

Jolly St. Clark

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Rated: PG

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Summary: This story is the missing Christmas episode from Season 1.

Set: I have set it after MoSB and Witness, but before PML. For continuity, I have returned Witness to its rightful spot after MoSB (Thanks, Kathy). MoSB is set in November, Witness has obvious Christmas décor, and PML seems so Valentine's Day, even if originally broadcast in late November 1993. Then as I was writing I was thinking PML might also work for New Year's! (if one discounts the whole fruit fly spraying thing, which everyone knows really wouldn't happen until spring.)

Author's Note: For plotting purposes, the Cost Mart "Grand Opening" scene in S2's *Church of Metropolis* was not Metropolis's first Cost Mart store.

Lois turned the aisle and literally bumped into Clark. His shopping cart was filled to the top with holiday decorations, lights, wreathes, garlands, ornaments, candy canes — the works. And toys. Lots and lots of toys.

She caught his eye and raised an eyebrow. "Getting into the holiday spirit, there, Clark?" she asked.

He smiled sheepishly. "Hi, Lois. What brings you to Cost Mart?"

"Holiday shopping. Same as you."

Clark made the obvious crane of his neck to her almost empty cart. There were two pairs of gloves, a scarf, and checkered suspenders.

"Okay," Lois amended. "Not the same as you, Jolly St. Clark."

"Didn't you get Perry checkered suspenders for his birthday?" he inquired.

Lois's eyes grew large for a moment in panic. "Those aren't for Perry," she exclaimed quickly, too quickly. "They're for my dad."

"Oh." He seemed almost embarrassed by his accurate guess, which she had made him think was a mistake.

She *had* planned on giving them to Perry. Now, she thought peevishly, she couldn't. *Now*, she had to think of another gift for their editor. Thanks, Clark. Thanks a lot!

The lull of silence grew into awkwardness. Their banter had become more and more uncomfortable this week since he had saved her life — literally — on more than one occasion. First from the skateboarder who had pushed her into traffic and then from Mr. Make-Up, Sebastian Finn. She wasn't quite sure why it made her uncomfortable. Superman saved her life all the time — well, not *all* the time, but often enough — and their discussions hadn't become this strained. But as soon as it was Clark doing the saving, suddenly... Lois sighed. He seemed like a new person somehow. Or maybe it was how she viewed him that was different and she didn't like that. He was her partner after all. She refused see him in another light.

"It's great that you two are exchanging gifts this year." Clark smiled encouragingly, breaking the silence. "I know your relationship with your father..."

Lois held up her hand stopping this line of conversation. "Did you really think we stopped giving gifts at Christmas?" she

snapped. Again, he had guessed right. But it would take hell and high water before she would ever admit it.

"I had assumed..." Clark started saying. "... from the way you two had acted at Menken's gym earlier this year..."

"There you go again, Kent, assuming relationships or non-relationships in my life," retorted Lois, annoyed.

Actually, she wasn't quite sure *why* she was annoyed. She just was. Maybe it was because Clark had pointed that keen sense of observation and his reporter skills to her personal life.

Perhaps it was because when she had mentioned a date with Lex Luthor recently and Clark had radiated his dislike for the man. He didn't so verbally, but distinctly *non-verbally*.

Or maybe it was because he had taken upon himself to become her bodyguard, like she was something or someone valuable that needed protecting.

Or possibly it was because Clark was entirely too happy that the holidays were upon them once more. Yes! That must be it. Of course, he would like Christmas, little Clarkie sunshine!

Lois needed to do something to pop his rose-colored bubble. Yes! That was what Lois Lane would give her partner, a big ol' dose of reality. She let go of her cart and took his arm, dragging him off down the aisle.

"Lois, my cart!" he sputtered.

"Calm down, Kent. I'm not kidnapping you." She shot him an evil grin, causing him to swallow nervously. "I'm just showing you something."

"Of course, you are, Lois," he replied as if she was always hauling him off on some fool's errand.

They stopped near a huge group of mothers with snot-nosed children, standing in line to see Santa. "Look at that!" she announced, flinging her arm out at the crowd.

"And?" Clark inquired.

"You aren't disgusted by this?" Lois said in shock, before catching herself. "Of course not. I bet this is exactly how everyone in Smallville pictures Christmas in Metropolis. This commercial cesspool of germs and greed."

"What?" He shook his head in confusion. "It's just a department store Santa, Lois. What's wrong with that?"

"Oh, Clark," she said with a mouthful of pity. "I bet this is where every family with a child comes to catch the winter flu. Look at all those whining children with dripping noses... no, even worse! Look where they end up! Santa looks more homeless than Ho, Ho, Ho. His wig is ratty. His beard is fake..."

Clark grabbed her arm and dragged her away down another aisle with more strength than she knew he possessed. "Lois," he hissed under his breath. "I know Christmas isn't in your top ten holidays..." He paused to give a chance to rebut; instead she agreed with a shrug of her shoulders. "But it's theirs. Those children with the dripping noses who begged Mom to drag them down to meet Santa, so they could get a good word in with the big man before the big date. So don't ruin it for them, please. If for no other reason than Perry will tan your hide for decreasing circulation of the *Daily Planet* if any of those good folk out there tie the woman who ruined Christmas for their child to your name."

Tan her hide? "What planet are you from?" she replied with anger, throwing her hand back the way they had come. "Most of those kids are terrified of Santa. Judge and jury of their 'goodness' and 'naughtiness'. The only reason that they're in that line is because Mom is hoping for a photo of her darling child in 'Santa's' lap. And *this* after all they've ever been told is 'don't talk to strangers', 'don't touch strangers', and, oh, don't forget 'never accept candy from strangers', *except this one!*"

Then Clark said the three words, she had rarely heard from him and never thought she would again, especially since they had become partners. The phrase she would dream about for months in fantasies. It made her body tingle and throb with desire.

“You’re right, Lois.”

