

Winter Wonderland

By Kathy Brown <kathyb@lcfanfic.com>

Rated PG

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Summary: “There’s over a foot of snow outside, Lois. It’s gorgeous! Currier and Ives, right outside my window!” Will a few days snowed-in in Smallville nudge Lois and Clark’s relationship from “maybe” to “yes”? A continuation of the 2nd season episode, “Season’s Greedings.”

Author’s Note: I began this story in response to a ficathon assignment back in December 2009. (Yes, 2009!) I got maybe 2/3 finished, then I started a new job which took all my free time, and I had to put the story on hold. I pulled it out every so often for the next couple years, making some progress, but then I changed jobs *again*, which once again required it to be put on the back burner. I honestly figured it would never get finished, but this past spring, the fundraising efforts for the L&C Fanfic Message Boards got me thinking about L&C again, and this time, I amazed myself by actually completing it. Of course, I have to appreciate the irony of, after taking 4 ½ years to finish a Christmas story, I finally wrapped it up in the spring and had to wait several months to actually post it. ;) I hope you find it worth the wait.

As a Christmas story, don’t expect any a-plot or bad guys. It’s just what I hope will be a fun, funny, romantic journey for our two favorite people. :)

My heartfelt thanks to Brenda, Corrina, and Erin for their encouragement and editing skills.

The jingle of sleigh bells cut through the silence of the darkened bedroom. “Ho, ho, ho! Merry Christmas!”

Clark Kent opened one eye to squint at the jolly, heavy-set man standing next to his bed. “You know, when I was a kid, you used to do that outside my window.”

The man laughed, causing the bells he wore around his neck to jingle again. “I was a lot younger when you were a kid. Besides, there’s a foot of snow out there. I decided I could wake you up and stay warm at the same time.”

Clark grinned. “Merry Christmas, Dad.”

“Merry Christmas, son. Your mother is already busy in the kitchen, so you better hurry if you want breakfast.”

Clark inhaled, already savoring the delicious smells of their annual Christmas breakfast as he pushed back the covers. “Are you kidding? I’ve been dreaming of her cinnamon rolls for months!”

“I’m sure she’ll appreciate hearing that,” Jonathan said, chuckling as he left the room and headed back down the stairs. He shook his bell-covered harness again as he entered the kitchen. “Ho, ho, ho! Merry Christmas!”

Clark laughed as his mother’s “Oh, Jonathan!” reached his ears, and he pulled on a pair of jeans and a sweater before heading downstairs to join them.

Martha set a steaming mug of coffee in front of him as he slid into his place at the table and kissed his cheek. “Merry Christmas, honey.”

“Merry Christmas, Mom. Sorry I overslept.”

“You’re fine. I just pulled the rolls out of the oven. Besides, you were probably pretty busy last night, what with all the snow.”

Clark took a hearty sip of his coffee. “I was in Des Moines for a while helping to put out a warehouse fire, but beyond that, it wasn’t too bad. Rescued a bunch of motorists who got caught out on the interstate when the Highway Patrol closed it down, cleared a few ice jams in the river, little stuff like that. I think the holiday has helped; people are staying home.”

Martha placed a large bowl of scrambled eggs next to the rolls and joined her family at the table. Her eyes were twinkling as she watched Clark fill his plate. “Speaking of staying home ... how was your evening with Lois last night?”

Clark smiled, completely unable to keep the sappy look off his face. After he and Lois had wrapped up the Space Rat story, he’d delayed his trip home to be with his parents on Christmas Eve to have dinner with his partner ... and had ended up staying until well after midnight. “It was absolutely wonderful.”

“What did you two do?”

“We ate the great dinner she made, cleaned up, then took our wine to the couch and talked for hours. I know it doesn’t sound like anything special, but ...”

“But it was special because you were together,” Martha finished gently.

Clark gave a contented sigh, lost in the memories. “Yeah.”

“I’m sure she was happy to have you there, son,” Jonathan said.

“I think so, Dad. I mean, I know she was happy to have company, but ... it just felt different this time. Like maybe ... maybe she’s starting to feel the same things for me that I’ve been feeling for her for so long.”

“Well, you’ll be back in Metropolis in a few days,” Martha encouraged. “Maybe you can ask her out for New Year’s Eve.”

Clark sat back in his chair, a smile growing on his face as a plan took shape in his mind. “Actually, Mom, I might have an even better idea ...”

Lois Lane glanced at the phone on her desk for the countless time and then forced her eyes back to her computer screen as she continued her internal battle. It was a little past ten o’clock, and she still couldn’t decide just how early was too early to call someone on Christmas morning. Unfortunately, willing time to move faster didn’t seem to be doing any good.

It wasn’t that she particularly minded working on Christmas Day. The newsroom was always quiet and the typical lack of hard news stories gave her time to get ahead on the stories she never seemed to be able to finish before the last minute during a regular work day. Besides, working was what she *did* and if her spending the holiday in the newsroom allowed other people — Perry, Clark, and, well, pretty much anyone with a family that wasn’t completely dysfunctional — to spend time with the people they cared about, it was a worthwhile trade. It was her own private nod to getting in the Christmas spirit. Even if publicly, she always insisted it was about the extra vacation days she’d be able to take later in the week.

Usually she didn’t have this much trouble concentrating on her stories, though. If things didn’t improve, she’d have little to show for her catch-up day. All she’d managed to do so far was focus on one thing, or should she say, one person. One very handsome, sweet, amazing person. And unlike the usual object of her affection, this one didn’t fly around in a brightly colored cape.

Of course, if she were being honest with herself, this wasn’t the first time Lois’s partner had consumed her thoughts so completely. She wasn’t sure when it had happened, but over the last few months, she’d found herself thinking about him a lot ... and in a very different way than in the past. While for months she’d been able to keep Clark Kent locked in that little corner of her heart labeled “friendship only”, it was becoming increasingly apparent that he’d already begun occupying a much larger space.

And after spending Christmas Eve with him last night and getting a glimpse of how things could be between them if she'd only let him in, she was finding it completely impossible to want things to go back to the way they were.

Lois bit her lip as her gaze flickered to the television screen that was always on in the newsroom. The LNN anchor was finally winding down the lead story of the hour — the blizzard that had swept through the Central Plains overnight. In fact, the cable news stations had been able to talk of little else on this otherwise slow news Christmas morning. Much of Nebraska, Kansas, and Iowa were under several inches of snow, with more predicted to fall. It was truly a white Christmas for those who lived there.

Lois had been more than a little worried when she'd come into the newsroom early that morning and learned of the snow. After all, Clark's parents had just left Metropolis yesterday afternoon on their way back to Smallville and any delays would have put them right in the middle of the storm. Fortunately, a little investigative work had assured her that their flight had made it safely to Wichita before the airport had closed. She only hoped that they'd been able to complete the drive home to Smallville before the roads got too slippery.

Of course, this meant that Clark was now stuck in Metropolis, since all flights to Kansas had been cancelled. She felt a little guilty that his willingness to delay his plans with his family was now making him forgo those plans altogether. But she planned to make it up to him ... and the first step of that plan was to resist the temptation to call him too early in case he was trying to sleep in.

But she had a refrigerator full of leftovers from last night's dinner, and she knew just the right person to come over and help her eat them. It would certainly make the day go faster, knowing she was going to meet Clark at her apartment for lunch. And maybe she'd even be able to convince him to join her in the newsroom for the afternoon if he didn't have any other plans ... and then maybe they could spend the evening together again, too. She smiled just thinking about it.

The jangle of her phone interrupted her thoughts and Lois absently reached for the handset, trying to force her mind back to her work. "Daily Planet, Lois Lane."

"Merry Christmas, Lois," a warm voice replied.

Lois sat up straight in her chair, unable to stop the grin that was forming on her face. "Merry Christmas, Clark! I was just thinking about you!"

"You were?"

"Yeah ... I was going to invite you over to lunch at my apartment today."

He laughed, and she suddenly felt very warm inside. "That's interesting because I was going to invite you over to dinner at my parents' house tonight."

Lois opened her mouth to respond, and then closed it again in confusion as his words filtered. "Wait a minute ... where are you?"

"In Smallville."

"Oh," she said in a little voice, trying not to sound too disappointed. "I thought you were in Metropolis. How did you get to Smallville? I thought all the airports were closed because of the storm."

Clark hesitated. "I ... came with Superman. I ran into him last night after I left your place, and he offered to fly me here." Then he continued quickly, his voice growing more animated. "But that's actually why I'm calling. How late are you working tonight?"

"I don't know; it's pretty quiet. I should be able to skip out by five o'clock, unless something big hits. Why?"

"Because Superman would be happy to fly you out to Smallville, too. I know you've got the next few days off, so I was

hoping you might come for dinner, and if you wanted, maybe even make a little vacation out of it. I've already talked to my parents, and they'd love to have you for as long as you're able to stay."

"Oh, Clark ... it's your family Christmas. I don't want to impose."

"You would absolutely not be imposing," he promised. Then his voice softened, the sound of it making her stomach do a little flip. "I just had a really great time with you last night, Lois, and I guess I was hoping ... well, that you might be willing to spend the rest of the holiday with me and my family."

"You were?" she whispered, feeling a little breathless.

"Yes. So will you come?" he asked hopefully. "Please?"

Lois hesitated, but it didn't take her long to make up her mind. "OK." She gave a delighted little laugh. "That sounds wonderful."

"Really? Great!"

"What time should I be ready?"

