Your father wants a divorce," Ellen whispered at last, struggling to keep her dignity. Young Lois walked her mother over to an empty bench, while Lucy collected the remaining contents of their mother's purse, including the small liquor flask that the family knew Ellen carried but pretended she didn't.

Lois watched as surreptitiously as she could, remembering how traumatized she had felt in that moment, seeing her mother lose her cool like that, especially in public.

Ellen started talking and couldn't seem to stop. She didn't even seem to notice she was speaking to her daughters; she simply needed someone, anyone to talk to. "He said he needs more time to work on his damn cyborgs! That he and I haven't--well, we haven't gotten along very well for--I guess years now... He said he... he doesn't love me anymore," she whispered, tears streaming down her face, making her mascara run dark streaks down her cheeks.

Lucy took out a tissue from her mom's purse, handing it to Lois. Lois gently wiped the tears and then pulled her mother into her arms. "It will be okay, Mother. Lucy and I

are here. Everything will be okay," she said reassuringly, though Lois could see tears forming in her own, younger eyes.

That was the worst Christmas she could ever remember. No tree would be set up that year, only a few presents would be exchanged. The holiday lost its luster entirely for her after that year; there would be no heart in Christmas after that for a very long time...

Lois turned away from the scene, suddenly desperate to get away from the pain of that day and the ones that followed. Memories flooded back of her parents arguing when they finally got home and her father storming out of the house, not returning till after Christmas Day. Memories returned of those horrible days of not knowing what would happen to her and her sister, of not knowing what her mother would do. She had had to take care of both herself and her sister, as well as her mother who went on a drinking binge that seemed to last for weeks.

She felt tears streaming down her own face as she started pushing and shoving through the crowd. Unwittingly, her heart cried out for Clark, even as pain went deeper and tears streamed harder. Her soul reached out for him, fearing she may never see him again. What if she was stuck, forever reliving painful moments of her past?

<<It's not possible! It can't be possible!>> she screamed inside. She ran and ran, avoiding couples, children, smiling faces; as the only face that she could see in her mind's eye was her mother's. That brokenhearted look of despair and loneliness; the look that she had once feared would be on her face if she ever dared to love...

"No!" she cried, pushing the fear away, reaching for the love that she knew was real. She reached for Clark with all her heart, calling to him, desperately. She felt like she had those dark days when he had been on New Krypton, torn away from her side. Now she was the one in a strange land, uncertain of the rules... for how do you stop a past that is your own?

She suddenly saw a flash of light, appearing as if out of nowhere... and in a blink, she disappeared into time... again.

"Lois!" Clark called as soon as they appeared in 1985. He changed out of the Suit and headed into the nearby mall. He had **felt** her calling to him, felt her pain and loss. It broke his heart that he wasn't there. But as soon as he had entered the mall, just under superspeed, he **saw** her disappear! Tempus had opened a time window in a wall and had grabbed Lois out into a different time and space... they had missed her once again.

Clark walked solemnly over the rest of the way to where she had disappeared, his eyes focused on the last spot he had seen her, before being ripped away once again from him. He carefully avoided passersby as he reached the spot, touching the wall she had been pulled in through by Tempus. The shoppers around hadn't even blinked! A quick flash of light had caught some people's eye, but that was all. He could have supersped in as Superman, and he didn't

think anyone would have noticed in all of the hustle and bustle!

But he hadn't. He had had presence of mind enough not to be Superman in the wrong time and place, but it had cost him missing Lois once again.

He sighed heavily, trying not to let despair overwhelm him.

HG Wells came up beside him, having moved slightly slower than Clark in chasing after Lois.

He put a gentle hand on Clark's shoulder, "Don't be disheartened, Clark. We're getting closer, getting better at this. We just have to move faster next time. I've already started the tracking device. She's somewhere in time in space, no 'where' exact yet. But as soon as Tempus lets her go, we'll be there."

Clark looked up at Wells, pain and heartache evident on his face, "I just want my wife back."

~1990~

Lois found herself at the Lexor Hotel Ballroom during the only fancy ball held for Planet employees ever, a black and white Christmas Eve masquerade. The only such party, because so many people complained it took away from family time in a season where Christmas was usually the only uninterrupted family time they had.

Lois remembered not caring that the party was on Christmas Eve, because it had gotten her out of her lonely apartment. That had been the only good thing about that party. She remembered it well, in fact, though she wished she didn't.

It had been Lois' first year at the Planet, and the events of the party had codified 'rule 3' of her work rules: never sleep with anybody you work with. Everything had been going so well that year, until Claude Montreux had walked into her life and stomped all over her heart.

Lois looked around in a bit of a panic, wondering if she could get out of there without anyone noticing her before she started reliving those painful events. She grabbed a white mask off a table and slipped it on, to get around the room hopefully unrecognized, and find an exit. The large ballroom was filled to the brim with people, and she had a hard time squeezing through the crowd. Though the party was meant to be an adult affair, some employees had brought their kids along with their spouses, just adding to the numbers and difficulty maneuvering around.