She was so stunned by the suddenness of it, she almost replied, “I am?” Instead she said, “Of course, I am. Which is why all Santas should have a thorough background check, especially for sexual predator charges. They should be well paid, well groomed, and preferably with natural grey or white hair, and a beard.”

“In Smallville everyone knows the Santa. It isn’t a position given to the town ne’er-do-well, but one of honor.” Clark sighed wistfully. “My dad was Santa last year...” His voice faded and he sniffled.

Lois forgot that Clark was all alone this year. As low man on the reporting totem pole he was required to work the holidays his first year. Plus, he got himself extra well stuck in Metropolis after quitting — when Superman was almost banished from town last month during the heat wave — and using up the few vacation days he had accrued. She knew that there wouldn’t be the time nor money to jet halfway across the country home for one day. His parents probably couldn’t change their plans and come out here to be with him; therefore, her partner would be reluctantly alone for the holidays. And the closest thing he had to a friend in town was standing in front of him at that very moment. *Her!* Yet, until she had started on her personal vendetta to Grinch the Christmas out of her partner, he had seemed genuinely happy.

“I’m sorry, Clark,” Lois said softly, placing her hand on his arm.

Clark responded with a smile. She wasn’t sure if it was real, but she knew it was well-intentioned.

“I made a vow to myself a few years ago, no matter my circumstances I would never wallow in self-pity at this time of year. Instead of focusing on myself, I give to others and I find it bolsters my spirit throughout the whole year,” he said with a nod. “I agree with your assessment of the Cost Mart Santa though. Unfortunately, it’s too late to make a difference this year. But if you feel so passionately about it, Lois, maybe Perry would let you write something for the Op Ed page.” Then Clark walked off, returning to his cart.

Too late? It was never too late to make a difference. She marched over to Cost Mart’s management office to offer up her services.

“You should take it as a compliment, Lois,” Perry told her the next morning.

“A compliment? Ha!” she snorted.

Perry grinned. “You must have some reputation as an investigative reporter, honey, if they have your name and photo on a blacklist.”

Lois’s eyes brightened. “Why though? I just wanted to investigate Santa, not Cost Mart itself. What are they afraid I’ll find?”

Their gaze met over Perry’s desk. “Bill Church is one of my oldest and dearest friends, Lois. He wouldn’t be involved in something illegal,” Perry warned her.

“What are they hiding, then, Perry?” She raised a brow. “Why don’t they want me sniffing around their store?”

Perry paused long enough for Lois to take it as an agreement for the story. She leapt out of her chair and bolted for the door before he could change his mind. “Thanks, Chief.”

“Now, hold your horses, young lady,” Perry said, following her out into the newsroom.

“Chief,” Jimmy said, coming between them and standing with his shoulders back, full of determination he hadn’t before then possessed. “I want you to give me a reporting assignment.”

“Not now, Jimmy!” Perry growled, trying to maneuver around the young man.

“Then when, sir?”

“You aren’t ready, Olsen,” Perry barked.

“But, Chief...” Jimmy’s shoulders started to sag, but before he could say anything further the Chief stormed back into his office grumbling and slammed his door.

Lois suddenly got one of her brilliant ideas and called to Jimmy from her desk. “I think you’re ready.”

Jimmy’s jaw dropped in shock. “You do?”

“Yes.” She left it at that. She might not know how to fish, but that didn’t mean she didn’t know how to use a lure.

Jimmy sidled up to her desk. “Thanks, Lois. That means a lot coming from you.”

“There are just some stories, I believe you’d be uniquely qualified for...” she said off-hand, hinting that there was more but not yet revealing anything.

The young man sat down in the chair next to her desk.

“Really?”

“Of course. Take the assignment I was about to suggest to Clark...” She lowered her voice conspiratorially with a glance over at her partner.

Clark looked up from his typing and caught her eye. *Damn!* How did he always know when she was talking about him?

“I think you’d be a much better match for the story — the undercover work — that is. But it could be something big... maybe even dangerous...” Lois let her voice fade off as if reconsidering the idea.

There was no way she could get Clark to go undercover for her story. Anyway, no matter how much the man loved kids, the holidays, or the man in the red suit, Clark would never be hired as one of Santa’s elves at Cost Mart. He was too tall, too brawny, too... *Oh, God!* She was picturing him in that elf uniform and the man even made *that* look good. Like he was built for uniforms or spandex tights or something. She swallowed. Right. Jimmy.

“No, I better offer it to Clark first, being that he’s got more experience at undercover work.” She sighed, trying to sound disappointed.

Clark rolled his eyes and shook his head as if responding to the suggestion she had never planned on offering him. Still... Clark in green short-shorts, red striped tights, and those cute little red and green vests, not to mention that hat. She bit her bottom lip, picturing Clark in that uniform once more and liking again what she saw. A grin slipped onto her face. *Hot stuff!* What in the hell was she thinking? She shook her head.

“Okay,” Jimmy said sadly, standing up in defeat.

Oops! She was about to lose her fish. “Of course...” Lois paused as Jimmy sat back down all-ears. “You’re a much better match.”

“Why aren’t you doing it, Lois?” Jimmy asked, unexpectedly wary.

“Regrettably, I did try,” Lois told him, her annoyance at being rejected shining through. “They wanted...” Someone younger? Less well-known journalistically? *A-ha!* “A man. And even though we both know, I do a great impression of a man. They were looking for someone...” She gazed at Jimmy, taking in his whole persona. What could she say that he would believe that *he* had that *she* didn’t? “Stronger.”

Jimmy’s shoulders went back instinctively with this compliment. “Stronger?” He didn’t *want* to believe her, she could tell. But that little movement informed her that he had bought her load of dung — hook, line, and sinker. Like Jimmy would ever be stronger than her? *Ha!* But she wouldn’t argue this one point, being that she had him just where she wanted him.

The young man swallowed. “And you think I’d be a better match than CK?”

Uh-oh! There went Jimmy’s skepticism again.

“Oh, not because of that.” Lois laughed, taking another glance across the room at her well-defined partner. Of course, how many jars of food had *she* opened for that man? “You have other qualities that make you more suited for this story,” she

responded vaguely.