"You tell me, and I'll make sure Superman is there to get you."

Lois laughed, her heart feeling so much lighter than it had just a few minutes before. "You give Superman his marching orders now, huh?" she teased. "You tell him where to be and he just shows up?"

Clark chuckled low in his throat. "Let's just say he owes me a favor."

"And you're spending it on me?" Her voice was beginning to match his, low and flirty, but Lois just couldn't find it in herself to stop.

"Are you kidding? That's the best way to spend it."

Lois blushed at the intimate tone of his voice and ducked her head, suddenly glad he couldn't see her. If the mere sound of his voice could do this to her, what was she going to do when they were face to face? "How about six-thirty? Think he could be at my apartment by then?"

"I will do my best to make it happen," he promised. "Can you stay for a couple days or just for dinner? I'm staying through Tuesday evening, but Superman could take you home earlier than that, if you need him to."

Lois chewed on her lip for a moment, then threw caution to the wind. "Oh, what the heck; I'll stay through Tuesday, too. I didn't have anything planned for my vacation time, anyway. And it might be fun."

"*Might* be fun? There's over a foot of snow outside, Lois. It's gorgeous! Currier and Ives, right outside my window!"

She laughed, getting caught up in his enthusiasm. "I guess that means I need to dig out my snow boots, huh?"

"I would highly recommend it. But just bring what you have and don't worry about what you don't. Anything you're missing, you can borrow from my mom. We're well equipped to deal with the weather out here."

"All right, then," she agreed. "I guess I'll see you this evening."

"Great. I'll see you at six-thirty."

"Right. Well, I'll see Superman at six-thirty. You, I'll see after he drops me off."

Clark blew out a slow breath before answering. "Right."

"Good-bye, Clark."

"Bye, Lois. See you soon."

At quarter to seven that evening, Lois found herself rushing around her bedroom, trying to make sure she hadn't forgotten anything important as she packed for Smallville. For all Clark's joking that he could arrange Superman's schedule, it was just as well her favorite superhero was late in picking her up. Her day in the newsroom had been ridiculously slow ... until she'd managed to pry additional information about the Space Rat case from one

of her police sources a mere twenty minutes before she'd intended to leave for the day. She was proud of herself for getting the follow-up story to the night editor before deadline, but the extra hour-plus in the newsroom meant that she was a lot less relaxed in her packing than she would have been otherwise.

Taking a deep breath, Lois surveyed the contents of her suitcase and mentally checked off everything she needed for a few days away: jeans, sweaters, pajamas, underwear, warm socks, slippers, plus her make-up and toiletry case. She'd dug out her boots, hat, and warmest gloves from the closet when she'd come home for a quick lunch of turkey leftovers, and they were now laid out next to the couch with her coat, waiting for her "ride" to arrive. Lois smiled as she zipped up her suitcase; hopefully Superman didn't mind being used as a taxi service, even if she and Clark were two of his closest friends.

A whoosh and the sound of boots landing on her living room floor reached her ears just as she heard a voice tentatively call her name. "Lois?"

"I'll be right out, Superman!" She quickly picked up her bag and carried it into the living room.

Superman looked a little distracted, but he returned her friendly smile when she entered the room. "Sorry I'm late. A cargo train derailed in Wisconsin and I didn't want to leave until I was sure the response crews had everything under control."

"No, no, you're fine," Lois assured him. "I was running late myself, so the extra time was helpful. Let me just get bundled up and we can go. Clark says there's a foot of snow on the ground in Smallville."

"I think even more fell this afternoon," he replied as she slipped her boots over her thick wool socks. "I'm surprised there haven't been more problems, but I'm certainly glad to not be needed."

Lois buttoned up her coat, and then reached for her hat and gloves. "Must be the holiday. People probably knew the storm was coming and just decided to stay home." When she turned around, she noticed that Superman was admiring the little star on her tree. "Thank you for that," she said sincerely. "Clark told me that it was a present from both of you."

His smile was warm as he glanced back at her. "You're very welcome. It looks great on your tree."

"It's perfect; I love it. And I really appreciate your being willing to fly me to Smallville, too. I don't ... well, I don't usually get to see my family over the holidays, so getting to visit Clark's ..." She trailed off, a little embarrassed. "Anyway, thank you for taking me."

"It's my pleasure, Lois," he said softly. "Are you ready to go?"

"Ready," she agreed, picking up her bag as Superman scooped her up in his arms. A moment later, they were outside her window, hovering a moment while he closed it, and then shooting up into the sky.

They lapsed into silence as they began to fly west, and Lois took the opportunity to watch the twinkling lights below them. "It's really beautiful up here tonight," she sighed contentedly. "I can see for miles."

"I'd offer to take the scenic route," Superman replied, "but we'll be running into cloud cover pretty soon. There's more snow in the forecast for the Midwest."

"No, that's OK. I'd hate to make the Kents wait dinner on me. Besides, you're already being so generous by taking me there; I don't want to impose on you any longer than necessary."

"You're never an imposition, Lois."

She smiled. "That's just what Clark said."

"Well, then I guess it must be true," he replied lightly. "Are you warm enough? I'm moving a little faster than I usually do when I fly with you, but I can slow down if it's bothering you."

"No, I'm fine," she assured him, trying not to shiver as she

hugged her bag more closely to her chest and tucked her head under his chin. "I guess the warm clothing is coming in handy for the trip, too, and not just the snow once I get there."

Superman held her a little closer, even as he craned his head to look through the thick clouds beneath them. "Sorry. I'm trying to keep us above the storm, which doesn't help with the temperature. We're almost there, though, so you'll be able to warm up soon."

Lois smiled in anticipation, but it slowly faded as another thought presented itself. "I feel a little guilty that I didn't get Clark anything for Christmas," she confessed. "He gave up Christmas Eve with his parents just to keep me company, and now he's invited me to visit for a few days. I just wish there was something I could do to show him how much he means to me."

Superman didn't respond for a long moment, but as they made their descent through the clouds, she could have sworn that he sounded a little choked up when he finally spoke. "Lois, I think it's safe to say that spending time with you is the best Christmas present Clark could ever get."

Clark landed softly on the path that he'd shoveled earlier in the afternoon, making sure that Lois was steady on her feet before releasing her. Snow was still falling, more gently than earlier in the day, but in larger flakes. A few came to rest on her eyelashes and he had to resist the urge to gently brush them away. "Well," he said, stepping back. "I guess I'll see you in a couple days."

Lois's gaze moved from the surrounding snowdrifts to look at him. "Would you like to come inside to say hello?" she asked. "I'm sure the Kents would be happy to see you."

He dipped his head in apology, anxious to leave as Superman so that he could come back to welcome her as Clark. Carrying her in his arms all the way here had been at once wonderful and torturous, as he'd longed to restore the closeness they'd had last night and earlier today. But the last thing he wanted was to draw her attention back to Superman, especially now that he seemed to finally have it as Clark. "That's a generous offer, Lois, but I need to be going. You should get inside, though, before you get any colder." He took a few more steps backwards, preparing to lift off.

"Superman, wait!" Lois dropped her bag and followed him. A moment later, her arms were around his neck. "Thank you. I know I said it earlier, but I really mean it."

Unable to help himself, Clark lifted his arms to return the hug, but he'd barely had time to embrace her before she'd released him and stepped back. Surprised at how quickly she'd retreated, he levitated several feet into the air so she couldn't see it on his face. "Goodnight, Lois," he called out. "Enjoy your vacation." And with that, he shot up into the clouds.

Safely hidden in the thick clouds, Clark counted to ten, and then quickly circled around to the far side of the barn, out of Lois's sight. He'd deliberately left a few lights on in the barn before leaving the farm, planning to emerge from the front side in case she was watching from the house. As he spun into his casual clothing and exited the barn, however, he was surprised to see Lois still standing on the shoveled path, gazing up at the sky.

His heart sank as he wondered if she was looking for Superman. After last night, he'd been so sure that she was starting to see the Clark side of him in a different light ... but maybe her feelings for her best friend and partner were still overshadowed by her feelings for the superhero.

The look on Lois's face as she turned around and saw him standing behind her in the path, however, pushed all those fears aside. Her eyes lit up and she ran to him with a laugh. "Clark!" she exclaimed. "There you are!"

He caught her as she launched herself at him, wrapping his arms around her back as she wrapped hers around his neck. It

was the hug he'd been expecting earlier ... only infinitely better because she was giving it to Clark, not Superman. "What are you doing outside?" he asked, laughing with her. "I thought you'd be inside getting warm."

She pulled out of his arms, her eyes bright as she looked up at the sky again. "I'm looking at all the snow. It's beautiful."

"I told you we had a lot of it."

"I know, but it's just so ... so ... Christmasy!"

He laughed out loud at her enthusiasm, his heart swelling at her joyful tone. He'd never heard Lois talk about Christmas in anything other than wistful tones, even last night when they'd been cuddled up on her sofa. The fact that he could help her experience some of the delight he always felt at this time of year, just by sharing it with her ... well, it made his holiday even better.

"Come on," he said, picking up her bag from the snow and extending his free hand to her. "Let's go inside and get you warmed up. I bet dinner will be ready any minute."

She slipped her gloved hand into his and followed him down the shoveled path to the back porch and inside the house.

In contrast to the weather outside, the Kent kitchen was warm and bright, and the wonderful smells of Christmas dinner filled the room. "Mom, Dad, we're here!" Clark called out as he led Lois inside.