Unintentionally, as Lois tried not to talk to anyone yet squeeze through the crowd, she began overhearing people's conversations. She couldn't help it. Her name---and **his** kept coming up, grabbing her unwilling attention.

"I guess that will teach the Ice Queen to play with fire," said a male voice.

"She should have known what was coming to her. Everyone knew Claude was just after that story," answered a woman.

Lois forged ahead, feeling all the old fears and insecurities rear their ugly heads, as the crowded room

started closing in around her, making her fear she'd never escape.

"I can't believe Lane was so shocked! I mean, come on, why else would a guy like Claude bother to go after a woman like her?"

"I think she was just desperate. He took an interest in her, and she couldn't help but throw herself at him."

Lois wanted to run, to hide, to just get out of there. She started for the door, one within reach at last, when she suddenly ran into a woman about her size.

"Sorry, excuse me," she said, reaching for the door.

"Geez lady, watch where you're going!" said a familiar voice.

Lois stopped in her tracks and turned to watch as her former self made her way into the party. People became less overt about their comments about her, but Lois could tell they were still whispering cutting things about what had happened between her and Claude.

She watched as her former self made her way to the punch table, grabbing a glass. Perry came up beside her and started making small talk.

"Lois, that partner of yours is something else," he said casually, still marveling at the story he had given him.

"You have no idea," she answered with barely concealed anger.

Perry turned to her, noticing her discomfiture. "You two were peas in a pod two days ago. What happened?"

Lois turned to him, her eyes flashing angry through her black mask. "What happened? How about that story--that I spent *months* putting together all the details on---how about the fact that the glowing story you published yesterday by *Monsieur Claude* was *mine*!" she said scathingly.

"What do you mean, Lois? Claude had been giving me notes on that story for almost a month," Perry said in shock.

Lois looked at him, her mouth gaping in horror. "He *what*?" she whispered, feeling the betrayal sink ever deeper within her. Images started flashing in her mind, of Claude coming over late at night, pretending interest in her story... kissing her and *stealing her notes*?!

Perry suddenly understood what had happened and shook his head, "Oh, Lois, I'm *so* sorry. I honestly had no idea... he told me he had this story all sewn up himself. If I had known it was *your* story..."

She swallowed, unable to listen to him. All she could picture was the smug look on Claude's face yesterday afternoon...

She came into work early that morning and knew she was about to turn in a Kerth winning story. She was chipper, even friendly to the coffee vendor on her way in. Then, as she picked up her copy of the day's news from her desk, she saw her very same story she had poured so much blood and sweat into with *his* name on it, on the *front page*! She felt her heart rip in two and had to sit down a moment to gain control over her emotions. She wanted to cry, she wanted to scream! Lois took a deep breath, never one to run

from a fight, and marched purposely over to Claude's desk, dumping the copy on it, right under his nose.

"Ca va, cherie?" he asked, reaching to pat her gently on her rear.

She swatted his hand away angrily and pointed to the article. "You want to tell me what this is about?" she demanded.

Nonchalantly, he leaned back in his chair, looking down his handsome French nose at her. "What is there to talk about? We share everything as lovers, non?"

She gasped, shocked by his comment and hurt by his flippancy. "Not my story! Especially not a story I've been working on for *months*! How *dare* you?!" she whisper shouted, not wanting to draw attention, but failing miserably.

He leaned toward her, winking, "All's fair in love and journalism, ma petite chou. Merci pour tous, cherie," he said laughingly, his eyes leering appreciatively up and down her body. "J'avais mieux que toi, mais tu n'etais pas tres mal..."

She turned on her heel, suddenly hating the sound of his voice, when only a week ago it had charmed her and *seduced* her even. She didn't even know what he was saying, so she couldn't retaliate! Nothing was worse to Lois than a battle of words when she didn't understand what was being said!

She couldn't get back to work, though. She was too humiliated, too hurt and stunned to sit at her desk all day across from *him*--that low, pond scummy---*frog*! Lois stomped into the conference room and nearly slammed the door. She was thankful the blinds were already drawn, so no one could see her slip to the floor and dissolve into a puddle of tears...

Lois watched her former self talking to Perry. She relived every second of that humiliation, especially the realization that Claude had been *planning* to steal her story for at least a month! She felt nauseous again at the thought, remembering how it had pushed her to work harder than ever. But alone... always alone. She had shut herself off from the world except when it was related to a story. Her personal life had been limited to helping her sister through college and watching reruns of 'The Ivory Tower' on the weekends. She had sworn off partners, off men entirely. It had pushed her to a loneliness that was so complete, with so many solid walls of stone built up around her heart, that it had finally taken a man of steel to break through to let her love again.

