

A Year Without

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Rating: PG

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Summary: A run-in with a con artist changes Lois's outlook on things.

The street was filled with noises: taxis honking, trucks backing up, kids playing, the flap of the flag above her head, and the chimes of an ice cream truck. It was Metropolis on a hot summer's day.

Lois and Clark walked down the street, hand in hand. She had stumbled crossing the street and had felt a gentle hand rest on the small of her back for a moment before moving to take hold of her hand. It felt good to have just Clark's hand back in hers and not his whole entire four-inch tall body.

"I know that you want to do the whole traditional wedding route again, Lois, but I want you to know that I'd be okay with eloping to Vegas this time," Clark said, before lowering his voice. "I'm just saying that I could fly us there this afternoon. We could be married and on our honeymoon by this evening. After all we've been through with our first failed wedding, Perry promised me that we could leave at the drop of a hat, once you got your memories restored."

"But *I* haven't experienced it, Clark," Lois reminded him. "My clone signed the registry and walked down the aisle. *She* was your lawful wedded wife, not me."

He raised a finger, and said, "Not technically lawful, since the marriage was never consummated."

"Humor me, will you? Please," Lois said, batting her eyelashes and gracing him with her largest grin. "It may take us a bit longer, but I'm sure looking back you'll see that it was worth a bit of hassle and patience."

"My patience has been pushed the limit," Clark grumbled under his breath, but when he gazed into her eyes, he smiled. "But if that is what *you* want, Lois, I'll wait. I just want you to be happy."

They noticed a commotion at the park across the way. A large crowd was gathered around some kind of booth. A woman was begging a magician to bring back her husband.

Clark glanced at Lois, and said, "Let's go check that out."

"A man who has left you will only return if *he* wants to," the magician told the woman. "Any other takers willing to test the loyalty of their spouses? Step right up!"

Lois and Clark exchanged a look. They knew a charlatan when they saw one.

Another woman dragged her husband up on the stage. "*My* husband is loyal," she insisted.

"Very good, madam," the magician said, before having the reluctant husband step into his magic box. He waved his hand and the man froze, an expression of sheer terror on his face, before he disappeared in a puff of smoke.

Lois and Clark exchanged another look. This was no ordinary street magician.

"Where's my husband?" the woman demanded.

"He left of his own free will," replied the magician. "Using it for the first time in years is my guess."

The crowd laughed, thinking that it all was a silly act. Lois and Clark knew from experience that it wasn't.

"What are you implying?" the woman shrieked.

"That you cannot force loyalty, madam. If you want your

husband to return, you need to change your ways and learn to appreciate him for the man that he is," the magician replied. "Any other women out there who believe in the loyalty of her man?"

Lois and Clark exchange another worried look. She recognized the determined expression on her fiancé's face.

"No," Lois insisted. Their new wedding date was just a couple months away.

"I need to save those men," Clark whispered in reply.

"Scan his stage. The men have to be around somewhere."

"I did. It's lead lined, probably old lead based paint," Clark murmured back.

"*That* in itself is a red flag, Clark. We'll check into his background and..."

"We *need* to act now. Anyway, it's not as if you have any doubts about my loyalty, do you?" he teased.

"Even Superman is susceptible to magic," Lois hissed back. She knew that Clark loved her. Of that, she had no doubts. "I don't like it."

"Then the worst that can happen is that the machine won't work on me," he said, tugging her hand and dragging her upon the stage. "I'm loyal."

"Clark, no!" Lois said. They had just gotten over a huge trial of her memory loss and brainwashing, and the shrinking of his ego; all she wanted was to move forward with her life, and she knew this wouldn't do that.

"Ah, it sounds like the little woman has doubts, sir," the charlatan said, much to the audience's delight.

"*Little* woman!" Lois roared.

"Lois, trust me," Clark murmured.

"I *do* trust you, Clark. It's *him* I don't trust," Lois replied, jerking her thumb back at the magician.

The short magician grinned with glee. "I give you my word, if your man here is loyal, he won't disappear."

"See, Lois," Clark said, kissing her cheek, before stepping into the contraption. "Nothing to worry about."

"Famous last words," Lois grumbled, crossing her arms.

The magician shut the glass door, waved his magic wand, and Clark froze – maybe for a second or two longer than the previous fellow did – but then he, too, disappeared in a puff of smoke.

"Oh!" gasped the magician in what appeared to be genuine surprise. "And, here, I thought we finally had a winner. Pity. Anyone else?"

"*Pity?*" Lois growled. "You kidnapped my fiancé. Bring him back!"

"I'm sorry, Miss. That's not the way this works. You have to *earn* him back," the magician replied.

"Earn? How? Is this some kind of extortion ring? Because you've conned the wrong sucker. I don't have any money," Lois informed the man.