His father was closest to the door. "Martha, the kids are home!" he called over his shoulder, and then smiled warmly to welcome his newest guest. "Lois, it's good to see you again."

"You, too, Jonathan," she replied, giving him a friendly hug. "Thank you so much for inviting me."

"You're always welcome," Jonathan assured her, patting her on the back. "We're just glad you could come on such short notice."

"Are you kidding? You saved me from two days of eating leftovers and cleaning my apartment. I think I got the better end of the deal." She shot Clark a playful look. "I was actually trying to figure out how I could get your son to keep me company when he called this morning."

Clark laughed as he set her bag down in the hallway before moving to help her off with her coat. "Which were you going to ask me to do? Eat the leftovers or clean your apartment?"

Her eyes twinkled at him. "You mean I had to choose?"

Martha took that moment to bustle into the kitchen, wiping her hands on her apron. "I was just adding some water to the tree and look what I missed!"

"Hi, Martha. Merry Christmas!"

His mom folded Lois into a warm hug. "Merry Christmas to you, dear. We're so glad you're here. And you two have perfect timing. Dinner is almost ready."

"It smells wonderful," Lois said. "I was worried I might be late ... I got caught up at work and only got home a little while ago. But Superman was late, too, so it worked out fine."

Martha's gaze immediately flickered to Clark. "Was everything OK in the barn, honey?"

He was quick to reassure her with a smile. He'd been in and out as Superman all afternoon while waiting to pick up Lois, but luckily, there hadn't been anything serious enough to require more than short bits of his time. "Yup, all set. Nothing I couldn't handle."

"Then I think it's time to eat," Martha said brightly.

"Jonathan, will you help me get the ham out of the oven? And Clark, you can show Lois to the table."

Jonathan gave Clark a friendly clap on the back as he passed by on the way to the stove. "If you want wine, son, you'll need to pick it out yourself. I wasn't sure what you might want."

"Sure, Dad," Clark answered before turning to look at Lois. "Any requests?"

"What are my options?"

"What are your options?" Jonathan laughed from across the room. "Take her into the wine cellar, Clark, and let her choose. God knows I have no idea what you have down there."

"You have a wine cellar in the house?" Lois asked, surprised.

Clark chuckled and rolled his eyes. "My dad is teasing me. C'mon, I'll show you."

He led her to a door on the back porch and swung it open to reveal a downward staircase.

"Is this your basement?" she asked as she peered inside.

"Kind of ... it's our root cellar." Clark found the light switch, and they moved down the stairs into the open room below. "See?"

Lois looked wide-eyed at the shelves covering the walls. Glass jars containing every color of the rainbow filled the top shelves, with boxes and bushel baskets taking up the bottom. "Where did you get all of this?"

"We grew it. That's what farm life is like — you grow the food in the summer, then store whatever you can't eat immediately for the winter."

"I guess I'm used to just going to the store when I need something."

"Well, the closest store is twenty minutes into town, so even running in for a few items takes time. But beyond that, there's no point buying what you already have." He lifted the lid off a few of the boxes on the lower shelves and showed her the potatoes and carrots inside. "People in Metropolis pay a lot of money for organic produce that's been trucked in from a thousand miles away. Here, we grow our own and know exactly what we're eating."

"Sounds like you miss it," she said.

"Sometimes," he admitted, replacing the covers, but his voice grew tender as he looked into her eyes. "But not as much as I'd miss Metropolis."

She looked up at him, swallowing a little nervously. "So you're in Metropolis to stay, then? I mean, you're not planning to leave anytime soon and move somewhere else?"

Clark caught his breath as he saw the anxious expression on her face. He already knew the answer to her question, but seeing it reflected in her eyes made him all the more sure. "Lois," he whispered, "I've found everything I've ever wanted in Metropolis."

They stared into each other's eyes for a moment in silent communication, and Clark felt himself begin to lean towards her. Lois's gaze flickered to his lips, then back up to his eyes, her own dark and luminous as she, too, leaned closer.

Her eyelids had just fluttered closed in anticipation, when suddenly a series of thumps shook the cellar ceiling. "Hey, Clark, did you pick a wine yet?" his father's muffled voice called from above. "Dinner's on the table."

Clark startled over the interruption, and pulled back, blushing. He cleared his throat before calling out in response, though his voice still sounded hoarse to his ears. "Uh, not yet, Dad ... we'll be right up."

Lois gave a little giggle as she tucked her hair behind one ear, and looked up at him from beneath her eyelashes. "So ... I guess we should pick a bottle, huh?"

He blew out a deep breath and pulled himself together, remembering why they were there. "Right," he agreed. "Wine." He led her to the far corner of the room where another set of shelves was laden with bottles, full from bottom to top. "OK, some people like Reisling with ham, but honestly, I prefer a medium bodied red ..." He started sorting through the varieties. "Do you like Pinot Noir? Oh! Or how about a Malbec?" He perked up as he found the one he was looking for and showed Lois the label. "I picked this one up in Argentina a few years ago. Have you ever tried it?"

Lois was staring at him in amazement, her eyes moving

between the bottle in his hands and those completely covering the shelves. “You have a lot of wine!” she finally burst out.

Clark smiled guiltily, and gave an apologetic shrug. “I know ... I can’t seem to stop myself. Actually, I’ve been pretty good about not buying much in Metropolis. But when I was traveling ... I could pick up all these local finds that I couldn’t get in the States, let alone in Smallville.”

“No, no, I think it’s great,” Lois assured him. “I’m just surprised, that’s all. I mean, when your dad said wine cellar, I thought he was kidding.”

“Oh ... well. Yeah, my dad’s not much for fancy wines. Not that these are expensive or anything, but ... well, you know, he just thinks it’s a silly thing to collect.” Clark chuckled, putting the Pinor Noir back on the shelf, but keeping the Malbec. “Not that he refuses to drink it, mind. He just likes to tease me about it taking up space in his root cellar.”

“Are they the kinds of wine you need to age for years or something? Is that why you keep them here instead of at your apartment?”

“Actually, I keep them here because until a year and a half ago, I didn’t have a permanent address,” he answered with a grin. “But now that I’m settled in Metropolis, I’d really like to move them over there. In fact, it’s one of my New Year’s resolutions — to build a nice wine rack somewhere in my apartment to give them a home.”

“Some people collect stray cats; Clark Kent collects stray wine bottles.”

Clark laughed with her as he led her back up the stairs. “Please, mom, can I keep it? It followed me home!”

They were still laughing as they entered the kitchen, ready to enjoy their Kent holiday feast.

Lois smiled as she set her fork down on her empty plate and sat back in her chair. She couldn’t remember a more enjoyable Christmas dinner, from the food to the conversation. The menu hadn’t been fancy, but Martha had explained that everything on the table had either been grown on their own farm or, in the case of the meat, raised by a neighbor. It made the dinner even more special, and the love and attention that had gone into it made Lois feel honored to share it with them.

As she watched Clark gleefully dig into his second slice of pie, Lois reflected on how different this trip was from the first time she had visited Smallville. Sixteen months ago, she’d come to Kansas under extreme protest, sure that nothing of any importance could happen in such a backwater place. Staying in Clark’s childhood home — not to mention meeting his parents — was something she’d done only out of necessity, an obligation to be tolerated as a means to getting a story.

But that trip had been a turning point in their relationship. While in the first few months of their partnership, she’d seen Clark primarily as a rival or a nuisance, spending time with him in Smallville had made her realize that there was so much more to him than just a simple farm boy. And there was so much more to this place, and this family, than she had ever imagined possible.

“Lois, honey, did you get enough to eat?”

“Oh, more than enough, Martha, thank you. It was all so delicious.”

Clark concurred from across the table. “You outdid yourself, Mom. Everything was wonderful.”

“Well, thank you. We’re just glad you could both be here to enjoy it.”

Finishing his pie, Clark pushed back from the table and started collecting the empty plates. “It’s kind of late for coffee, but would anyone like herbal tea? I was going to make a pot while I did the dishes.”

Lois stood up with him. “Here, let me help you,” she offered,

stacking the plates within her reach.

“That’s a generous offer,” he teased, trying to take them out of her hand. “But you’re my guest.”

She pulled them back with a flirty grin, matching his tone. “But you were my guest last night and you helped me clean up, so it’s only fair. Besides, we make a pretty good team.”

As their hands touched and their eyes met, Lois felt her stomach do a little flip as she watched a new intensity enter his gaze. “Always, Lois,” he murmured. “Always.”

Martha intervened by taking the dishes they were holding for herself. “Well, you’re both *my* guests tonight, so neither of you needs to do dishes. Clark, why don’t you take Lois into the living room and start a fire? Your dad can help me with these, and we’ll bring in the tea when we’re done.”

“Are you sure, Mom? You’ve already done all the cooking today.”

“Really, Martha, I don’t mind—”

Martha just deposited the dishes in Jonathan’s hands with a laugh and waved them off. “Shoo, both of you. Before I use my mom voice.”

Clark grinned. “Well, I guess that seals it. I never argue with the mom voice.” He offered Lois his elbow, which she accepted with a smile.

They walked into the living room, and Lois gave a little gasp of delight when she saw the Christmas tree that completely filled the far corner of the room. “Clark, that tree is huge!”

Clark chuckled as they approached it. “Yeah, I think my dad was feeling optimistic when he cut down this one. Mom said they had a hard time even fitting it through the door, let alone getting the lights on it.”