She had hoped to never feel that pain again, that knife of utter betrayal, yet here it was, laid out before her, feeling as real as the moment it had first happened to her.

Suddenly Lois remembered what had happened next that night. She wanted desperately to save her younger self, to pull her away from some of the pain. Because maybe if she didn't go through that final, absolute step of humiliation, she might have been happier... she might have been open to Clark just that much sooner...

Lois was decided. Besides, she had a mask on, right?

The other Lois had no need to know that it was her twin from the future, sent to save her from getting her heart broken *again*.

She stepped right up to her former self and Perry and reached out her hand. "Hi, I'm... Linda...Kent," she said, using the first name that came to mind. Though as soon as she said it, she realized she had no excuse to be at the party...<<Way to go, Lane. Way to check the water level before diving in!>>

Perry reached out a friendly hand, but eyed her cautiously. "Linda Kent, nice to meet you. Are you here with...?" he prodded.

"A friend, yeah. I came with...Cat Grant," she said, instantly regretting her choice, but unable to back out now. What if Cat *were* here, and Perry insisted she come over and--

"Oh, well, Linda Kent, this is Lois Lane," Perry offered, and Lois reached out to shake hands with 'Linda.'

"How do you do?" Lois said, uninterested in this 'Linda Kent' person. "Perry? Did Claude say he'd be here tonight?" she asked, really hoping he wouldn't be. She didn't think she could keep her opinions--or her emotions--to herself if she saw him.

"Well, you two had RSVP'd as a couple last week, Lois... So all things considered..." Perry tried delicately, though backed off seeing the pained expression on Lois' face.

"Lois, I promise you. If that man shows his face here tonight, he'll get a piece of my mind. You won't have to work with him ever again, you understand?" he asked, solidifying forever the protective father figure role he would play in her life.

"Thanks, Perry," she said softly.

'Linda' tried to chime in, to give her twin a little ego boost, "Uh, Miss Lane, I am a great admirer of your work."

"You are?" Lois asked in surprise but then quickly recovered. "I've only been here a year, but I am just getting started, you know. I'll have a Kerth before the end of next year, I promise!"

'Linda' smiled, knowing that Lois managed to accomplish just that. "I'm sure you will. I'm a journalist myself."

"Oh? Who do you write for? Just don't tell me it's the Metropolis Star. I *hate* that rag."

"No I would never write for the Star either. I work for the... Borneo Gazette. Yeah, just here for the holidays," she improvised.

"With Cat?" asked Lois derisively. "Some company for Christmas."

"Yeah, she's not that bad," 'Linda' said, but needed to steer the conversation so she could get Lois out of there. "Hey, would you mind showing me the way to the ladies' room? I've lost track of Cat, and this place is sooo big..."

"It's just down the hall, you go out to the left, then turn right at the elevators, then go past the lobby... oh, heck. I guess I can take you," Lois said, as 'Linda' pretended utter

confusion at her directions.

Lois and Lois headed out of the ballroom and stepped into the hallway. 'Linda' hoped she timed their departure right. She would hate it if her former self would have to go through---

Lois stopped in her tracks. There he was. Claude--*with a date.* Talk about insult to injury!

'Linda' realized she was too late. It didn't matter. This heartbreak would happen whether she tried to do something to stop it or not.

"Are you okay, Miss Lane?" she asked gently, though knowing exactly how not okay she was.

"I'm fine, let's just go. Maybe he won't recognize me," she said, tugging on 'Linda's' arm towards the restrooms.

"Lois, so good to see you!" Claude said, stopping her again in her tracks.

"Come on, you don't have to talk to him," 'Linda' said, trying to pull Lois away from the mayhem.

But Lois ignored her. "How brave of you to show up here tonight, Claude," she said, trying not to shake with all her hurt and anger.

"I never miss a good party, ma cherie. Oh, Lois, I'd like you to meet Melanie," he said absently, as if it were the most natural thing in the world to introduce a new girlfriend to a woman he had slept with and betrayed.

The blond stupidly reached her hand out to Lois, but Lois totally ignored it.

"How dare you, Claude! How dare you show your face here after the way you treated me!" she cried, word for word what Lois remembered saying. At least the confrontation was happening in the hallway, and not in the middle of the ballroom as she had remembered. That was somewhat better...

"You are an innocent, Lois. I've told you before... you must learn the ways of the world. We had some fun, we wrote some stories. But now, just put it behind you, eh? Can't we be les amis?"

'Linda' suddenly couldn't take it. Lois was crumbling at her side, trying not to cry and didn't have the strength to fight the humiliation he was heaping on her. But she had the strength. She had the strength of a love that protected her and surrounded her, even when he wasn't by her side. She had the strength of a love that had erased all of the pain of the past, no matter how many times she had to relive it. She had the strength of Clark Kent, because he loved her.