“Give me a chance to show Perry I’ve got what it takes, Lois,” Jimmy pleaded with her.

“Oh, I don’t know, Jimmy,” Lois pretended to hem and haw. “Well, okay,” she finally gave in. “But if you come across something... *anything*, you’ve got to call me and Clark for back-up.”

Jimmy practically floated to his feet with joy. “What do you need me to do?”

Lois grinned larger than Cat in a room full GQ models.

“Have you got any place to be for Christmas Eve dinner?” Lois overheard Cat ask Clark the next morning before the meeting.

Oh, please! Was the woman still after Mr. Goody-Two-Shoes? How many times did a man have to say ‘no’? How many times *had* he said ‘no’? And the sixty-four thousand dollar question: *why* did Lois care?

“I’m working Christmas,” he responded as if the gossip queen wasn’t asking him out. “You?”

“Dinner with my parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, sisters, brother, and cousins,” Cat told him. “The Grants *love* Christmas. I bet one more wouldn’t even be noticed.”

Smooth. Lois rolled her eyes.

“Hhmmm,” Clark responded non-committally. Did he not know that Cat had just asked him out? Point blank? *Can we say ‘dense much’?*

“The food’s really good,” Cat coaxed.

Clark’s brow furrowed as if he just realized it had been an invitation. “Oh?” Then he glanced at Lois — just for a second — before focusing his gaze on Cat. “Thank you, Cat, but I have made...” His eyes darted towards his partner a second time as he paused. “... plans.”

Plans? They most certainly did *not* have plans! Lois glowered at Clark. At his startled and confused expression, Lois discovered her eavesdropping had become overt. *Damn!* Now, her partner knew she was interested in his holiday plans, even if she had no idea *why* she was interested.

“How about you, Lois?” Clark asked, unable to keep her from their private conversation since she had butted in. “Do you have any plans?”

“If you must know,” Lois admitted. “I too am working this Christmas.”

“Oh! I see, how it is,” Cat implied, as her gaze went back and forth between Lois and Clark.

“*No!*” Lois denied adamantly. “I always work Christmas!”

“Right,” said Cat in disbelief. “That’s the only reason.”

“And since I tendered my resignation during the heat wave, I volunteered to work the holidays, so everyone else could spend it with their families,” Clark explained with a knowing look towards his partner.

Oh, God! Clark wasn’t expecting Lois to take the day off and spend the holiday with *her* family, was he? Anything but that!

“I don’t *do* Christmas with my family,” Lois mumbled under her breath as Perry walked into the conference room.

“Where in blue blazes is Olsen?” yelled Perry.

“Jimmy’s working on something for me,” Lois confessed.

“Lo-is,” Perry growled, knowing exactly what. “You didn’t, honey?”

The young man in question marched into the conference room decked out in red and white striped socks, bright green knickers, the cherry-apple red and green vest, elfin shoes that curled up at the toes, and a hat that had built-in pointed ears and jingle bells. “She did,” he announced.

The entire office burst into snickers.

“Go ahead,” Jimmy said, slowly spinning around, his arms out-stretched. “Get it out of your system.”

The snickers turned to outright laughter.

Lois clapped with delight. “Jimmy, you got the job!”

He pulled off his hat and dropped it on the table. “Strength! Ha!” he grumbled, sticking his nose in her face.

“Strength of character,” Lois said, defending her weak argument.

“You owe me, Lane,” he replied.

She smiled demurely. “Undercover work is undercover work, Jimmy. It’s not always pretty.”

“A better match than CK, huh? I’d like to see him try to work for Santa,” Jimmy griped, leaning against the wall behind Lois and Clark.

“Hey!” Clark said in his defense.

“Sorry, big guy. But I can’t picture you in this outfit,” Jimmy admitted.

“I can,” Lois murmured under her breath to herself. She glanced again at Clark and noticed he was staring at her with his mouth agape. He hadn’t *heard* her, had he? No. Impossible.

“If you are finished with your fun, I’d like to get back to running a newspaper,” Perry stated loudly, instantly quieting the room. “Eduardo, have you finished your series on the environmental impact of Metropolis’s boiling aquifer?”

Lois gave Jimmy a list of things she wanted him to check out regarding the Cost Mart Santa and sent him on his way. She went over to Clark’s desk and saw him shaking his head.

“What?” she inquired.

“I can’t believe it. Actually, I don’t know why it surprises me. You’re really spying on Santa,” he told her.

“No, Clark. I’m investigating Cost Mart and the man pretending to be Santa. I want to make sure he’s not some crazy, diseased lunatic,” she replied.

“Lois, crazy and lunatic mean the same thing,” he corrected her.

“Thank you, Einstein,” she snapped. “It was your idea. Have you changed your mind?”

He sighed. “What I’m wondering is why you aren’t the one bedecked in green and red?”

She sneered and responded with a slight pout, “They rejected me.”

“Not enough Christmas cheer?” he asked with mock-shock and plenty of mirth.

“No. If you must know, I was at the top of a list of do-not-hires in their management office,” she informed him.

His brow furrowed as he thought about that. “They have a blacklist for journalists? A retail store? Even a big chain like Cost Mart?” This seemed to stump him. “Why?”

“My sentiments exactly! And precisely why I sent Jimmy in.”

“Jimmy?” Clark said, questioning her choice of undercover operatives.

She grinned. “I agree it was *your* turn for the goofy suit as I wore the chicken outfit during the last assignment, but ...” She shrugged, knowing Clark would never have agreed to work for Cost Mart during the holiday season, let alone dressed up as an elf. He just didn’t seem the costume type of guy. She decided to go with the less offensive route. “I figured if I was on their blacklist, as my partner, you probably were too.”

“Really?” he replied skeptically. “You’ve got three Kerths under your belt and, as you’ve reminded me on numerous occasions, I’m just a hack from Nowheresville.”

She raised a brow. “Well, if you want to march down to Cost Mart and fill out an application, I’m sure that Jimmy...”