Lois laughed as she took it all in. Large colored lights covered the tree, and ornaments of all shapes, sizes, and ages were hung throughout the branches. It was completely different from the sleek designer trees Lois remembered from her early years, and it was everything she had ever pictured when she imagined an old-fashioned country Christmas. It felt like coming home. “To tell the truth, this is what I’d had in mind when we visited that tree lot the other day,” she confessed. “But you’re probably right — I would have regretted it the moment we tried to drag it up three flights of stairs to my apartment.”

“Oh, I would have gotten it up there,” he said with an easy grin. “But don’t knock the little guy you picked out. It’s very ‘Charlie Brown’ ... you can practically hear Schroder on the piano and Linus quoting Bible verses every time you look at it.”

“I’ll have you know I have that album and play it regularly,” she answered primly, turning her head to hide her smile.

He gave a little chuckle, and then his voice softened.

“Actually, I love that you rescued it. It’s very you.”

As she felt his arm come around her back, Lois leaned against him. “Thanks, Clark.”

His hand squeezed her shoulder. “You’re welcome. I enjoyed shopping for it with you.”

“Not just for that. For ... well, everything.” She sighed contently as she ran a finger along one of the many childhood photo ornaments on the tree, this one showing Clark as a little boy. “Staying for dinner last night, inviting me here today, all of it. But really ... just for being you. I’m lucky to have you in my life.”

He swallowed and pulled her closer still, resting his head against hers. “Thank you,” he whispered emotionally.

Lois closed her eyes as she felt him nuzzle against her hair. It felt so good ... so *right* to be here with him like this. A little shiver worked its way down her spine, and she moved to turn into his arms.

Unfortunately, Clark misinterpreted the shiver, and instantly pulled back. “Oh, geez, Lois, I’m sorry. I completely forgot I was supposed to start a fire, and now you’re cold.”

Instantly regretting the loss of his touch, Lois tried to protest, but it was too late. He'd already moved to the fireplace and was crouched in front of it, adding a few logs from the box nearby. With an ironic chuckle, she followed and knelt down near the hearth, watching him work. As he lit a match and held it to the kindling, she couldn't help but rub his back affectionately.

Clark looked into her eyes as the kindling flared, his smile as warm as the growing fire, but before either of them could say a word, the Kents returned to the room, bearing a steaming tea service.

"Lois, we forgot to ask you at dinner," Martha said cheerfully as she set the tray down on the coffee table. "Whatever happened with those toy rats that were so popular in Metropolis? Clark said there was some sort of chemical inside?"

Lois's eyes lit up as she remembered the story she'd worked on earlier that day, and how she hadn't yet filled Clark in on what she'd learned. After they moved to sit together on the sofa, Lois spent the next several minutes explaining to her hosts what had transpired over the last few days, and then catching Clark up on her newest information.

From there, the conversation flowed easily from topic to topic, and before Lois knew it, the grandfather clock was chiming ten o'clock.

At the sound, Jonathan placed his empty mug on the coffee table and stretched. "Well, I hate to say it," he said, stifling a yawn, "but I need to get these old bones to bed. Christmas or not, morning comes early on a farm."

Martha checked her watch as she, too, stood up. "Mercy, how did it get to be so late? It just goes to show what good conversation can do." She smiled warmly at the younger couple. "Clark, can you show Lois to her room when she's ready for bed? She probably remembers where it is from last fall, but make sure she has everything she needs, will you?"

"No problem, Mom," Clark assured her. "We'll be up in a bit. And don't bother cleaning up. I'll take care of the tea."

"Thank you, honey. Goodnight. And Merry Christmas!"

"Merry Christmas, Martha," Lois replied. "You, too, Jonathan."

The older couple waved as they left the room.

When they were alone again, Lois turned to find Clark looking at her with a smile on his face. "What?" she asked.

"Nothing," he said softly, shaking his head. "It's just ... really nice to have you here, that's all."

Her own smile grew. "Thanks."

"So ..." Clark began, and then trailed off a little shyly.

"So ..." she echoed, a few butterflies beginning to take up residence in her stomach. She had no idea what it was about this man that made her feel this way, but from the way he was looking at her, she was pretty sure that he was feeling it, too.

Before either of them could continue the conversation, however, Lois felt herself begin to yawn. She covered her mouth quickly, but it was too late.

Clark smiled. "I guess it's going to be an early night for all of us."

"I'm sorry," she said, laughing as she yawned again. "I guess I had kind of an early morning."

"Because I kept you up late talking last night," he finished amicably. He rose from the sofa and reached for her hand to help her up. "Come on, I'll carry your bag up to your room."

Lois squeezed his hand as they walked back into the kitchen to retrieve her suitcase, deliberately not letting go, and felt her heart flutter when he squeezed back. "So am I going to be in your room again?"

"Yup. Just like last time. I hope that's OK?"

"Oh, Clark, it's fine. I just hate that you don't get to sleep in your own bed. Why don't you let me take the couch? There's no reason for you to give up your room."

"Absolutely not. And I don't mind at all. I can sleep anywhere, and this way you get your privacy."

"Are you sure?" she asked doubtfully as they walked up the stairs.

"Completely," he promised as they reached the door to his room. "Besides, I'll probably be getting up early to help Dad with the chores, and this way we won't wake you up."

"What, you aren't going to ask me to help?" she asked playfully. "Don't think I'd be much use in the barn?"

The corners of his mouth twitched. "Be careful; I just might take you up on that. Bring any 'mucking out the stalls' clothes?"

"Darn, I knew I forgot something," she responded with a snap of her fingers. "And here I'd just gotten them back from the cleaner after my last mucking job, too."

"Pity. I guess you have no choice but to sleep in."

They stood in the hallway grinning at each other for a long moment, but their smiles slowly faded as they realized that there was no getting around the inevitable. "Well ..." Lois said regretfully, leaning against the door frame.

"Well ..." Clark echoed.

"I guess this is goodnight."

He blew out a slow breath. "Yeah."

"I'll see you in the morning," she said softly.

"Definitely," he whispered, even as he took a half step towards her, his gaze flickering to her mouth. "Lois?"

The butterflies began swirling in anticipation, just from the look in his eyes. "Yes?" she answered, already a bit breathless. Like earlier in the root cellar, there was no mistaking his intentions, and it was all she could do not to throw herself into his arms.

Before she could do so, however, the sudden sound of a door opening down the hall caused Lois to startle, and she looked up to see Martha coming out of her room. "Oh, Lois; good, you're here. I was just coming down to tell you that I put a second blanket on the foot of the bed for you, in case you get cold. It can get a bit chilly in the house at night. Do you think two blankets will be enough?"

Lois gave a little laugh, trying to gather her scattered thoughts. Twice, she'd been sure Clark was going to kiss her, and twice, they'd been interrupted by his parents. If she hadn't enjoyed her evening so much, it would be enough to make her wish they'd stayed in Metropolis. "Two blankets should be fine, Martha, thank you," she managed. "I brought some warm pajamas to sleep in, so I should be OK."

"Well, if you do get cold, there are extra blankets in the linen closet. Feel free to help yourself."

"Thanks."

"Well, goodnight, then. You, too, Clark," his mother called brightly as she disappeared back into her room.

He was rubbing the back of his neck, his cheeks a little pink. "Night, Mom."

As the door closed and they were alone again, Lois couldn't help but giggle. Twenty-seven years old and she could still be made to feel like a teenager who been caught by her boyfriend's mom. And from the way Clark was shaking his head in amusement, she could tell he was getting the same image.

Taking pity on him and knowing the moment had passed, Lois took her suitcase out of his hand and rose up on her tiptoes to give him a lingering kiss on the cheek. "Goodnight, Clark," she said warmly, stepping back into the room. "See you in the morning."

He beamed. "Goodnight, Lois." And with that, he disappeared back down the stairs.

"Sleigh bells ring, are you listening? In the lane, snow is glistening. A beautiful sight; we're happy tonight. Walking in a winter wonderland."

Clark awoke to the sound of music, and he blinked sleepily as he tried to get his bearings. At the sight of the Christmas tree in the corner of the room, however, he remembered where he was — in Smallville, on the couch in his parents' living room.

"Gone away is the bluebird. Here to stay is the new bird. He sings a love song, as we go along. Walking in a winter wonderland."

He smiled as he recognized the voice he heard. Lois had apparently awoken before him. In fact, from the sound of things, she was singing to herself as she got ready for the day.

Swinging his legs over the edge of the couch, Clark sat up on his make-shift bed and stretched. He'd spent much of the night patrolling the streets of Metropolis, making sure no one could connect Clark Kent's vacation to Superman taking one of his own. It was odd, though ... usually when he patrolled in other cities, he felt anxious to get back to Metropolis. But last night, it had been all he could do not to rush back to Smallville.

It wasn't that hard to figure out why. In the year and a half since he'd met Lois, he'd become used to wanting to be wherever she was. For most of his life, home had been a house in Smallville, and more recently, an apartment in Metropolis. But there was no longer any point in denying it — home for him was now always going to be wherever Lois Lane was at the moment. He only hoped that he'd be able to tell her that someday.

"In the meadow, we can build a snowman. And pretend that he is Parson Brown. He'll say, are you married? We'll say, no, man. But you can do the job when you're in town."

Grinning, Clark hurried through his own morning routine, noting that his parents had left a pot of oatmeal warming on the stove for breakfast. A sweep of his vision confirmed that his dad was out in the barn checking on the animals, while his mom was organizing a shelf in her art studio. A glance at the clock told him it was eight-thirty, so they'd likely been up for a couple hours already. It was a testament to how recently he'd fallen asleep that he hadn't awoken when they did. Still, he knew they wouldn't mind that he hadn't joined them for breakfast. Even though Superman never got a vacation, it was nice for Clark to be able to sleep in a little during his.