Lois reached up and slapped Claude Montreux. "I don't know what you do in France, but we don't treat women that way in this country," she said in a low voice, trembling with the adrenaline of having taken charge of the scene. "Now have the decency to take your date and get out of here. And never show your face at the Planet, ever again!"

She turned to Lois who looked at her in stunned awe. "Thanks... why... why did you do that?"

Lois smiled, "I had to help a sister out."

Suddenly, Perry came up between them. "What was all that about? I heard some commotion---" then he spotted

Claude's retreating back. "Now just a minute here, Claude. I'd like a word with you."

Lois watched as Perry marched over and pulled Claude to the side, his date shifting nervously on her feet. He was giving the Frenchman a piece of his mind, and Lois was certain that it would end with Claude losing his job at the Planet. She couldn't be happier.

"Come on, let's get you freshened up so you can enjoy the party," said Lois.

"I'm fine. Thanks for your help, though I don't understand why you intervened... I feel... relieved... so relieved," smiled the younger Lois.

"Ok, then how about a drink?"

"Sure."

They made their way back into the ballroom. Already the news that Claude had been slapped by an unknown woman was being spread through the ballroom. People backed off saying hurtful things about Lois, and 'Linda' had felt she'd done her job.

She suddenly felt panicky, as she expected that Tempus would now appear any minute to whisk her away to another time and place. After each hurtful moment had played out before, he had displaced her, making her relive pain over and over again. Had she won somehow by taking a little of her own back? Why was she still here?

Lois suddenly felt eyes on her and her breath caught. She turned around, hopeful beyond measure when she knew who she would see. He had come for her at last.

Across the room, wearing a black mask, was Clark.

Through his dark mask, and through her white one, their eyes locked from across the room. Each felt like it had been an eternity since they had last seen each other. Lois feared that if she as so much breathed, the spell would be broken, and she'd be whisked away again to another time and place, taken away again from Clark.

Lois didn't remember deciding to move, but she suddenly found herself in Clark's arms. Had he flown over? She didn't know, she didn't care. He was *here,* at last.

Their lips covered each others faces; her eyes, his jaw, her cheek, his ear. Until finally their lips met, hungrily, as fear disappeared, and they reassured each other that they were really together again.

"I thought I was lost forever," she whispered as tears started streaming down her face. Now, having him there with her, she could admit to herself how scared she had been.

"You're here. I found you. And we're going home," Clark said decidedly.

"But --Tempus," she hesitated as she whispered his name, fearing saying it might conjure him up like some long ago evil wizard. "We have to do something about him!"

"We will. I'm counting on him to reappear again, though I'm not certain he will if I'm around," he looked around nervously.

"You're not leaving me," she said fiercely, grabbing him

by the shoulders to emphasize her point and not let him go further down that train of thought.

"I may have to... if only to lure Tempus out... wherever he is. HG Wells is working on tracking him down. And we have a plan as soon as I can get---"

Suddenly a hand was on Lois' shoulder. It was Tempus.

He was tugging her into the time window, but this time, Clark wasn't letting her go alone.

~1995~

"Oh, great," Clark said resignedly. "Not this again."

They were trapped in the force field cells designed by the eccentric collectors, Tim and Amber Lake. Lois was lying on the floor in her cell, across from Clark.

"Lois, are you all right?" he asked, worried as she was lying facing away from him.

She sat up slowly, "Yeah, I'm fine. I think I got knocked out a bit---Oh, great," she said, disheartened, realizing where they were.

"Yeah, that's what I said," Clark answered with a sigh.

"You said you had a plan to stop Tempus... mightn't this be a good time to share what that plan is?" she asked, trying not to let her fear show.

"I realized when he grabbed you that he does so from *inside* his time window, thus giving you no opportunity to escape him. So, what we need to do next time he appears is to lure him out of the time window, if even for a moment, before he can act. Which, admittedly, won't be easy. He's gotten pretty slick at this," Clark said in frustration. "But we *will* stop him, Lois. Then, I can use this," he said, holding up the compact window Andrus had left for him. Clark had left HG Wells behind in 1990 as soon as he had heard Lois' heartbeat--both of them, and had taken the window with him in case he succeeded in finding Tempus. "If I can get Tempus to use this window, he'll disappear forever into eternity."

Lois sighed, thinking. "But first, we need to get us out of here. Besides, you're not dressed as Superman. If the Lakes come in and see you as Clark, that will stir some questions."

"That's not a problem. I have the suit... But I don't think the Lakes have 'us' yet. I doubt they'll come in here. Otherwise, we'd be sitting next to our doubles. I don't know how much time we have, but we need to get a move on and get out of these cages."

Lois swallowed visibly, "Does that mean you are going to do that--vibrating thingy again?"

Clark shrugged practically, "It worked before."

"But it nearly killed you! Clark! You can't!" she cried.