The con man looked at her with doubt. "Miss Lane, are you saying that even though you were engaged to the third richest man in the world, he didn't name you in his will?" The man tsk-tsked.

"How do you know my name?" Lois snapped, her gaze narrowing. She had known this man was selling cheap tricks when she first saw him. Clark and his damn naiveté.

"You're right. How could I possibly have recognized the woman who has graced the front page of gossip magazines, tabloids, and even the society pages for a good six months solid a couple of years ago?" The man's words dripped with sarcasm.

Okay, Lois had to admit that going undercover after her engagement and failed wedding to Lex Luthor had been slightly more difficult. "So, it's money you want," she stated, really not surprised.

"No, not really, but I won't hold it against you if you want to give me some."

The audience tittered at his joke.

She glared at the man.

“Didn’t think so. The only way you’ll be able to earn your fiancé back is to change your personality completely around. Become the opposite of who you are now,” the man said.

She grabbed his throat and pulled the short man to her.

“Should I start with murder?”

“You tell ‘im!” one of the other unlucky wives called out.

“If that’s the way you think you can best earn Clark’s full loyalty,” the man croaked under her tightening grip.

Lois pushed the man away and to the ground. She should be patient. Clark would escape from whatever prison this man had put him in. Meanwhile, she would find out all she could about the charlatan, and try to find her fiancé and the other men from the outside. She stepped off the stage and reached into her purse for her camera. She would start with a good photo of Suspect Number One.

“You have one year!” she heard the man shout.

Lois turned around to snap his picture, but he, his stage, and the machine, which had stolen Clark, had all disappeared.

“But Clark loves me the way I am!” she shouted into the void, scaring a flock of pigeons who flew up into the trees.

Lois paced the section of the park where the man’s booth had been set up, checking for mirrors, trap doors, manholes covers to sewer lines, invisibility tarps, and anything else she could think of which might logically explain how everything, including the crowd of spectators it seemed, had vanished into thin air.

Clark was simply gone.

Lois stomped into the newsroom. She wasn’t going to lose Clark again, not after Tempus, other dimensions, Lex and the clone, memory loss, Dr. Deter, and shrinking shampoo. Clark was *hers!*

The new researcher Perry hired came up to her desk. “I have that data for Mr. Kent,” she said, glancing around. “Didn’t he return with you?”

“Change of plans,” Lois grumbled, shoving her purse into her desk. “He’s gone undercover, and he might not be back for a year.”

“But... But... but what about...” the woman stammered.

Lois paused and glanced up at her. “The wedding?” she mocked. Apparently, that was back on hold as well, not that she’d admit it to this anybody.

“No,” the woman replied, leaning forward to whisper, “Superman?”

Good question. Lois froze as she realized exactly *how* good a question that was, and turned around slowly to face the woman. “What *about* Superman?”

The woman looked at Lois with a knowing expression. “You know.”

“Know *what*?” Lois asked between pinched lips.

The woman leaned into Lois’s personal space. “Aren’t you trying to keep his identity a secret?”

“Who *are* you?”

“Sarah,” the woman said, standing taller causing her shoulder length brown hair to brush her shoulders.

“Uh-huh,” Lois said skeptically. Her reporter’s instinct was tingling.

“Perhaps we should speak in private,” Sarah suggested.

“You took the words right out of my mouth,” Lois replied, standing up and moving into the conference room, shutting the door behind them. “So, who are you, *really*?”

“I am Zara, leader of the people of New Krypton,” Sarah said. “Kal-El is my husband.”

Lois crossed her arms, refusing to give an inch. She’d figure out later how Sarah had discovered not only that Clark was Superman, but also that his Kryptonian name was Kal-El. “Kal-

El left Krypton as a baby.”

“On Krypton the families of noble blood marry as infants,” Zara explained.

“Oh, so Kal-El is nobility?” Lois said archly, hoping this would be the biggest practical joke of her life. It would make more sense if this were April instead of July.

“Yes, he is Lord Kal of the ruling family of El. It is our destiny to marry and...”

Ah, so it is like a royal betrothal. They aren’t really married. Lois raised her hand to interrupt. “Well, your marriage to Kal-El will have to wait. Kal-El has... well, gone away.”

“Gone where?” Zara asked.

“Poof! He stepped into a box and vanished,” Lois explained.

“This must be Nor’s doing.”

“Who’s Nor?” Lois asked.

“Nor is the second in line after Kal-El for my hand. Should Kal-El not formalize our marriage, I would be forced to marry him. He’s a bloodthirsty man who will bring destruction upon our people,” Zara said. “He would do anything to kill Kal-El and stop our marriage.”

As if Lois’s life hadn’t felt surreal enough before this conversation, the world started to swim around her like a Dali painting. Lois set a hand on the conference-room table to steady herself. “Is... is he a magician?”