"Later on, we'll conspire. As we dream by the fire. To face unafraid, the plans that we made. Walking in a winter wonderland."

As he swept a beam of heat vision across his face to shave in the downstairs bathroom mirror, Clark's memories drifted to the previous day, and the hours he and Lois had spent together. He could hardly believe that he'd tried to kiss her — twice! — only to get interrupted each time. Even more unbelievable was the fact that she seemed to have been anticipating those kisses just as much as he had. The kiss on the cheek she'd given him before bedtime hadn't been quite the same thing, but it still made his heart soar. The invitation in her eyes had been clear, and he only hoped he'd get another chance to take her up on it soon.

Walking back into the kitchen, he started a fresh pot of coffee, and then set the table for two. He had just set out the cream, sugar, and two glasses of juice when Lois walked into the kitchen, looking as beautiful as ever in jeans and a wool sweater. He couldn't have kept the smile off his face if he'd tried. "Good morning, Lois!"

"Morning, Clark," she replied brightly. "I hope I didn't sleep too late."

"Not at all; I just got up myself. Are you hungry? My folks ate earlier, but they left some oatmeal for us. Is that OK, or would you like me to make something else?"

"No, no, oatmeal is fine. Where are your parents?"

"Dad's out in the barn, and Mom's upstairs in her art room. How'd you sleep?" As he spoke, he pulled two bowls from the cupboard, spooned a serving of hot cereal into each, and carried them to the table.

"Very well, thanks. How about you, though? Is the couch comfortable enough?"

"It's fine, believe me. In fact, when I was a kid, my parents used to have to force me to sleep in my own bed at Christmas. Between the lights on the tree and the warmth of the fireplace, I would have slept in the living room every night if they'd let me."

"Oh, now I'm on to you, Kent. You just invited me here so you could sleep downstairs." Her eyes were twinkling at him as she sat down.

"Darn, you caught on to my nefarious plan," he agreed good-naturedly. After pouring them each a cup of coffee, he joined her at the table and they began to eat.

"So what's on the agenda for today?" Lois asked. "What does the Kent family do the day after Christmas?"

"Well, usually, we go into town for the big holiday party at the lodge, but with all the snow, we'll have to stick pretty close to home this year. I spent some time yesterday shoveling our driveway to the main road, but I don't think they've finished plowing the main roads themselves yet."

"So we're snowed in?"

"Well ... kind of. But it's not that bad. We have everything we need here to last several days, if not a few weeks."

"Oh, no, I wasn't complaining. I was actually thinking it was kind of fun." She grinned. "You know, kind of adds to the whole Currier and Ives thing."

Clark laughed. "Well, we've got plenty of that. In fact, I was going to head outside in a little while to do another round of shoveling on the path to the barn. We got a few more inches last night, and I don't want my dad to get it in his head to do it himself."

"Want some company?"

"I'd love some. Just make sure you bundle up; the snow is pretty deep. My mom has clothes you can borrow if your stuff isn't warm enough."

Lois snorted. "Kent, please. I grew up in Metropolis. We get snow every year."

"Not eighteen inches at a time."

"Nothing I can't handle."

Clark chuckled. "Whatever you say, Lois. Whatever you say."

She patted his hand with a grin. "See, now that's the attitude you should have started with."

Martha walked into the kitchen, her arms full of papers. "What should Clark have started with?" she asked cheerfully.

"Oh, Lois was just saying she didn't think eighteen inches of snow was any big deal."

"Actually, I was saying that I've seen snow before and know how to dress for it. But Clark felt the need to remind me to bundle up." Her eyes twinkled at him, showing her good humor.

"Oh! I can't believe I forgot!" Martha quickly deposited the papers she was holding in the trash bin and scurried back out of the room.

Lois looked at Clark, bewildered. "What did I say?"

"I have no idea," he answered, equally perplexed.

A few moments later, Martha came back into the room with a wrapped gift in her hand. "Lois, honey, this is for you. I can't believe I forgot to give it to you last night."

"For me?" Lois repeated as she took the box. "Martha, you didn't have to do that."

"I know I didn't *have* to," Martha answered with a smile.

"But I wanted to. Go on and open it."

With a curious look, Lois tore off the red paper, and then pulled the lid off the box to reveal a cream colored wool scarf.

"Oh," she gasped. "It's beautiful!"

"Keep going; there's more."

Indeed, under the scarf was a matching hat and pair of mittens. Lois immediately wrapped the scarf around her neck and put the mittens on her hands with a happy laugh. "They're

wonderful! And so soft! Thank you.”

“Everything is made from merino wool, so it should keep you warm, even in eighteen inches of snow. I finished them last month and put them away for safe keeping.” Martha laughed. “I guess I kept them too safe.”

“You made these for me?” Lois asked in amazement. “Yourself?” At Martha’s nod, she rose from her chair and gave the older woman a hug. “Thank you so much. I love them!”

Martha returned her hug, clearly touched and delighted. “I hope you get to put them to good use.”

“Oh, I will,” Lois laughed as she pulled from Martha’s arms and spun over to Clark’s chair. She patted his cheeks playfully with her mitten-covered hands. “See, told you I’d be plenty warm,” she teased. “Let me get ready and I’ll meet you outside.” And with that, she picked up her gift box and scampered out of the room.

Clark laughed as he watched her head up the stairs, then set about clearing the table. “That was really nice of you, Mom. I didn’t know you were making her something.”

“It was my pleasure. After all, it’s not like my boy needs me to knit him warm mittens anymore.” Her tone was affectionate as she nudged him with her hip.

“Hey, I still wear the scarf you made me in college,” he replied, smiling as he washed and dried the dishes. “As a matter of fact, I brought it with me to wear here.”

“Well, when you go out, be sure to check on your father. The barn is warm enough, but I want to make sure he doesn’t stay out there by himself all day, tinkering the hours away.”

Clark chuckled and kissed her cheek. “No problem. I’ll see if he needs any help, then I’ll start shoveling. Send Lois out when she comes down, OK?”

Martha’s eyes were twinkling at him as he shrugged into his coat and pulled on his boots. “You two seem to be getting along well. Are you glad you invited her?”

Clark didn’t even try to keep the smile off his face as he thought about their time together so far, and he shot his mother a wink as he headed out the back door. “That, Mom, is a gigantic understatement.”

Lois walked down the back steps of the house, shielding her eyes as she squinted into the brightness of the outdoors. The sun wasn’t making much headway through the clouds overhead, but the snow on the ground reflected every bit of the mid-morning light. Even without direct sun, everything was bright and sparkling and very, very white.

Lois smiled as she noticed Clark working on the far end of the path, his shovel lifting the snow off the ground before tossing it to one side. He’d clearly been busy in the time it had taken her to get dressed — she could have sworn that it hadn’t taken her more than ten minutes to brush her teeth and add a pair of long underwear under her jeans, but the long walkway between the house and the barn was nearly clear.

She couldn’t help but release a pleased sigh as she watched him work. He looked good in his jacket and gloves, and though the snow looked heavy, he seemed to be lifting and tossing it with ease. “Gorgeous,” she sighed. “Clark Kent, you are absolutely gorgeous.”

As if he’d heard her, Clark’s head lifted and he stared at her in surprise for a moment before breaking into a delighted smile. “I’m almost done,” he called out to her.

Lois smiled in return and began making her way towards him. “Do you need any help?” she called back to him.

“Nah, I’m good. It wasn’t more than a few inches.”

“Long path, though.”

He shrugged and threw another shovel of snow off to the side. “This was one of my chores when I was a kid, so I guess I’m used to it.”

She’d nearly reached him, but hung back a little, trying to keep out of his way. “Lucy and I were supposed to shovel our walk when we were growing up, but we usually just ended up throwing snow at each other.” She chuckled. “My mom finally gave up and hired a service.”

Clark grinned mischievously, and sure enough, the next shovel full of snow was tossed in her direction.

“Funny, Kent,” she replied, even as she smiled. She picked up some of the snow at her feet and formed it into a ball. The moment his back was turned, she launched it at him.

Clark chuckled as the snow hit the back of his jacket and gave her a calculating look, but the next shovel of snow landed on top of the growing pile off to the side, exactly where it belonged. As did the next two after that.

Watching him speculatively, Lois formed another snowball and tossed it at him, this time hitting him in the arm. She could see him fighting a smile, but he continued to ignore her, seemingly intent on shoveling the remainder of the path.

“Not a snowball fight fan, huh?” she finally asked, keeping her eye on him in case of any sneak attacks.

“Oh, it just wouldn’t be a fair fight,” he replied breezily. “It’s like throwing a water balloon at the person holding the hose. I’d never take advantage of you like that.”

“Oh, really?” she drawled, lifting an eyebrow. “Why do I not believe you?”

Clark finally finished the rest of the walkway, including the snow he’d tossed at her earlier, and leaned the shovel up against the barn. “I have no idea,” he said with an exaggeratedly innocent shrug. “Face it, Lois. I’m just a really nice guy.”

“Uh huh,” she said, even more unconvinced than before. “You’re up to something; I can smell it.”

“That’s just the barn,” he said, his eyes dancing with amusement. “We should move away.”

She laughed. “What, you’re not going to try to sell me on the good, clean country air?”

