

Taking the Shortcut

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Rated: G

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Summary: After the events of the episode “The Green, Green Glow of Home,” Lois and Clark leave Smallville and head to the airport to fly back to Metropolis. But Lois takes a shortcut....

Clark Kent moved uncomfortably on his parents’ couch. It had been a long day, what with Jason Trask trying to shoot him and then the Bureau 39 agent getting shot himself by Sheriff Rachel Harris. Clark had been beaten, tied up, half drowned, and almost shot – facing all of it without his powers and his invulnerability, thanks to exposure to the glowing green rock his father had shown him.

But now everything was over. Trask was dead. The green rock had exploded and the dust swept away in the wind. Rachel was on administrative leave from the sheriff’s office while the state police examined the circumstances of the shooting. Clark’s parents had recovered from being tied up and held hostage. All the police paperwork was completed, and more importantly, the story sent to Perry White and filed with the Daily Planet. Jimmy Olsen had taken the red-eye flight back to Metropolis last night. After a comfortable family dinner with the Kents, Lois slept soundly in the upstairs bedroom. Finally, Clark could rest.

He shifted again and a dopey smile came over his face. Lois had hugged him! Not only that, but he thought that she might have been ready to kiss him, if it hadn’t been for Jimmy interrupting them at the critical moment. Yes, Clark’s hard-as-nails, take-no-prisoners partner had given him a physical sign of affection! He liked Lois, a lot; perhaps she was coming to see him, Clark, as a possible romantic interest. Could it be? He had hopes. Sighing happily, Clark drifted off into sleep...

Lois drove their rental convertible and the wind whipped through her pageboy bob.

“Are you sure you know where you’re going? I mean, that last shortcut...” Clark trailed off.

Lois shot him a glare. “I know exactly where we’re going. Your mother told me about this shortcut and it should get us to the Wichita Airport in no time at all.”

“Which is why we’ve been on the road for three hours, and the last state highway sign we saw had “Arkansas” on it.” Clark grinned at her as she lifted her chin and refused to answer him. He knew she hated to admit that she was wrong.

He didn’t really care that they were obviously lost. They still had a quarter tank of gas and the weather was sunny and warm. It just gave him more time to spend with Lois – time that was uninterrupted by phone calls, story ideas, Jimmy’s constant interruptions, and Perry’s constant deadline pressure. Plus, although he could feel his powers returning slowly as the brilliant sunshine rejuvenated him, Clark was still not able to be Superman. He listened for calls for help – nothing. In a second test of his powers, he attempted to levitate a quarter inch, and failed. No, he wasn’t back all the way yet. He could stay here with Lois, in the car, on an inadvertent road trip, with a clear conscience.

“Maybe you should ask for directions,” he said cheerfully, just to stir the pot. He loved watching Lois get annoyed. The color in her cheeks came up, she breathed harder, and he could

see her lips tighten. He knew almost every expression her face could make, and loved them all.

“Maybe you should,” she retorted. “You’re the one who thinks we’re lost.”

“I’m a guy,” Clark said in mock consternation. “It’s against the guy code to ask for directions.”

“Well, I guess we’ll just have to go on being lost, then.”

“So you admit we’re lost?”

“I never admitted that,” Lois countered. “I was just responding to your statement about what was appropriate and what was inappropriate for guys to do.”

“Is it inappropriate for me to point out that we are on a narrow, winding, tree-bordered, two-lane road of uncertain destination in the middle of nowhere?”

“Yes. It’s very inappropriate. You should be admiring the scenery.”

“I *am* admiring the scenery,” Clark hoped that Lois noticed that he was looking at her.

She blushed. Clark felt a little thrill. She *had* noticed!

“Too bad that I can’t admire the scenery too, but one of us has to drive,” Lois said haughtily. Then, in a lower voice that Clark would never have heard if it weren’t for his slowly-regenerating powers, she mumbled, “Plus, you put your shirt back on this morning.”

Clark smiled. She was definitely noticing him.

Suddenly Lois stomped on the brakes. Clark was thrown against his seat belt as the car screeched to a halt. “What was that for?”

“Clark, did you see that sign?” Lois put the car into reverse and backed up about twenty feet.

“What – “ Clark stopped as the sign in question came into view.

TALKING DOG FOR SALE! \$10

“A talking dog? Come on, Lois!”

“No, Clark, we should check this out. It’s a story! Wouldn’t the Daily Planet readers like to hear about a talking dog?” Lois argued. “Plus, you can ask for directions.”