“I never said that!” Clark pointed out. Then he smiled.

“Although, I’ve heard I do look good in green.”

Lois flushed. *Had* he heard her? “I have no idea what you’re talking about,” she said and quickly changed the subject. “So, what are your holiday plans?” Oh, geez. Why had she asked that?

His smile grew larger. “As I mentioned before, I’m working.” Her eyes turned to slits. “You didn’t sign up for the Christmas shift because you knew I would be working it too, did you?”

“And you’re so irresistible that I can’t stay away from you?” he asked rhetorically with a hint of cynicism.

Rhetorically, because there was no way in heaven Clark ever expected an answer to such a ridiculous question. Lois harrumphed and returned to her desk.

Of course, she was so irresistible to him that he couldn’t stay away! Wasn’t that why he begged to be her partner until Perry caved? Wasn’t that why he never seemed to respond to Cat’s blatant attempts to seduce him? Wasn’t that why he was always offering to walk her home? Wasn’t that why he went undercover at the Metro Club to keep an eye on her? Wasn’t that why he had kissed her goodbye on the lips when he quit the paper? Wasn’t that why he had sat outside her door all night after she witnessed that murder last week? Wasn’t that why he hated Lex Luthor? Did her partner just have a crush or was he half in love with her?

Lois looked over at Clark, adrenaline rushing through her veins. He was busy typing on his computer, oblivious to her thoughts. *Was he in love with her?* Really? Lois wasn’t quite sure how she felt about that.

Luckily at the moment, her phone rang.

“Lois Lane.”

“Lois,” said Lex into her ear.

“Lex,” Lois replied with enthusiasm and relief. She needed a good distraction from thinking about Clark’s possible feelings for her. And even more distraction from how she felt about him. . . *it!*

“I’ve had a change of plans and was wondering what you were doing on Friday night?” he asked.

Lois watched as Clark got up from his desk. Her eyes followed him as he disappeared in the direction of the storeroom. Had he heard Lex ask her out? Was Clark jealous? No, she must be leaping to conclusions again. How could Clark possibly hear what Lex was saying to her from across the room?

“Friday,” she repeated and then realized she wasn’t concentrating on her conversation with Lex. “Friday?”

Lois waited for Clark to reappear.

“Yes, Friday. This next Friday.”

She glanced at her calendar as if to recheck the date. Christmas Eve?

Oh, God! Was Lex Luthor asking her to spend Christmas Eve with him? Should she say ‘yes’? Did she want to? Did she really want to spend Christmas with a man whose nuclear power plant had made it hit over hundred degrees in November in Metropolis? Even if it had been inadvertently? Could she blame Lex personally for a problem at one of his companies? No, she guessed not.

Clark did say he would be working Christmas so others could have the day off. To spend with their *families*. Lex Luthor was not family. And Clark did not like Lex, didn’t trust him. Would it offend Clark if she agreed to go off with Lex while knowing that Clark liked her for more than friends and disliked Luthor? Or would he become more jealous? Did she want him to be more jealous?

What exactly would that be saying to Lex?

What exactly would that be saying to Clark?

What would it be saying to Perry after agreeing to work Christmas?

Should Clark’s opinion make a difference on whether or not she should say ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to Luthor? It shouldn’t. It was *her* life after all.

Did she like him enough to spend the holiday with him? What did it mean if she did spend the holiday with him? Would it be admitting feelings for him that she wasn’t sure that she had? She swallowed.

It was times like this Lois wished she had a family event to

use as an excuse to get out of seeing either man. *Yikes!* What was she thinking? This decision was less torture than being even on the telephone with *her* family. Telephone! Lex.

“Why don’t I tell you what I’ve got going on and we’ll see if that fits in with your plans?” Lois finally replied, wondering why Clark still hadn’t returned from the storeroom.

Collapsing into the chair next to Lois’s desk, Jimmy handed her his notes and then wiped his sniffing nose. “If they’ve got something secretive going on, I didn’t witness it,” he told her, his voice hoarse with a cold.

Lois held his notes with two fingers and set it on her desk. “What did you learn?”

“Santa only washed his hands *after* a reminder from a friendly elf.” Jimmy coughed into his sleeve. “He smelled like he slept regularly in Suicide Slum. I don’t know if that was him personally or the fact that they never washed the Santa suit. I definitely saw him on more than one occasion take some fluids to ward off the cold. He was disgusting but not predatory.” He wiped his nose again. “I, personally, wouldn’t want *my* child on his lap.”

“Lovely. We should take Cost Mart to task.” Lois’s brow wrinkled. “You have a child, Jimmy?”

He glared at her. “Figuratively.”

She winked at him. “I thought so. You look like you should take the day off.”

Jimmy turned his red eyes towards her. “Ya think?”

“Why don’t you ask Perry to let you go home before you spread your germs around the newsroom?” she suggested. “I’ll type up the story and then swing by your place on the way home for a fact check.”

“Do I get a byline?” he asked, looking like he would rather have a warm bed and cup of soup.

“We’ll see if it makes an article first,” she informed him.

“Gotcha,” he replied in parting, but didn’t seem to have the energy to stand.

“Was there something else?” Lois asked, starting to lean away from him and his germs.

“No,” he answered, still not moving.

Clark approached. “Whoa there, Jimmy. You okay?”

Jimmy looked up at him like Clark must be blind, but otherwise didn’t respond.

“How about a hand up?” Clark suggested, holding out his hand.

“Thanks, CK,” Jimmy said with relief.

“Do you need some help getting home? Or are you still on assignment?” Clark turned a sharp glance Lois’s way.

What did *she* do? Lois shrugged.

“Nah. Turned in my uniform. Today was Santa’s last day. He has to return to the North Pole and rest up for Christmas Eve tomorrow,” said Jimmy with a groan, stumbling forward. “Besides they don’t want anyone as sick as me around the kiddies.”

“Come on, I’ll get you home,” Clark offered.