“Honestly, I wasn’t sure you could be convinced,” he said, laughing with her. “I’m still waiting for you to compare Christmas to Arbor Day again.”

“Oh ... that.” Lois gave a sheepish shrug. “I guess I’ve changed my mind. At least for this year.”

Clark’s smile melted into something much warmer. “So you’re having a good time? Glad you came?”

“Yeah,” she said softly. “I am. I guess I found my own Christmas, after all ... I just needed to find the right person to share it with.”

“Oh, Lois,” he breathed, looking into her eyes.

She fought to keep her mouth from twitching as she turned away from him. “Yeah, Martha’s been great ... she said I can come back whenever I want. Turns out your parents don’t really care whether *you* visit, but they really want me—” Her words ended in a gleeful shriek as Clark grabbed her around the waist and twirled her around.

“That’s it! No more Mr. Nice Guy!” he trilled as he carried her off the path. “Forget the hose; you’re going into the pool!”

Lois squealed with laughter as he waded deeper and deeper into the snow. “Kidding! I was kidding! Clark!”

“Too late!”

He dumped her in a snowdrift, but she caught his arm on the way down and pulled him down next to her. Still laughing, she managed to sit up first and funnel an armful of snow over his head.

With a chortle of delight, he scooped it up and sent it back in her direction, completely covering her.

They battled for several minutes, until Lois’s ribs ached from laughing so hard. “Truce!” she finally called, gasping for air.

Clark settled back on his heels in the large hole they’d made in the snow, laughing himself as he blew white flakes away from

his mouth. His glasses were flecked with snowflakes, but behind them, his eyes were shining. “Had enough?”

“I’m just taking it easy on you,” she assured him, even as she worked to catch her breath. “I’ve got my new scarf and hat to keep me warm, but your head is bare. You must be freezing!”

“I’m fine,” Clark chuckled, brushing the snow from his hair with a gloved hand. “I’m used to this weather. Besides, I worked up a sweat just keeping up with you.”

“If you say so,” she said, pulling her hat down a bit more tightly over her ears. Then she moved several feet behind them, fumbling through the drift to get to an area of fresh snow. She hadn’t played like this in years, but it felt good to just let go and enjoy it. “Remember making snow angels when you were a kid?” she asked, flopping down on her back and trying to move her arms and legs.

Clark waded to the spot beside her and made his own angel, then rose to his feet to admire his work. “Not bad; not bad at all!”

Lois tried to do the same, but every time she tried to stand, she’d just work herself deeper into the snow and fall back down. With a laugh, she finally gave up and held up her hands. “Help!”

Clark laughed and moved through the snow to assist her, leaning down to take hold of her hands and pull her up. She fell against him, enjoying the feeling of being in his arms for a moment, before turning to study her angel. “Hmm, I think it’s kind of crooked.”

“We’re out of practice.”

“Yours looks pretty good.”

“I guess I’m more angelic than you are,” he said with a grin.

“In your dreams,” she chuckled before moving to an untouched patch to try again. They made several more angels, each a little better than the last, until finally Lois just laid down and stayed there, exhausted but happy. It had started to snow again and they stared up at the sky, enjoying the silence.

After a long moment, Clark turned his head to look at her. “You’re my person, you know,” he said quietly.

Still on her back, she turned her head towards him. “Your person?”

“The one who made this Christmas special. The one ... I wanted to share it with.”

The quiet assurance in his voice took her breath away. “Wow,” she whispered.

He sat up and moved closer, kneeling in the snow beside her. “It’s OK ... you don’t have to say anything. I just wanted you to know.”

Lois sat up with him, the intense honesty she saw in his gaze both thrilling and humbling. This amazing man, this man she could no longer picture her life without ... seemed to be telling her he felt the same way about her. “Oh, Clark ...”

He looked breathless and enchanted as she leaned into him, inviting his kiss. “Oh ... Kimberly!”

“*Kimberly?*” Lois reeled back in shock as the romance of the moment shattered around her. “Who the heck is *Kimberly?*?”

Clark just stared over her shoulder in dismay. “Aww, man. She is *not* supposed to be here!”

Overwhelmed by visions of being attacked by a jealous ex-girlfriend, Lois quickly whirled to look behind her ... only to come face to face with a furry creature.

“Maaah!” said the creature.

“Ahhh!!” screamed Lois. She flailed backwards, falling against Clark.

“Maah!”

Lois squealed again. “Clark, that’s a goat!”

“Yes,” he agreed, even as he tried to detangle himself so he could crawl past her. “A goat who is in very big trouble.” He reached out a hand to grab the animal’s leg, only to have it jump out of the way, bleating loudly as it tried to keep its footing in the

deep snow. “Darn it, Kimberly!”

The animal came to rest a few feet away, watching them warily. “Maaah!” it said again.

Finally realizing that the beast wasn’t going to hurt her, Lois began to giggle at the absurdity of the situation, especially as she sensed Clark’s growing frustration. “I don’t think she’s going to surrender easily,” she managed to get out. “Do you think she wants to make snow angels with us?”

Clark snorted. “Only if we added horns and a pitchfork.” He eyed the animal as it tentatively ventured closer, and he tensed, ready to lunge.

Lois scooted backwards in the snow, trying to get out of Clark’s way, but she only succeeded in tripping him as he tried to get up. “Whoops,” she said, unsuccessfully stifling another laugh as he fell face first into the snow.

He shot her an exasperated look as he surfaced, which only made her giggle harder. “Lo-is!”

“Sorry.” She tried to stop laughing, but as it was a losing battle.

Shaking his head, Clark made one last dive towards the goat as it ran past and was finally successful in tackling it. Kimberly protested loudly, but Clark lifted her easily into his arms and stood up. “Ha! Gotcha!”

Lois gave up all pretense and dissolved in laughter at the sight.

This time Clark just rolled his eyes, a smile playing on his own lips. “This is not funny.”

“Yes, it is,” she choked out.

“Why? Because the farm boy is holding a goat?”

“No,” Lois responded, barely able to get out the words.

“Because until today, I thought the worst thing a guy could do was call his date by another woman’s name. But you—you—” She struggled to catch her breath, laughter-induced tears rolling down her rosy cheeks. “You just called me by your *goat’s* name!!”

Buried up to his knees in snow, his arms full of struggling goat, Clark blushed deeply as he replayed their conversation in his head. Not only had they been interrupted — again! — as he’d tried to kiss Lois, but indeed the goat’s name had popped out of his mouth as he’d seen her come toward them. He was never going to live this down.

Groaning with embarrassment, he tromped through the snow toward the barn, only to meet his father coming out the door.

“Hey, Clark, have you seen—Oh, good, you found her!”

“Yes, I found her,” Clark muttered, shoving the animal into his father’s arms. “Stupid, ridiculous beast.”

Jonathan just laughed. “What did she do this time? I swear, this thing gets into more trouble than a toddler.”

“Let’s just say she has a really rotten sense of timing.”

“Uh oh,” his dad chuckled. “I hope she didn’t do anything to Lois.”

Clark stretched his hearing to confirm that Lois was still laughing out in the snow and he rolled his eyes. “Lois is fine. My ego, on the other hand, may never recover.”

“What happened?”

Clark just waved his hand. “Never mind. Just keep that trouble-maker away from me, OK?”

“I’ll do my best,” his dad agreed good-naturedly. Then he looked at Clark quizzically. “Son, are you getting cold? The tops of your ears are all red.”

Clark felt the blush rise once more on his cheeks. “Just ... never mind,” he repeated, ducking his head as he left the building.

As he rounded the corner, Lois was waiting for him on the walkway, still wiping the tears from her cheeks. “Did I scare you off?” she asked teasingly.

“Just returning the beast to her lair,” he replied.

“Thought maybe you were running out on me.”

He couldn't help but smile, knowing it would be impossible for him to stay away from her. “Never.”

“Good.” She walked closer, holding out her arms to him.

“Make up hug.”

Delighted, he accepted her embrace, squeezing her affectionately. “Apologizing for making fun of me, huh?”

“No,” she murmured, burrowing deeper into his neck. “I'm just really, really cold.”

He laughed out loud at that and held her even closer, running his hands up and down her back. “Better?”

“Better,” she agreed, the smile clear in her voice as she tightened her arms around his waist. The shiver that suddenly overtook her body, however, told a different story.

Clark gave her one final squeeze, relishing the feeling of her in his arms, before pulling back. “Come on, let's go back inside and get you something hot to drink.”

When she didn't protest, he led her back up the path toward the house, and they paused on the back porch to toe off their snowy boots and brush the snow from their clothing.

Martha was working at the stove when they came into the warm kitchen. “I was wondering how long you two were going to stay out there,” she said with a smile. “It looks cold.”

Lois's cheeks were rosy, but her eyes were shining. “It is cold,” she agreed. “But lots of fun.”

Clark helped her out of her coat, taking the opportunity to rub his hands up and down her arms. “Now we've got to warm you up. Should I make hot tea or hot chocolate?”

“How long have you known me?” she asked in amazement.

Clark laughed. “Sorry, what was I thinking? Extra rich hot cocoa, coming up.”

“That's more like it,” she said with a grin. Then she shivered again. “Actually, would you mind if I took a shower and changed first? I'd like to get some dry clothes on. You can go first, if you want.”

“No, you go ahead. I'll get the cocoa going and take my shower after you're done.”

“Do you mind, Martha?” she asked her host. “I don't want to use up any hot water if you need it for something.”