"Lois, I've done it before. This time, we have the benefit of knowing it works," he replied calmly. "It's okay, honey. We'll be okay."

She nodded, slightly comforted by just the sound of his voice. "I'm glad we're in this together," she whispered.

"Me too," he said with feeling. "I don't care what kind of disasters we come up against together, it's the ones where we're on our own that I most dread. These last few days---"

he began.

She nodded in agreement. "I know. You don't have to say. Me too." She sighed, "What do you say we bust out of here, trap Tempus, and go enjoy Christmas at your folks?"

"Sounds like a good plan to me," he grinned.

Clark stepped back slightly from the force field and started concentrating deeply. In utter fascination, Lois watched as for the second time her husband displaced his molecular structure to break through the force field. He vibrated before her, imperceptible at first, until he blurred into a mass of color. She let out an involuntary gasp as he nearly disappeared before her and made his way through the force field.

She held her breath till he began to reappear again. He seemed a little weak and unfocused, and no wonder! But she called out to him, "Clark, remember, you have to fly! You can't touch the ground!"

He came to and nodded that he heard her. His toes nearly touched the ground, but he was able to regain enough equilibrium to float over to the control panel. He zapped it as he had before, and Lois was suddenly free.

She ran to his arms, and he could feel she was trembling. "I don't care how many times you do that, it's still terrifying!" she said into his shoulder.

"It's okay, Lois. I'm okay," he said soothingly but was breathing a little heavily from the effort.

Suddenly, a time window opened before them. Clark pulled Lois tighter into his side, expecting Tempus' hand to reach for her once again. Instead it was HG Wells, and they both sighed in relief.

"I'm getting much better at this!" said Wells with some pride. "I was able to track you two fairly quickly. Clark, we must get back to your present. Utopia is off balance, to say the least."

"Why did Tempus send us here, do you think? I thought his goal was to destroy Utopia and something about if Lois and I never meet..." Clark asked, puzzled.

"I am not certain, Clark. He also knew you'd escape from these cages. It's almost as if... well, he wanted you to escape. Maybe he was trying to delay you? Remember, Tempus' ultimate goal is to destroy Superman, however he can. Maybe he has a more nefarious scheme at hand than keeping Lois away from you, now that he knows you've found her."

Lois moved closer to Clark. "Do you think he has access to... kryptonite?" she asked warily.

"It's a definite possibility. Though it's much harder to acquire these days, I think, we must make a plan before we go anywhere. I think we can definitely expect Tempus to appear if we take you two back where you belong. And this time, we'll be ready for him."

Wells leaned over conspiratorially and told the couple his plan.

"Sounds good to me," said Lois. "Let's go home and finish this," she sighed, exhausted from all of the emotional upheaval of the past few days.

Clark gave her a gentle squeeze and they prepared to enter Wells' time window.

In an instant, they were gone.

The door to the collection room suddenly opened and Amber Lake stepped in. She took in the damaged control box and was disheartened that their little game would have to be delayed until it got fixed.

"Tim? Do we still have that electrician's number?" she called to the other room. "I think something went wrong with our little Superman display..."

~1996~ HOME AT LAST

Lois wanted to cry with relief when they arrived back at their living room. It looked as cozy and inviting as she remembered it. The Christmas decorations were as she left them, and Clark's tree was still propped against the wall. She sat on the sofa and hugged a pillow.

"Home sweet home," she said with a grin. "I can't believe those words are coming out of my mouth, but they're true."

"We're not out of the woods yet," Clark said, spinning into Superman. "I'll be back in a jiff. Mr. Wells, don't let her out of your sight."

Herb forced a smile as he sat on the sofa next to Lois, wondering just what he could do if Tempus were to appear. "Just, hurry back..."

Lois laid her head back into the cushy sofa. "I'm nervous about this, Mr. Wells. What if it doesn't work? Or what if Tempus... comes here before Clark can get back?" she asked nervously, looking around.

She had just barely finished her comment, when the whooshing sound of Clark returning was heard. In his arms, was a stack of dozens of five foot tall mirrors.

"I can't believe you found that many!" Lois said, laughing.

Clark let out a small laugh, his hands on his hips as he surveyed his purchases. "Well, I had to go to ten different department stores, but this should do it."

Then, faster than anyone could see, he scattered the mirrors strategically around the room.

"Mr. Wells, can you step out of the living room?" Clark asked. Then realizing their friend was a bit confused, he led him to the stairway.

"Okay, Lois, how does that look?" he asked from behind the array of mirrors.

"I see... waaay too many of me," she said turning in place. "You think this will work?"

"It has to. Only I'll know where you are. Hopefully Tempus will be fooled long enough--"

Suddenly a light was in the living room. It was Tempus! Lois and Clark tried not to laugh when he reached out a hand through his time window, feeling for what he thought would be a shoulder and instead grabbed air.

His suavely coiffed head peeked out of the window. "Well, now. That's simply not playing fair."