“Maybe you could drop me off at my mom’s. I’m supposed to go there for the holidays. Chief’s given me the next two days off,” Jimmy mumbled, leaning heavily onto Clark’s arm.

“Don’t get sick, Partner,” Lois called to Clark as she looked over Jimmy’s notes. “Merry Christmas, Jimmy!”

Jimmy lifted his arm in salute.

“I’ll be fine, Lois,” Clark reassured her before walking Jimmy to the elevator.

Lois looked over the notes and wondered if she had enough to write up an article. It would be too bad if she had sent Jimmy to hell and back and didn’t end up with an article out of it. She sighed, trying to make heads or tails out of his chicken scratch.

Two hours later, she turned over Jimmy’s notes for the

thousandth time, still wishing he had seen something suspicious. She had been barred employment from the esteemed halls of Cost Mart for some reason. They must be hiding something. Maybe it was time to do some more holiday shopping. She put her bare bones story into her ‘current’ folder and grabbed her briefcase.

After circling the block for the sixth time, Lois wondered what in the hell she had been thinking in trying to snoop at Cost Mart on the last full shopping day before Christmas Eve. She wasn’t going to find a parking spot in this area of town, let alone within walking distance from the store. With one final harrumph, Lois conceded temporary defeat and turned her Jeep Cherokee towards home. She would have to wait to spy on Cost Mart when the store was less busy. Like after the holidays.

The next morning, Cat leaned towards Lois’s partner and purred, “So, Clark, are you busy tonight? I’d still love to have you for dinner.”

Lois felt like groaning and rolling her eyes at the blatancy of the offer. Suddenly she felt a wave of Christmas charity for her partner and said to him as if she hadn’t overheard Cat, “So, are we still on for tonight?”

“Huh?” Clark stammered, glancing between the two women.

“Oh, *you* and Clark have plans?” Cat insinuated, her claws outstretched.

“Yes, Cat, work,” Lois said as if it were clear. “It’s what those of us without holiday plans do for the holidays.” She belatedly realized that her chosen words sounded more pathetic than they had in her head.

“Pity you,” snapped Cat.

Clark reached across the desk for a donut and murmured in a low voice only Lois could hear, “What work?”

“I’ll tell you my idea after the meeting,” Lois replied in a hush. “Unless you wanted to take Cat up on her offer?”

Clark sat back in his chair and took a bite of his cake donut. She could feel his gaze lingering on her, causing her to wonder yet again if he harbored more than friendly feelings for her. “Thank you, Cat, but Lois and I are in the middle of a story.”

After the meeting Lois took longer than necessary to gather up her stuff as she waited for the room to clear out.

“So what did you have in mind, Lois?” Clark asked from his seat, tapping his fingertips together.

“I’m still suspicious about why Cost Mart didn’t want me sniffing around their store, officially or unofficially. So, I thought we could go into the store tonight just before they close at eight and hide out until the employees leave for the holidays. Then we would have the whole of Christmas Day to search the building without interruption,” she told him.

Clark’s eyebrows continued to go higher on his forehead with each sentence. “Is that really what you want to do for Christmas?” he inquired in astonishment. “I thought you had plans?”

“If you want to earn the Kerth or Pulitzer, you’ve got to make sacrifices in your personal life for your career,” she informed him, brushing off his question. “You never know, we might find something.”

He pressed his lips together. “No, thanks, Lois.” He gathered up his notes and stood up.

“No?” she asked with shock. She almost felt offended. “*No*?”

“I don’t want to spend Christmas locked inside Cost Mart, looking for some unknown secret that they don’t want the great Lois Lane to discover. You may want to treat the holiday just like any other Saturday night, but I don’t.” He let his voice fade. Then he reluctantly informed her, “Anyway, I have somewhere I need to be tonight.”

Lois’s jaw dropped. Did Clark Kent just turn her down? Some place to be? Where did he have to be? “Where? The Grant family extravaganza?” she grilled him snippily.

“For your information, Lois, I do have other friends and obligations outside of those at the Daily Planet,” Clark enlightened her before leaving the conference room.

Lois’s eyes formed slits. Clark had *friends* and obligations outside of the Daily Planet? Ha! She pressed her lips together. Well, so did *she*!

She could show him and go ahead with her plans to hide out in the Cost Mart store. Only... without Clark’s participation the all-day stake-out seemed... boring. With him it could have been a lark. What if she didn’t find anything? Then she would be stuck inside the store all of Christmas Day by herself until they opened up early the next morning for the after-Christmas sales. Maybe Clark had a point.

She tapped her pencil on the desk, staring at her partner as he returned to his desk. Of course, there were other things she could investigate instead.

Lois wrapped the muff of her winter coat up and around her jaw. How late would it be before Clark left his Clinton Street apartment for his “date” with his other “friends”? She had been standing out here on the street for what felt like hours. She had even snuck up to his door and peered in to see if he was at home. He was; she could tell from all the lights on.

Strangely though, Clark hadn’t decorated his apartment for the holidays despite buying all those decorations at Cost Mart a week ago. She had been sure with his excess of holiday spirit he would have had sparkly lights and even some garlands strung around his apartment. Or at least a wreath on his door. He had none of that. He did have a tree. A little one that had rivaled her own, albeit decorated with what looked like homemade cookie and paper ornaments. He wasn’t much of an artist from what she could tell. Her heart had ached at the lack of gifts underneath it. From what she had been able to see from the window of his glass door, there had been only one sole gift under the tree.

Clark walked out of his bedroom and Lois flattened herself against the wall beside his front door, hoping beyond hope that he hadn’t seen her. When he never came to the door to ask what she was doing, she realized he did not know that she was there. After determining that he was indeed at home, Lois returned to the street.

As Lois stood waiting for him to leave on his “date”, she wondered where all the decorations had gone? Did Clark have a girlfriend somewhere for whom he had bought the trimmings? That thought tugged at her heart in a completely different way than the lack of gifts under the tree had.