“Heavens, no, dear. You go get warm and dry, and we'll see you down here when you're done. Take your time.”

As his favorite distraction left the kitchen, Clark turned to his mom and kissed her on the cheek. “Thanks, Mom.”

“For what, honey?”

“For letting Lois visit. For being such a great mom. For making whatever it is you're stirring in that pot. Just ... for everything.”

Martha put down her ladle and gave her son a hug. “You're very welcome. And for the record, we're delighted Lois is here. We think she's a wonderful woman, and we love seeing how happy she makes you.”

“I just hope the feeling is mutual.”

His mom laughed, her eyes twinkling. “Call it mother's intuition, Clark, but I don't think you have anything to worry about. Now, come help me finish the bread. The soup needs to simmer for a bit, so we should have just enough time before lunch to bake some fresh rolls to go with it.”

A little over an hour later, Lois and Clark had each showered and changed, and were enjoying their hot chocolate around the kitchen table, when Jonathan finally came in from the barn. “Brrr!” he said, hanging up his coat. “It's getting chilly out there. The wind is really picking up, too.”

“Is it still snowing, Dad?”

“A little. But it's blowing around so much, it's hard to tell how much is new and how much was on the ground already.”

“I guess it's a good thing you kids got outside in the morning,” Martha offered as she glanced out the window. “This looks like a good afternoon to just stay inside and keep warm.”

Lois finished her cocoa and let out a satisfied sigh. “Well, if we have to be snowed in, I can't think of a nicer place to do it in.”

“I couldn't have said it better myself,” Jonathan agreed. “Especially since this kitchen smells so good, it must be time for lunch.”

Martha laughed and set a stack of bowls and plates on the counter. “Who needs a clock, Jonathan, when we have your stomach? Come on, everyone ... the soup is ready, so grab a bowl and come help yourself.”

Lunch was a chatty affair, with lots of conversation around the table and numerous compliments of the cooking. Lois seemed particularly amazed that Clark had helped make the rolls from scratch instead of buying them from a store, and had exacted a promise that he'd come over to her apartment sometime and bake for her. It was a promise he was only too happy to make.

As Clark cleared the table and washed the dishes, Jonathan took Lois over to their game cabinet and invited her to pick out something to play to keep them all entertained that afternoon.

When the pair returned with two decks of cards, Clark began to laugh. “Uh oh, Dad, you may have met your match. Lois is nearly as much of a card shark as you are.”

Jonathan gave her a sideways look, sizing her up. “Pick your poison, girlie. You don't scare me.”

“Ooo, them's fightin' words,” Lois replied with a grin. She started shuffling one of the decks, first showing off with a bridge shuffle, then spreading the cards out on the table and cascaded them over, casino-style.

Chuckling, Jonathan took the other deck and imitated her moves, then took it a step further by adding quad cuts and twirls. By the time he began to sling-shot cards from one hand to the other, Lois's jaw was hanging open.

“Uh oh,” she squeaked.

He winked. “I'll take it easy on you. Maybe.”

Lois's resulting whimper caused them all to laugh, but it wasn't long before she proved she had earned her reputation, besting the entire Kent family in both Hearts and Spades before Martha surprised them all by dominating in Scrabble. The hours passed quickly, filled with laughter, coffee, hot chocolate, and several different varieties of Christmas cookies.

As pleasant as things were inside, however, the storm outside only seemed to intensify as afternoon turned into evening, and several times, conversation paused inside as their chatter was interrupted by the howl of the wind. Getting up to put his empty mug in the sink, Clark peered out the kitchen window into the darkness, making sure everything on the Kent land was where it was supposed to be. “I hope we don't lose too many branches,” he commented to his parents. “Those trees are really whipping around.”

“I think the ones around the house will be fine,” Jonathan replied, bringing his own dishes to the sink. “You helped us trim out the deadwood this summer, so what's left should be pretty sturdy.”

“I never got to the ones down by the road, though. Maybe I should—” Before Clark could finish his sentence, however, a particularly large gust of wind shook the house, causing the lights to flicker for a moment, and then go out completely.

“Oh, my!” Martha exclaimed. “I wonder what caused that.”

Clark lowered his glasses as he looked out the window, confirming his suspicions. “I bet one of our trees by the road came down on the wire leading to the house.”

“Do you still have phone service?” Lois asked. “You should call and report it to the electric company. Might take them awhile to get out here, though, if the storm is taking down trees all over.”

Clark hesitated, his hand going automatically to fiddle with the collar of his shirt before he remembered he was wearing a sweater instead of a tie. “You know what? I’m going to take a quick look outside ... see if anything else is out of place.”

Jonathan pulled a couple of flashlights from a drawer. “I’ll join you.”

“In this weather?” Lois asked in surprise. “You’ll freeze to death.”

Jonathan was already reaching for his coat. “The barn should be warm enough, at least for awhile. We’ll make sure the animals are all right, and then Clark can help me look at the generator.”

A match flared to life as Martha lit a few candles. “You know, we never did get that working the last time it broke.”

Jonathan grimaced. “You’re right, we didn’t.” He turned to Clark to explain. “The motor burned out this fall, and I never got around to replacing it.”

Clark grabbed his jacket as he headed out of the kitchen. “Let me look at it. Maybe there’s something I can do.” He was stopped at the doorway, however, by a warm hand on his arm, and looked down to find Lois.

“Be careful,” she said, offering his gloves to him. There was no mistaking the concern in her eyes, even in the flickering candlelight.

He smiled reassuringly as he took them from her. “Always.” He couldn’t resist cupping her cheek with his free hand, stroking his thumb lightly across her soft skin. “Stay in here where it’s warm. I’ll be back soon.”

“Are you sure you don’t need any help?”

“I’ll be fine. Don’t worry.” And with a last, longing look, he followed his father out into the snow, slipping on his jacket as he went.

It didn’t take Clark long to zip over to the downed power line and remove the fallen tree, but unfortunately, the same could not be said for fixing the broken power line ... or the generator in his father’s barn. After several long minutes of tinkering with it, he had to concede that the motor was indeed completely burned out.

“I’m sorry, Dad. I think we’re just going to have to get a new one.”

“I was afraid of that. Well, that’s what I get for procrastinating. Your mother and I talked about replacing it this fall, but we just never got around to it.”

“I can head out and try to find one for you.”

“With this storm?” Jonathan shook his head. “Generators will be sold out for miles around. Best thing we can do is just wait for the storm to blow over and let the power company do their job.”

“I could try some stores in Metropolis ... or maybe somewhere out west where it’s not snowing?”

His father smiled indulgently. “I appreciate the offer, son, really, I do. But the last thing I want is you running from store to store the day after Christmas, fighting the crowds and trying to explain why Superman needs a generator while Clark Kent is stuck in a blizzard. We’ve weathered dozens of storms like this one over the years, and we’ll weather this one, too.”

“But—”

“No buts,” Jonathan insisted, placing a paternal hand on Clark’s shoulder and steering him out the door. “If the power is still out in the morning, we’ll explore our options. But for now, let’s go inside and spend the evening with our favorite girls.” His eyes twinkled playfully. “Besides, if there’s one thing I’ve learned about winter storms, it’s that cuddling up to stay warm is half the fun.”

Clark blushed a little as he accompanied his father back to the house. He’d done a quick flyover the area when he’d been surveying the storm damage, grateful that their home seemed to be the only one in town affected by the power outage. It made it that much easier to justify retiring Superman for the evening. As much as he normally enjoyed helping out, tonight, all he wanted

was to get back to Lois. Whether or not there would be cuddling ... well, he could only hope.

Clark lay on the couch, drowsy and content as he watched the flames dance in the fireplace. Other than the light from the fire, it was completely dark in the house and he could hear the wind whistling through the trees outside, though the storm had died down considerably. The power had yet to come back on, but that hadn’t stopped the family from having a wonderful evening.

He smiled as he remembered how they had all gathered around the fireplace to eat their dinner — fortunately it had been nearly done cooking when the storm hit and a little judicious use of his heat vision had ensured that everything made it to the proper temperature — and then they had heated hot chocolate in a saucepan over the fire for dessert. It reminded him of the various times they’d lost power when he was a kid, and how much fun he’d had “camping” in his living room with his parents, nestled between them as they’d turned each storm into an adventure.

Of course, he was no longer a child and could now appreciate the benefits of cuddling in a completely different way. Lois had curled up on the couch with her hot chocolate after dinner, and when Clark had joined her, she’d shyly offered to share her blanket with him. He still remembered how his heart skipped a beat when he’d chanced wrapping his arm around her shoulders and she’d responded by immediately snuggling into his embrace. And when their hands had found each other’s under the covers and their fingers had intertwined ... well, it’d been all he could do to keep himself from floating out of pure joy.

Clark sighed happily as he replayed the memories. True, he hadn’t been able to attempt another kiss this evening — his parents had been sitting with them the entire time, and when they’d gone to bed, they’d graciously offered to escort Lois upstairs so she could share their flashlight on the stairs. The best he could manage was a quick trip upstairs while Lois was washing up in the bathroom to warm her sheets with his heat vision. It wasn’t exactly the way he’d prefer to keep her warm overnight ... but he had to content himself with doing what he could.

Completely lost in the pleasant memories, Clark nearly missed the sound of a door opening upstairs, followed by tentative footsteps on the stairs. He had just enough time to sit up and slip on his glasses before the woman consuming his thoughts entered the room. “Lois?” he asked, concerned. “Is everything OK?”