"I'm done playing fair, Tempus," said Superman,

purposely flying quickly to different points in the room to further confuse Tempus.

Tempus stepped out of his window, just as Clark hoped he would. Clark was also relieved to not to sense any kryptonite near by. That would make this just that much easier.

Lois ducked out of the way, though she was still visible in a handful of mirrors. Clark immediately stepped in behind Tempus, opening the window in his pocket.

"This is one Christmas *you* won't ruin!" he said, grabbing Tempus by his shirt and shoving him into the alternate time window.

The window shone brighter but with a black sheen. Tempus screamed as the window shrunk and eventually, disappeared into eternity...

"Is he really gone?" asked Lois.

Clark spun out of Superman and put his glasses back on as Lois came up to him. "Yes, he's gone. I don't think we'll need to worry about him interfering for a very, very long time."

As if to contradict him, another window appeared. Clark tensed his hold on Lois, but it was just Andrus.

"Well done, Superman. I've just come to tell you that things are back to normal in Utopia. Tempus hasn't been heard from in the future... so I assume that means you were successful with the time window?"

"Yes, he disappeared not moments ago," Clark confirmed.

"I feel kind of bad for him," Lois suddenly confessed. All three turned to look at her. "What? The guy must have had a really crappy childhood to turn out so evil," she shivered. "Thank goodness despite all my problems... I found the one man who could bring me back to life," she finished softly, smiling warmly at Clark.

HG Wells smiled contentedly. "Well, it seems my work here is done. Andrus, shall we head to Utopia? I hear that Christmas there is really something to see."

Lois hugged the old writer. "Thanks for coming. You always seem to be there when we need you. If ever you need *our* help, please, don't hesitate to contact us."

"Thank you, my dear," HG Wells blushed. He shook Clark's hand, "Well my boy, I told you we'd get her back."

"Thank you, Mr. Wells. And, have a Merry Christmas," he said warmly.

Lois and Clark watched as their two friends disappeared into time and space...

"So, what do we do now?" Lois asked casually.

"First--" Clark began, then flew around the room and collected the mirrors. "Good thing I saved the receipts," he grinned.

She stepped up to him and wrapped her arms around his waist. "Well, we don't have to take *all* of them back... It might be kind of fun if we kept one..." she trailed off and whispered her idea in his ear.

Clark was actually blushing when she looked up him.

"Well?" she asked with a sexy shrug.

"You always keep me on my toes, you know that?" he asked, nuzzling her ear.

"Hey, a girl's gotta work pretty hard to keep up with Superman."

"Lois, you don't need to work hard at all. Just promise me, not to go jumping through time windows for a while."

She laughed warmly, kissing his cheek. "No worries there... but, um, do we have a little time before we have to be at your parents?"

He moved on to nuzzling her neck.

"Honey, we've got all the time in the world."

~EPILOGUE~

"So, are you ready to head to Smallville?" Lois asked with a smile, coming up behind Clark to give him a hug.

He nodded, "Soon, but I have something I have to do first. I'd like you to come with me." Suddenly, he stepped back to turn into Superman. He grabbed a large bag from out of the hall closet and hoisted it over one shoulder, turning to with her a silly grin.

"Don't tell me, you're going to play Santa Claus?" she laughed.

He smiled, slightly embarrassed as he pulled out a Santa hat and put it on. "Sort of. I promised to stop by the Children's Hospital..."

"Okay, no problem," she giggled, enjoying watching 'Super-Santa' get ready.

"How do I look?" he asked, still grinning with the sack of toys for the kids slung over his shoulder.

"Wonderful," she answered truthfully, her heart full of love for this man in front of her, who would don tights to save lives and still make time for children at Christmas.

"Any reason the Planet can't take the exclusive on Superman's visit with the children?" she asked pretending to be serious, while she playfully adjusted his Santa hat.

"Always looking for a story, aren't you?" he teased in return, stopping her playing with his hat by giving her a quick kiss. "No, it shouldn't be a problem. Besides, it's a good cover so my wife can come along," he winked.

Clark finished settling the large sack of toys comfortably over his shoulder and then scooped up Lois with his other arm.

"I don't think Santa could manage both me *and* the toys," she giggled, wrapping her arms more securely around his neck.

"Heh," he laughed boyishly. "Well, he doesn't have to. Besides, I love having you fly with me."

With that comment, he took off to the skies, and Lois snuggled closer to him, glad that Clark was so warm. The winter air was especially biting this time of year, and snow was predicted to start at any moment.

They landed shortly at Metropolis General Children's Hospital, which was decorated festively with lights and tinsel.

When they entered the hospital, the kids that were well enough to be up and about sat around a large Christmas tree.