Was he dating a single mom with kids? Was that why he had bought all those toys? She could see Clark falling for someone like that. That would explain the quality of the cookie ornaments on the tree if they had been made by children. Was that why he was always disappearing with crazy excuses? Was it that the children had called or needed to be picked up from school or were home sick with a cold?

How could he have so much going on in his life and not tell anyone at work? Not tell her? Not one word! She was his partner, after all. Or, at least, she considered herself so.

Maybe Lois didn’t know Clark Kent as well as she thought.

Rubbing her gloved hands together, then blowing hot breath on them, Lois tried to warm them up. It was a good thing she was following him tonight, so she could finally learn what he was keeping secret from her. What he had lied to her about. She stomped her feet as they felt more numb than alive at the moment. At last, she heard footfalls coming down the stairs and ducked into a nearby alcove.

In Clark’s hand was a shopping bag full of... drat! In the darkness she couldn’t see what was in the bag. She assumed it was a present or gifts for his someone, or more than someone, special.

He was lucky she was following him. If he walked along the street for any length of time, he would surely be knocked over the head and have his packages stolen.

When Clark got to the boulevard, he raised his hand and flagged down a passing Metro Cabbie. Darn! She looked at the cab number in hopes she didn't lose him before she could get a cab herself. As soon as his taxi drove off, Lois ran to the corner and whistled.

A genuine Christmas miracle happened! A cabbie pulled up to the curb. Lois climbed in and pointed at Clark's cab.

"Let me guess, Lady, 'follow that cab'?" The man chuckled, turning on the meter. "Believe it or not, I hear that more often than you'd think."

"Well, don't just sit there!" Lois gestured wildly. "Follow him!"

The cabbie pulled into traffic. "So, where is he off to? This boyfriend, husband, or lover of yours?"

"If I knew that, would you need to 'follow that cab'?" she snapped, waving her hand.

"Guess not," replied the cabbie. "Is he seeing another woman? Gambling? Drinking? Socializing with an ex-wife? Or seeing as it's Christmas Eve, visiting his estranged children?"

"He isn't my boyfriend, husband, or lover," Lois clarified for some reason that was outside of her grasp. She was keeping a firm eye on Clark's cab, even if her cabbie seemed more interested in the gab than the chase. "He's turning! Left at this next corner."

"Uh-huh," murmured the cabbie, turning down the next street.

"He's my partner."

"Partner?"

"Yes, we *work* together," Lois explained.

"Do you think he's up to something illegal? Got a little fluff on the side? Working for the competition?" asked the cabbie.

"How in the hell should I know? That's why I'm following him," said Lois. "He does have a tendency to disappear at odd points during the day. Maybe I'll finally find out why."

"Ah." The cabbie nodded. "But there isn't anything romantic happening here?"

"Of course not!"

"Of course not," repeated the cabbie with a nod.

Lois watched as Clark's cab turned down a quiet street and pulled up to a gated building at the end of the block. "Stop! Stop, here! I'll walk from here," she told him, handing the fare plus a reasonable tip through the window.

"Good luck, Lois," the cabbie said with a friendly smile. "I hope you find what you're looking for."

She glanced back at the man and waved. "Thanks, Mike."

Lois froze on the sidewalk and shook her head with a glance back at the cabbie as he drove off. How in the world did he know her name? For that matter, how had she known his? She must have looked at his cabbie license. He must have recognized her from one of her few dates with Lex Luthor that Cat had allowed onto the society pages. Yes, that must have been it.

Clark was just passing through the gate and into the courtyard of the building on the corner. Lois, as quickly and as quietly as she could in her boots, ran to the corner of the building for a better glimpse into the courtyard. Drat! He was already inside the building. She hoped she would be able to figure out which apartment he had gone into or she would have gone through all this trouble for nothing. She opened the gate, slipped inside, and stealthily made her way to the door of the building.

"Hello," said a friendly older woman just inside the doorway. "How may I help you?"

Lois blinked at the woman with a momentary loss for words.

"My friend just came in..."

The woman nodded and gestured towards a large room full of

bright lights and music.

Inside Lois found a huge crowd of children dancing or playing a game. They were all holding hands and skipping around in a circle. The room was awash in holiday décor. Almost the complete opposite of Clark Kent's apartment. There was a huge tree off in the corner, so tall it almost bent at the top where it scraped the ceiling. And so covered with bought and handmade ornaments, she could hardly see the pine needles. There were wreaths, lights of all colors strewn around the room, bouquets of balloons, boughs of holly, garlands of pine, and streamers as well. There were several abandoned long tables with remnants of a holiday meal. Yes, there were adults as well, scattered here and there. But mostly there were children. The woman from the door came and joined Lois.

"Do you see your friend?" the woman asked.

Lois just shook her head, still in awe in what she saw.

"Where am I?"

"Metropolis City Orphanage," replied the woman. "I'm Judy, the Center's director."

"Lois Lane, Daily Planet," Lois responded as if on cue.

"Oh, how nice. I do hope you'll be writing an article thanking Superman for all the generous support we've had this year," Judy gushed.

Superman? Judy suddenly had Lois's full attention.

"Superman?"

"Oh, yes, Superman has done wonders for the orphans since he arrived in the city. He even brought us our Christmas tree," the woman said, gesturing to the tree that Lois had already taken in.

"Is... Is Superman coming tonight?" Lois stammered, starting to dig through her briefcase in hopes of finding her camera. Was that why Kent was here? Another Superman exclusive? Had Superman told him of this event? Why hadn't Clark invited her?

Judy grinned, knowingly, yet at the same time, said vaguely, "We'll see."

The music and games stopped and someone gathered the kids together to sing "Silent Night." Judy encouraged Lois to join in.

Lois looked through the crowd of people, searching for Clark, but still didn't see him as everyone came together as a group to sing. As they finished the final verse, a plume of soot and ash came out of the large fireplace on the side of the dining hall.

When the smoke cleared, she saw a pair of black boots hit the ground with a thud. A tall man in a red suit with white trim bent down and emerged from the fireplace. Santa!