She was wrapped in a quilt from the bed and was wearing what looked to be a second pair of pajamas over her first. “I’m really sorry to wake you ... but I’m cold,” she all but whimpered. “Really, really, really, really cold.”

As he noticed her shivering, Clark kicked himself for not paying better attention to the time. When he’d swept his heat vision through Lois’s and his parents’ bedroom as they’d readied for bed, he’d made a mental note to repeat the action every few hours throughout the night to make sure they’d stay comfortable. But he’d gotten so caught up in his own daydreams and enjoyment of the fire that he’d completely forgotten.

“Oh, honey,” he exclaimed, rising quickly. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s not your fault. It’s just, your mom was really good about telling me where the extra blankets were, but it’s so dark up there ... I was afraid to start digging around. Do you think you could help me find some?”

Clark motioned her over to the sofa. “Sit down and try to warm up. I’ll be right back.”

He took the stairs as quietly as he could without flying, and quickly located the extra blankets in the linen closet where his parents kept them. A glance into his parents’ room showed that they were sleeping peacefully, curled together under the down

comforter they'd used for as long as he could remember. He took the opportunity to gently warm the air for them, and then swept a stronger beam of heat through Lois's room. He placed two extra blankets on the foot of Lois's bed, then warmed a third to take downstairs with him.

When he returned to the living room, he found Lois had abandoned the couch in favor of sitting directly in front of the fire. "Here, I brought you another blanket," he said as he approached. "I left a couple more on the bed upstairs, but you looked like you needed something immediately."

Her eyes fluttered open, and she smiled at him as he knelt down beside her. "Thanks, Clark. Fortunately, I already found a good one."

He smiled as he noticed that she'd taken the quilt he'd been using on the couch and wrapped herself up in it. "A blanket thief, huh? Well, you might like this one better; it's even thicker."

"Mmm, but this one is soft ... and it smells like you," she replied with a smile, sleepily rubbing her cheek against it.

Clark's heart skipped a beat as the intimacy of her statement filtered into his brain. "Then ... I'm happy to let you have it," he responded, a little breathless. "I can use this one."

Her gaze flickered to his. "Or we could share." Then she ducked her head, blushing a little. "If you want."

"I ... " For a moment, he could hardly form words, but he quickly regrouped. "Yes, of course, absolutely. That would be great." He quickly sat beside her, accepting the end of the blanket and wrapping it around his shoulders.

Lois gave a contented sigh and leaned against him, her head tipping to rest on his shoulder. "This is nice."

"It is," he agreed, dropping his head down to rest against hers. They stayed that way for several long seconds, watching the fire. And it was nice ... wonderful, even ... but at the same time, Clark wanted more. Every fiber of his being was yearning to turn, pull her into his arms, and tell her everything he was feeling.

Suddenly, Lois let out a little laugh. "That's the only problem with sitting in front of a fire. When I'm facing it, my front feels great, but my back gets cold. But if I turn around to warm my back, my front will be cold." She chuckled. "I need to sit on a turntable so I can rotate around and around."

Clark released a breath and took a chance. "Let's try this," he offered, sliding around behind her. "Sit in my lap, and I'll keep all of you warm."

"But won't you still be cold?"

He breathed deeply as she moved between his legs and snuggled sideways against his chest. "Not a chance."

She released a contented sigh and relaxed into his arms as he rewrapped the soft blanket around them both, cocooning them in. "Mmm, thanks, Clark. This is wonderful."

He gently rubbed his hands over her back. "Better?"

"Yes, much." She pulled back to look into his eyes, smiling. "You must think I'm pretty silly, especially after I insisted I was prepared for the weather."

"Lois, no one could have predicted the heat would go out."

"I know ... and I was fine when I went to bed. But I woke up in the middle of the night and just couldn't warm back up again. I even added an extra pair of socks and pajamas but I was still shivering."

He tightened his arms around her. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be." She nuzzled into his neck. "I can definitely see the benefit of your nefarious plan to sleep downstairs. The fire feels wonderful. And I get to spend more time with you."

Clark caught his breath as he felt her hand smooth its way over the front of his t-shirt, then slide around to his side, pulling him closer. The way she was touching him, the way she was encouraging him hold her ... he couldn't possibly be mistaking her invitation. Emboldened, he decided to extend an invitation of his own.

"Lois ... are you busy on New Year's Eve?"

"Mmm," she murmured into his neck. "I think we're both working all day."

"I know, but after ... in the evening? Do you have plans?"

Her fingers paused in the delicious pattern they were tracing over his shirt. "Not yet. Do you?"

"I'd really like to do something with you."

She lifted her head to look into his eyes. "What do you have in mind?"

"Anything, honestly. It might be kind of late to get a dinner reservation, so maybe you could come over to my place and I'll cook? Or if you'd rather go out somewhere, I'm totally flexible ... as long as I get to be with you."

Her eyes danced in the firelight. "Would this be a date?"

He nodded, hoping desperately that he was reading her correctly. "Yes. Lois, will you be my date on New Year's Eve?"

Her mouth curved into a happy smile. "Yes. I'd really like that, Clark."

"Really?" He smiled back, ridiculously delighted, and then took another leap of faith. He cupped her face, gently stroking her cheek with his thumb. "And would you object ... if I wanted to kiss you at midnight?"

It was her turn to catch her breath. "Well, that depends," she answered, her eyes darkening in a way that made his heart race. "That's nearly a week away. Do I have to wait until then?" Her gaze flickered to his mouth, then back to his eyes.

"Oh ..." he breathed, so, so grateful that she was making this easy on him. "I really, *really* hope not."

Gently, almost reverently, Clark slid his hand around to cradle the back of her head and slowly lowered his mouth to hers. Just before their lips made contact, however, he couldn't help but pause, cocking his head to listen expectantly.

"Oh, no," Lois groaned, dropping her head to his shoulder. "Not again. What is it this time?"

"Nothing. Not a thing," Clark answered with a relieved laugh, gently lifting her head back up. "It's just happened so often since you've been here, I was waiting to see what else could possibly interrupt us."

Fortunately, she saw the humor in the situation and started to laugh with him. "No pounding on the floor? No well-meaning parents?"

He grinned. "No marauding goats ... no armies of Space Rats bent on revenge or herds of wild buffalo taking a short cut through the front door."

She giggled, her eyes bright with affection. "Then I guess there's no reason to wait any more."

Feeling as if he might burst with happiness, Clark finally closed the distance between them, unwilling to let anything else stop him. Gently at first, his lips caressed hers, but it wasn't long before they each released a quiet whimper and slowly took the kiss deeper. When their mouths finally separated, Clark dipped his forehead to hers, trying to calm his racing heart.

"Wow," Lois breathed, her voice coming in soft pants as she ran her fingers through his hair. "That was ..."

"Yeah?" he answered, equally breathless.

"Definitely worth *not* waiting any longer to repeat," she finished, recapturing his mouth with hers.

Many, many kisses later, Clark couldn't keep the smile off his face, even as he closed his eyes and nuzzled against Lois's hair. As their kisses had heated up, they'd pulled his pillow from the sofa and made a cozy nest of their blankets in front of the fire, agreeing that neither one of them wanted to leave the living room for the cold bedroom upstairs. But eventually they both knew they needed to cool things down, and their kisses and conversation turned more affectionate than passionate as they basked in the glow of their burgeoning relationship. Sleep,

however, was proving elusive, as they didn't seem to be able to stop talking ... or kissing ... long enough to get there.

"I still feel a little bad that I didn't get you a Christmas present," Lois said, running her fingers along the back of his hand where it lay against her stomach. He was spooned in behind her, keeping her warm enough under the covers that she'd been able to shed her extra layers. The soft fleece of her pajamas felt nice against his hand, though it paled in comparison to the softness of her skin. "Maybe I should get you something for New Year's."

"Mmm, you don't have to get me anything," he replied. "Just being with you is present enough."

"Still ... I'll have to think of something special."

"Trust me, Lois," he murmured, layering butterfly kisses behind her ear. "This has already been the most wonderful ... fabulous ... amazing ... special Christmas I've ever had."

She giggled as he hit a ticklish spot. "Ever?"

"Ever."

"Better than the time you got a baseball glove? Or your first bicycle?"

He chuckled quietly. "Yes, even better than that."

Lois shoulders shook with suppressed laughter. "What about the year your parents bought you the goat?"

He groaned on a laugh. "You're never going to let me live that down, are you?"

"Nope." She just giggled more. "Never."

He growled playfully and rolled her to her back. "You're just lucky I'm crazy about you."

She was smiling as she looked at him, her eyes reflecting his joy back at him. "Yeah, I am," she murmured, stroking his cheek. "Because this has been the most wonderful, fabulous, amazing Christmas I've ever had, too."

Sighing happily, Clark nuzzled his nose against hers before lovingly capturing her lips once more.

He was no longer a kid, and it wasn't Christmas Eve ... but in front of the fire in the living room was still his favorite place to be.

THE END :)

Author's Note, part 2: Since this story was conceived as a ficathon assignment, I thought you'd enjoy seeing what Mishmishat asked for in her story — way back in 2009!

Three things I want in my fic:

1. Goat
2. Embarrassing situation.
3. Almost kiss.

Preferred season: early relationship-ish :D

Three things I do not want in my fic:

1. Lex.
2. Violence.
3. Death.

Do some of my plotting choices make more sense now? :D
Thanks, Mishmishat, for the assignment. I'm not sure if you're around any more to read this, but if you do, I hope you enjoy it. :)

Kathy