“You think Perry would let us write about a talking dog? And do you think a dog would know how to give directions?”

“You can ask the farmer, then,” Lois said decisively as she piloted their car up the unpaved, rutted driveway. Clark knew her look – Lois was on the track of a story and she wouldn’t be dissuaded.

A few minutes’ ride found them at a ramshackle farmhouse. Rusting farm machinery littered the lane that led to the falling-down barn that was behind and to the side of the house. An overall-clad figure stepped out onto the rickety front porch.

Lois parked the car and stepped out, advancing quickly toward the farmer. Clark struggled a moment with his seat belt and then followed her.

“Lois Lane, Daily Planet,” Lois introduced herself with her usual snappiness.

“Bob Smith,” the man said, coming down the porch steps to meet them, casting an appreciative look at Lois’s trim figure and stylish clothing. He looked at Clark curiously.

“Clark Kent, Daily Planet,” Clark said, extending his hand to shake Bob’s. “I’m Lois’s partner.”

“What’s this about a talking dog?” Lois asked. “We saw the sign.”

“And the Daily Planet is interested?” Bob replied, raising an eyebrow.

“It might be a good story,” Lois said, in a tone which implied she thought for sure it was a fake. “I mean, a talking dog is news.”

“Well, why don’t you go ask the dog? He’s around back of the barn there.” Bob made a broad gesture and then turned his head sideways to spit out a stream of tobacco juice.

Lois gave him a long stare, making sure he wasn't openly mocking her. He met her gaze coolly. "All right, we will," she answered, taking up the challenge. "Clark?"

"Right." He followed Lois back to the rental car, where after one look at the surroundings, she prudently changed from her heels to the farm boots she'd picked up in Smallville. Clark wished he'd brought his boots, too – his shoes were going to need serious attention after this.

Clark took her elbow in his as they began walking towards the barn. She didn't protest, and it sent a secret little thrill though him.

"Clark, do you really think there's a talking dog here?"

"I bet it's more like the old joke, where the guy says he has a talking dog that will answer questions. But the questions the guy asks the dog are stuff like, 'How does sandpaper feel?' and the dog says, 'Rough! Rough!'," or 'What's on top of a house?' and the dog says, 'Roof! Roof!'"

Lois had to smile. "It would be a good story, though, wouldn't it?"

"Yeah. Well, it would certainly be a change from our last story."

"Federal agents running roughshod over Kansas farmers? Yes." Lois stopped. "Clark, I was so worried about you. You almost got killed!"

"But I didn't, thanks to you and Jimmy." Greatly daring, Clark pulled her to him and hugged her. She stiffened and then melted into his embrace. No doubt about it – this was one of the high points of his day. He loved standing like this, holding her soft body against his, feeling her heartbeat against his chest, breathing in her unique scent.

Next to his ear, she mumbled, "I wonder if the dog is Kryptonian."

Stung, Clark let her go. She just couldn't forget about his alter ego. Even when she was in his arms, she was thinking about Superman. Of course, he *was* Superman, but still... It was weird to be jealous of oneself, but Clark had somehow managed that feat. He began walking again. "Why would you think that?"

"Well, if the dog really talks, it's really unusual. And the last really unusual thing that happened was Superman."

"That doesn't mean the two are connected."

"Why shouldn't they be?"

"Superman never said anything about having a dog."

"I wonder if he does. You know, Clark, if the dog was Kryptonian, would it be able to fly, too?"

"Good question." Now she had made Clark think about it. He could see himself in the Superman suit, followed by a flying dog.

"If it's Superman's dog, it would wear a red cape, just like Superman, so everybody knows it's his," Lois continued.

The image in Clark's mind immediately shifted to himself as Superman, flying, followed by a flying dog wearing a red cape. How did Lois have this power over him?

By now they had made it behind the barn. Ahead of them was a fence, with a meadow and a dilapidated doghouse on the other side of the fence. A large dog stood up and slowly ambled its way towards them.

"Clark, what kind of a dog is that?" Lois asked.

"I guess I'd have to call it a mixed breed. Very, very mixed."

The dog came up to the fence and sniffed both Clark and Lois politely. Gray on its muzzle told Clark it wasn't a young dog. Lois reached over the fence and petted it. It sat down politely.

"This is the talking dog?" she asked incredulously, turning away.

"Yes, ma'am."

Lois looked at Clark. Clark looked at Lois. He shook his head. "I didn't say that."

"Yes, ma'am. I'm the talking dog." The dog stood up on its hind legs and rested its front legs on the top of the fence. "You can call me Rex."