Clark? Lois wondered. Was this where her partner disappeared off to? Were these his friends and his plans?

As he stood up, Santa indeed had his traditional belly and his long white hair and beard and red hat. This was no hobo Santa that someone scraped together on the cheap and had dragged off the street. True, he was "tarnished with ashes and soot", but not any more than she would be if she had come down through the chimney. His cheeks were certainly rosy and his eyes had the brightness of... Lois's jaw dropped.

Clark? No, not Clark. It couldn't possibly be Clark. Clark wouldn't have crawled down a chimney as Santa Claus. Would he? It was hard to tell who the man was with that full white beard and mustache. But wouldn't Clark be wearing his glasses?

"Ho ho ho," Santa chuckled and his belly shook. He drew out his big red bag from behind him. "Oh, deary, deary. Am I so early? Everyone is still awake!" The voice was deep and low and, though he had added a bit of an accent, Lois would recognize it anywhere.

What was she thinking? It couldn't possibly be Clark. It was Superman. It had to be.

From inside his bag, Santa started to pull gifts, some wrapped, some not, for the horde of children that now surrounded him — each one received a gift, no one was left out. He greeted

each child by name and said something personal as well. She saw his black boots lift off the ground a couple of inches as he stretched over the heads of some of the taller kids to reach a small child in the back of the group.

Lois nodded to herself. Yep. Super Claus!

As soon as the gifts got passed around and the crowd thinned, Santa pulled out a small bag of sweets. Homemade sweets. These were handmade candy canes, thicker and more robust in color than Lois had ever seen. He couldn't possibly have made these himself. He may be Superman, but no man was as super as all *that*. Perhaps not homemade but definitely made professionally by hand, possibly from Europe. Of course, flying to Europe and back was no difficult feat for such a man. Super Claus handed them out to the adults in the room with a simple "Merry Christmas!"

Lois stood back and watched this whole procession as it occurred. She had to agree with Clark on this one point. *This* certainly beat out being locked in the Cost Mart store for an evening.

She began to wonder if Superman was from another planet after all.

Perhaps Krypton actually stood for Kringle.

That would explain how Santa was able to visit all those houses in one night and without anyone seeing him. Super speed.

He might not need a sleigh with reindeer if he himself could fly and had super strength. And what if he used his x-ray vision and super hearing to know if someone had been naughty or nice?

It would explain the "S" on his suit: for "Santa", not "Superman". She wondered, and not for the first time, what his real name might be.

True, Superman himself was much too young to be Saint Nicholas, but he could be his son or grandson. And he had said that his mother had made his suit. Mrs. Claus? He had also said that last year his father had...

Lois shook her head. Clark had said that, not Superman. But her theory wasn't any more preposterous than Superman coming from a far-distant planet, was it not? If her hypothesis proved true — although how would one test such a hypothesis? — well, Superman certainly had made a believer out of her. She wondered what Clark would think of her theory? Where *was* Clark?

Santa approached her and her heart doubled its beat in anticipation. "Merry Christmas, Su... Santa," Lois murmured, hastily saying his character's name rather than his own. Maybe it was his real name. *She* had been the one to give him the moniker of "Superman" not him. But she couldn't do it. Lois couldn't acknowledge that this man was Superman in front of the children. No matter what other flaws Smallville had, Clark was right in this one respect. She couldn't be the Grinch who revealed the truth of these children's Super Claus.

"What would you like for Christmas this year, young lady?" Santa asked her.

She smiled. She knew what she wanted, but dare she ask for it. "Santa, I would like..." Lois's voice and her gaze lowered to the floor. She couldn't. No, she couldn't ask him. She wouldn't have the nerve. "A kiss from Superman." Her face must have matched his suit. She couldn't believe the words had actually come out of her mouth. They had been so soft she had breathed them more than spoke them.

"Such a rare gift, but may I offer this instead?" he replied.

Lois's gaze raised to his and saw that his eyes twinkled like the stars. His lips, which she could barely see through the beard, curled up into a smile. Her heart seemed to pound in her chest. Offer *what*?

"Merry Christmas, Lois," Super Claus whispered, holding out a candy cane.

Oh, right, the candy cane. She glanced down in embarrassment that she had expected more. Had it been made at a

super secret workshop up at the North Pole?

As she accepted the sweet, Super Santa leaned in to kiss her cheek. Lois gasped in surprise and touched her hand to her face.

Santa chuckled a deep "ho ho ho." He gazed up at the mistletoe above her head and then back at her with a wink.

Lois laughed and watched as Santa returned to the fireplace. "Happy Christmas to all, and to all a good night!" he called, before setting a finger beside his nose and up the chimney he rose.

Everyone was still cheering and calling "Merry Christmas" to Super St. Nick, when Clark stumbled in from the kitchen with a half-eaten slice of pumpkin pie in his hand. He looked at the crowd around the fireplace and pressed his lips together. "Drat! Don't tell me I missed him," he groaned.

Lois shook her head. "Don't worry, Partner, I got this one."

"Lois!" said Clark, just noticing her. "What are you doing here?"

"I wondered who or what had a bigger draw for you than spending Christmas with me," she explained as he walked up to her.

"You followed me, Lois?" he asked suspiciously.

"Why didn't you tell me that this was where you were coming?" She turned the question on him with a raised brow. "You know if Superman was involved I'd be there like that!" She snapped her fingers.

"Superman? He was here?" Clark stammered almost foolishly.

Lois grinned at his misdirection, grabbing his tie and placing a chaste kiss on his lips. "You're too much, Clark. Too much, indeed. Any more of that pie? I'm starved."

Clark's jaw dropped as he gaped at her. "Uh... Lois? What just happened here?"

She rolled her eyes in disbelief and pointed up at the mistletoe. "Really, Clark. You'd think this was your first Christmas or something."

He got that sheepish expression that she adored on his face. "I think we could scrounge you up some pie," he told her, leading her back into the kitchen.