As soon as Superman entered the room, their faces lit up. Clark felt a warm glow as he passed out teddy bears and small toys he had collected through the Superman Foundation for the sick children. Many of the children didn't know if they'd see another Christmas, and he was glad that he could at least make this one special. Lois shared a small smile with him over the crowd of children as she passed out her share of toys. She was enjoying this as much as he was.

At last, the presents were all handed out, and Superman made his excuses to leave.

"Hope you all have a very Merry Christmas!" he said as he waved, leaving the hospital with Lois by his side.

"Merry Christmas, Superman!" cried the children, some of whom were already too occupied playing with their new toys to wave good-bye to their hero.

Once they finished up at the hospital, Clark scooped Lois back into his arms and headed west.

"Okay, Lois Lane. That was just the warm-up act. Ready to see how Christmas is done in Smallville?" he grinned.

She grinned back. "Can't wait!"

~Smallville~

A thin layer of snow was on the ground at the farmhouse when they landed. Soft, wispy flakes fell from the sky, shimmering like tiny stars when they passed through the lamp light on the barn.

Lois stood a moment, entranced, as she took in the world around her.

"Do you hear that?" she asked softly.

"Lois, I hear a lot of things. Can you be more specific?" Clark asked patiently.

"The snow. It's 'chisping.' I read that word in a book somewhere a long time ago. I never really understood what it meant until now. But the snow really is... 'chisping,'" she said, sticking her tongue out to catch some flakes.

Suddenly Clark's arms were around her again. "Now, that is one cute little tongue."

She giggled and subconsciously covered her face.

"Uh-uh. We need to have a closer inspection of that oh so cute little tongue," he said, leaning in to kiss her thoroughly.

"Clark? Is that you?" called Johnathan from the porch.

Lois erupted into giggles as Clark answered back.

"Yeah, Dad. Lois and I will be in, just a minute."

Lois buried her nose into his upper arm, just enjoying him holding her for a moment more before they went in.

"Come on, you must be freezing," he said gently, coaxing her towards the house.

When they entered the living room, Jonathan had just finished pulling out all of the trimmings for the Christmas tree. A simple fir tree stood in the corner, nearby the cozy fireplace which warmed the room gently with its glow.

"Merry Christmas, you two!" cried Martha, coming in the living room to greet them, a spoon still in her hand. "Do you believe I've been cooking *all* day!"

"Oh, Martha, let me help you," Lois offered. They all

exchanged looks, knowing Lois' limits in the kitchen.

"What? I can do something, as long as I'm told exactly what to do, and it doesn't involve any kind of... um, cooking."

They erupted into laughter, and Martha shook her head.

"Don't worry, dear. Everything is just about ready. Clark, why don't you and Lois set the table?"

Everyone settled into their little tasks, moving quietly and comfortably in the farmhouse. To Lois, it was all so beautiful. The scents of Martha's cooking, the warm fire, the smells of Christmas. She turned and smiled at Clark as he was finishing the place settings.

"You know, I never can remember which fork goes where," he said, half seriously.

Lois came up beside him and wrapped her arms around his waist. "Don't think it matters... it will be perfect no matter how you set it," she said sweetly, earning a kiss from her husband.

In moments, they were all at the table, comfortably enjoying each others company and the lovely food Martha had prepared. Conversation was light and pleasant. Clark told his parents about their escapade with Tempus, but even that didn't seem to dampen the mood. There was too much love in the room for anything to ruin it.

After dinner, they all moved to the living room and finished trimming the tree. Lois watched as they shared memories of Christmases gone by and souvenirs from when Clark was growing up. Finally, they got to the topper for the tree. Martha handed Clark a silver star to put on top, but Lois stopped them.

"I almost forgot!" she cried, digging for something in her purse. "Clark gave me this on our first... unofficial Christmas together," she said with a smile at the memory.

She handed Clark the star--the *real* star-- that he had somehow gotten for her from the heavens and preserved so it still kept its magical sparkle.

Clark floated up just enough to top the tree with the lovely star, and everyone stepped back to take in the effect.

"Oh, it's beautiful!" cried Martha, turning to Jonathan.

"That's some tree topper, Clark," he said admiringly.

"Only the most beautiful star for Lois," Clark responded, happy now that he could admit how important that gift had been when he gave it to her. She simply looked up at him, in awe and in love.

Martha and Jonathan eventually moved to the kitchen to finish up the dishes. Lois and Clark moved to the sofa, and she leaned into his shoulder gazing at the tree, thinking. "I guess this is how it's always been for you, huh?"

"What do you mean?" he asked softly.

"This wonderful Christmas feeling that pervades this house and your folks. It truly is wonderful, Clark. And I can see why you always believed in Christmas."

"And you still don't?" he asked sadly.

"I believe in you. I believe in the love that surrounds this family. But Christmas, I don't know, Clark. I mean, it was wonderful to give those poor sick children a moment of happiness, but there is so much--selfishness, evil, in the

world... I just..."