Clark had seen Lois taken aback like this just once before – when Superman lifted her in his arms and began to fly, the first time they had met each other. And, just like that time, she recovered quickly.

"Well, Rex, I'm pleased to meet you. I'm Lois Lane from the Daily Planet, and this is my partner, Clark Kent."

Clark gave a tiny hand wave. Somehow it didn't feel right, offering to "shake hands" with the dog.

"Pleased to meet you, ma'am."

"Rex, can you tell us about yourself?" Now Lois was going into get-the-story mode. "Have you always been able to talk?"

The dog got back down onto all fours and then sat. "Well, I discovered my talent at a pretty young age," he began. Lois pulled out her notebook and began frantically jotting down notes.

"I decided that I wanted to serve my country," Rex went on, "so I went and joined the NIA. They put me to work as a deep-cover agent. I would sit in the offices of world leaders and I would listen to their plans and report back. They talked in front of me all the time, because, you know, I was just a dog."

Clark stared in fascination. He understood, now, how people had felt when they saw Superman for the first time.

"Of course, I can't give specific details about my missions. Those were classified," Rex told Lois in a confiding tone. "After a while, I got tired of the travel, so I came home and worked at the local airport for a while as a drug-sniffing dog. Then, I retired, got married, had a mess of puppies, and well, here I am." A move of his head indicated the meadow and the tumbledown farm.

Lois looked around too. Clark saw the light rising in her eyes. "Rex, would you like to go to Metropolis?" she asked.

"Well, ma'am, I wouldn't say no to that. It's kind of dull here, now that all the pups are grown up and moved out." The dog scratched his ear with his right hind leg.

"Give us a minute. Clark..." Lois gestured and Clark followed her back towards the farmhouse.

"Clark, this is a story! I smell Pulitzer all over it!"

"Lois, a story about a talking dog is not going to win a Pulitzer."

"It just might. Clark, we've got to get that dog to Metropolis. Do you have ten dollars?"

"What then?"

"What?"

"What then? What are you going to do with him? He's a dog, Lois. He can't rent an apartment or buy groceries. Or dog food."

"He can stay with you."

"What?! Lois, I can't have a dog. Neither can you. Our schedules are just too crazy."

"All we have to do is get him to Metropolis and get the story. After that he can stay with your parents. I heard them say that your farm dog had died last month, Clark. They need a dog. That's true and you can't deny it."

"Well..." Lois was right. Besides, Clark had to admit that he himself was intrigued, and just like Lois, he wanted to find out more. "All right."

"Great!" Lois turned to him and hugged him. Now it was Clark's turn to tense up and then relax into the hug. She melted into his arms and turned her face up. He cast all caution to the winds and like magic, he found himself kissing her. She didn't flinch or turn away; she held him just as tightly as he held her, and returned his kiss enthusiastically. Time faded as the kiss lingered. Clark lost all sense of his surroundings.

Lois broke the kiss, and then came back for another. "Clark... she said as she came up for air, "Being in Smallville with you... meeting your parents... getting lost with you right now.. well, it's been one of the best weeks of my life. And one of the worst."

"Worst?"

When you were almost shot, I realized... I realized... If I'd

lost you... If you'd... I couldn't let another day go by without telling you..."

"What?" Clark held her to him, knowing what she was about to say would be important.

She pulled his head down for another mind-boggling kiss before she went on. "Um... Well... I lo- "

"Ahem." Bob Smith interrupted.

Clark felt like incinerating the man with his heat vision. It was lucky for Bob that Clark didn't have his superpowers back yet.

Lois stepped away from Clark, babbling nervously. "Of course, you saw us... Um... we're partners... We're going to write a story about your dog, we want to buy your dog. Ten dollars, was it? That's what you're selling him for, ten dollars?" She drew a breath. "By the way, that dog is amazing. How come you're selling him so cheap?"

Bob looked at them and spat a cud of chewed tobacco on the ground. "That dog is a big fat liar. He never did any of those things."

"Clark! Wake up! Rise and shine!" Clark groaned and opened his eyes. As he saw Lois, however, a smile crept across his face.

"Your mom said to wake you up for breakfast," Lois said. Studying him, she asked, "Are you feeling all right?" Her eyes skittered down to his bare chest.

"Slept like a log." Clark smiled at her.

"Well, that's good," she said quickly, dragging her eyes back up to his face. "We can get an early start. We've got to turn in the rental car after we get to the airport, and our flight leaves at eleven. I'll drive."

"That's great," Clark said. "Lois... do you want to take a shortcut to the airport?"

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