The Epilogue

"*Yes, Metropolis, there is a Santa Claus!*" announced the headline on the Christmas edition of the *Daily Planet*. What followed was Lois Lane's story of how Santa Claus had visited the children at the Metropolis City Orphanage the previous evening. She hadn't mentioned it outright, but the adults reading the article would have noticed her nod and wink to Superman.

Lois set down her paper and fell back onto her bed with a groan. The phone rang and she didn't have the energy to pick up the receiver, letting the machine answer it.

"Lois! Lois! Where are you?" Clark called over her machine. "I thought you said that you were working today." At least, it wasn't her mother nagging her. Again.

She couldn't let her partner go on thinking that she had skipped out on him. Gathering energy she did not have, she lifted up the receiver beside her bed. "Hi, Cark," she moaned into the phone.

"Lois? Are you okay?" he asked, concerned.

"Sobby, Cark..." She coughed. "I caught Jimmy's code," she replied, sniffing with a hoarse voice.

"Lois, if you didn't want to come into work on Christmas..." Clark started.

"No, Cark! I'm reabby thick," she told him, grabbing a tissue and blowing her nose.

"Wow, Lois. You sound really horrible," he stated baldly.

"Lub you, too, Cark," she responded with an extra dollop of sarcasm.

"As long as you aren't delusional, Lois. So, what do you have

planned for today?” he asked.

“What do you tink, Cark? I’m taying in bed and dying a sew mizerable death,” she retorted, flopping down against her pillows.

“I had thought you might be spending the day with... never mind.”

“Who, Cark? ‘uthor? Peas! ‘ex and I are spedding ‘ew ‘ears together, ‘ot Krithmas,” she explained before coughing.

Christmas was too big of a step for her fledgling romance with Lex. When Lex had called earlier in the week, he had meant *next* Friday, not *this* Friday. Lex had explained the error after she told him she would be working on Christmas and couldn’t jet off to Europe for dinner the night before. Either way, Christmas Eve with Clark, Super Claus, and the orphans had beat out hours on an airplane with Lex.

After they had left the orphanage, Clark had taken her out for a late dinner in Chinatown. Lois had mentioned her theory that Superman belonged to the Santa Claus family to Clark. He had promptly laughed so fully and heartily at her suggestion that tears had actually come to his eyes.

Well, she had said, if it was such a crazy idea where had Superman gotten such a fine Santa disguise?

Clark had admitted that it was his... or his father’s. He had lent it to Superman.

Her jaw had dropped. *That* was what had been in the shopping bag Clark had carried with him to the orphanage.

Clark then explained how he and Superman had gotten to talking one day, probably after Clark had written up that article about orphans searching for their birth parents. It had come out — off-the-record, of course — that they both were orphans. That the Kents weren’t Clark’s natural parents had been a shock in itself. But that Superman had also had been adopted by strangers after *his* folks had abandoned him as a baby had tugged at Lois’s heartstrings. It explained why both men were always helping out the less fortunate.

“I’m sorry, Lois. You want me to bring some chicken soup over...” Clark said, pulling her out of her reverie.

“Cark! I don’t want you to catch my code,” Lois told him in no uncertain terms. “If you ‘aven’t already.”

Clark would be the last person she’d admit it to, but he was making her day with this call.

“I just hate it that my best friend is alone and sick on Christmas,” he told her wistfully.

Best friend? Wasn’t Clark in love with her? Had she confused friendship with love? True, she didn’t have much experience with either, but she had been so sure her hunch had been... She sighed. *Right.* Best friend. She could use a best friend more than a lovesick suitor.

“Anyway,” he continued. “I have a pretty strong constitution. And I have your Christmas gift here, Partner.”

“No, Cark. Pebby will kill uth if we both get thick,” she told him.

“Thanks for the invite, Lois. I’ll be over after work and make us some chicken soup. My mom says homemade is a better remedy than store bought anyway,” Clark said, refusing to take ‘no’ for an answer.

“You know, Cark, when a woman thez ‘no’ she meanz...” Lois coughed.

“Please, come over and take care of me?” he finished.

Lois sighed, pressing her lips together. If Clark wanted to spend his Christmas making her feel better... wanted to make her his charity case... he *had* said that he felt better all year by giving to others on Christmas. She no longer had the energy to argue. “Okay, but you bebber bring videoth,” she ordered, giving up. “Anb no ‘anky-panky.”

“Hanky-panky? You really *are* sick, Lois. Anyway, who kissed whom last night?” Clark chuckled. “How does ‘Miracle on

Thirty-Fourth Street’ sound to you?”

“Whabever, Cark. I ‘aven’t theen it.”

“It’s about this little girl who doesn’t believe in Santa Claus until she meets the real deal,” he explained.

Lois settled down into her bed, pulling up her covers. “Will Thuperman make an appearanz?”

“Lo-*is!*” he said instead of answering her question.

Well, if Lois couldn’t have Super Santa for Christmas, she guessed she would take the next best thing: her very own Jolly St. Clark.

THE END

Disclaimer: These characters do not belong to me. The characters were created by Jerry Siegel & Joe Shuster and portrayed on the *Lois & Clark: The New Adventures of Superman* television series, developed by Deborah Joy LeVine. Many thanks to all the writers on the show for their inspiration. I have borrowed some lines and images from Clement Clarke Moore’s 1823 poem “Twas the Night Before Christmas”. This story was inspired a bit from the 1947 film “Miracle on Thirty-Fourth Street” written by George Seaton, based on a story by Valentine Davies. The plot of the story is entirely my own.

Author’s Note: This story is the missing Christmas episode from S1, per my Christmas Challenge:

PROS: 1) Mistletoe, 2) Lois Lane’s usual holiday traditions, 3) Something romantic

CONS: 1) Fruitcake, 2) Revelation that CK=S, 3) Grinches or Scrooges or time traveling ghosts

Okay, so I fudged a little on the Grinch. And on S=Santa.

Gratitude: I would like to thank my Betas IolantheAlias and SciFiJoan for their excellent advice and knowledge of comma placement.