"Hold that thought," he said suddenly, standing up and reaching out a hand to her. "Fly with me?"

"Always, but--where?"

He only smiled and grabbed her into his arms once again as they headed out of the house and took to the skies.

They flew for a few moments in comfortable silence until Clark turned to her and said, "I have a Christmas gift for you, Lois. It's one I sort of--give myself every year. And this year, I want to share it with you. You've given me so much and taught me so much about what it means to be a hero. But that gift has also been a burden, one I gladly carry, yet, being Superman also makes me privy to all of the evil in the world, the corruption. You know that too, as a journalist. And you know how wearing it can be to try and make things right, uncertain if there is anything worth striving for. There is, Lois. I want to show you a part of it. This one time of year, all of that bad seems to stop, at least for a little while, and you can peek in to see the good that is in people's hearts. And it feeds my soul a bit and confirms in my mind that, that what my father Jor-El said to me of the people of earth, 'They can be a great people. They wish to be,' is true. It's at this time of year where I can truly see the goodness that he so believed is here," he finished, gesturing to a bustling London street below them.

"All I see are people shopping. How is that humanity at its best, Clark?" she asked in dismay, but trying to try to understand him, moved by his speech.

"No, look closer, Lois. See that young boy help the old lady across the street? And the street vendor? He gave away some chestnuts to the homeless man over there. And see, through that shop window? The manager is setting aside toys to be given away to charity. All small acts of kindness that come together in a feeling that is... Christmas. Come on, I'll show you more."

Swiftly they flew over Europe, till suddenly, they were over a lively German Christmas market. Fanciful decorations were on display on the small wooden structures. A child's imagination could run rampant with the mystery and wonder of Christmas amid all of the lights, characters, and warm little huts that sold sweets, sausages, and gifts.

"Again, commercialism!" sighed Lois, gesturing to the scene below them.

Clark shook his head, "Take another look. There, you see? A baker is teaching a small group of children how to make cookies--for free. Sharing a passion that has probably been in his family for generations. Over there, that choir is singing carols. And that sign under the donations says that any money they make is going to charity. See that little girl over there?" Lois nodded. "She has ten euros in her pocket, in change, which tells me she's probably been saving it a while. And she's at that stand, looking at cutting boards for her mother. Does that seem like a selfish Christmas to you?"

Lois slowly shook her head, finally beginning to see what he wanted her to see. "How do you do it, Clark?"

"Do what?"

"See the good in people? How... how did you see the good in me?" she asked in a low voice, thinking of how she was in the early days of their relationship.

Her sadness tore at his heart, "Lois, I always saw the good in you. You had just been so battered and bruised that you needed... well, love. Without any strings or boundaries. Without judgment, without hurtfulness."

"Love is patient, love is kind," she whispered, echoing his sentiment, tears forming in her eyes. "I don't remember the rest, but... thanks, Clark."

"For what?"

"For everything. For being you. For the love we have together... without strings or boundaries or judgment... or hurtfulness. Even if it took us a while to get there," she said, her voice tight with happy tears, as she gently reached up to stroke his face.

She looked up into his eyes, shining like the many stars that twinkled above them, shining like the star on their tree at his parents' house. She reached around his neck and leaned up to kiss him.

"Merry Christmas, Superman," she whispered and gifted him with her love, sealed with a kiss.

THE END

Notes:

French translations:

Ca va, cherie= Everything all right, dear?

ma petite chou = an endearment that translates to 'my little cabbage' (I've never found being compared to a vegetable very appealing, have you?)

Merci pour tous, cherie = Thanks for everything, dear.

J'avais mieux que toi, mais tu n'etais pas tres mal... = I've had better than you, but you weren't so bad...

les amis= friends

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The word 'chipping' I don't think is in the dictionary anywhere, so I'm fairly confident that my favorite author, Diana Gabaldon, made it up. She wrote a most excellent time travel series (Scotland, 18th c) called 'Outlander'. There are seven hefty books in the series, but I have no clue which book had the word 'chipping' in it!

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Here are some pictures of the Christmas markets in Germany. I had to have Lois and Clark share in them--they are simply magical!

Dresden Christmas Street Market ('Streizelmarkt'):

<http://www.facebook.com/photo.php?pid=5982789&l=96c7469126&id=594826720>

Clark wasn't lying. Dresden actually has a mini-baking school (which I'm FAIRLY certain is free) for kids set up for the holidays.

Baking school for kids:

<http://www.facebook.com/photo.php?pid=6079812&l=6774a5e87d&id=594826720>

The detail on these booths is just amazing!

Booth1: <http://www.facebook.com/photo.php?>

pid=6079814&l=5693ec6e81&id=594826720

Booth2: <http://www.facebook.com/photo.php?>

pid=5969677&l=7ab46ec461&id=594826720

1 Corinthians 13:4

"Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud."

Happy Holidays, everyone!! <:0)