“A what? Magic man? No, Nor is a general. He would never humble himself to use what you humans call ‘magic’.”

“Kal-El was taken by a magician in the park, who told me that he would return in a year,” Lois said. *Then*, she’d kill him.

“I need Kal-El *now* to stop a civil war from developing on New Krypton. I cannot wait a year.”

Lois knew the feeling. She merely shrugged. “There’s nothing I can do about that.” And even if there were, she wouldn’t tell this interloper that.

Zara closed her eyes, almost as if she were coming to grips with a great disappointment.

“Are you okay?” Lois asked.

“I’ve attempted to contact Kal-El telepathically to verify your claims. It seems you are correct. There is no trace of him on Earth. Now, I’m communicating with my lieutenant, a man named Ching, telling him to absolve my marriage to Kal-El,” Zara said, before opening her eyes. “Tell Kal-El when he returns that we’re sorry to have missed him. Should we find a way to defeat Nor without him, perhaps we shall revisit him under happier circumstances.” She made a strange gesture with her hand.

“Sure thing,” Lois said with a good-bye wave of her fingers, trying not to call Sarah ‘whacker-doodle’.

Zara opened the conference room window and flew Superman-fast out of it. Lois’s jaw dropped. A part of her hadn’t really believed any of this until that very moment.

Had Lois just saved Clark from being forced to marry his birth wife and leave Earth to rule New Krypton? She slipped into a chair.

Was Zara the reason Clark had failed that so-called loyalty test?

Would Clark really be gone for a year?

Did Lois still have to change *her* personality to earn Clark back, when he was the two-timing schmuck who had been previously married without informing her?

A Year Later

Lois pushed a shopping cart up what was left of the bumpy sidewalk to the rumble heap ahead. Her friends at the fire pit had told her rumors of new items being found at the now ruined First Metropolis Bank building.

Earth would have been so much better off if Kal-El’s parents hadn’t married him at birth to Lady Zara. Then Clark wouldn’t

have failed his loyalty test to Lois in the park, disappearing and making it seem as if Superman had deliberately left Earth vulnerable to invasion from Lord Nor's forces. If Jor-El and his wife truly wanted their son to marry a New Kryptonian, why didn't they program the hyper-drive of Kal-El's ship to meet up with the New Kryptonian colonist ship instead of sending it to Earth? It didn't make any sense.

After Nor's force took over Smallville and then Metropolis, the U.S. army tried to fight them with Bureau 39 leading the charge. She didn't even want to think about what happened the day Bureau 39 attacked Nor's men headquartered at the Daily Planet. Apparently, Nor had used torture to read the minds of the people of Smallville and, piecing together bits of knowledge from their collected memories, discerned that Superman went under Clark Kent's name. The son of the Kents had moved to Metropolis and worked at the Daily Planet. Nor had decided that the Daily Planet would be the best place to wait for the great 'Lord Kal-El' to return. Even if Clark somehow reappeared, Metropolis was so full of Kryptonite dust from the final battle, it would make it inhospitable for him to live here.

Upon their victory over the New Kryptonian forces, Bureau 39 made a coup d'état and took over first the United Nation's building in New York, and then the White House in Washington DC. Metropolis and all of the other major U.S. cities were still all under martial law, just in case, not that it was doing any good. There was little food, no new commercial goods, and no rebuilding of the city. Safety was non-existent. Metropolis had turned into a war zone, with the different warlords and factions battling on the streets. Most buildings were inhospitable or condemned, and those civilians remaining in the city were pooling their resources for the good of what was left of their communities.

That was why Lois was down at the bank. If she could find some gold or jewelry among the rubble, she might be able to trade it to her district's warlord for more food, blankets, or medicine. If she found stocks, bonds, or legal documents, she could use them for the burning barrel. Chances were that someone had already picked through the rubble, though, but it was Lois's job as a scavenger to scour the city looking for goods to help her neighbors.

In the tent city currently covering all the green areas of Centennial Park, she saw a strange commotion. A stage had been erected and someone spoke to the crowd through a loud speaker. Was this a formal announcement from the city governor? The reporter in Lois returned. Handcuffing her shopping cart to a broken parking meter pole, so that it wouldn't be stolen, she crossed the street to find out what the announcement would be.

"Have you changed?" the man with the bullhorn asked the crowd.

As she neared the group, the man on the stage pointed in her general direction. "I see one woman who has changed! Shall we put her to the test?"

A huge cheer rose out of the crowd.

Lois's brow furrowed as she glanced at those around her. Another faux preacher out to fleece Metropolitans of whatever possessions they had remaining by promising a future he could not deliver. Terrific. If only Clark were here. If only she had the power of the Daily Planet to inform these people what this man was really up to.

"Ms. Lane, have you changed?"

A chill ran down her spine despite the heat of the day. Lois shaded her eyes from the blistering sun and studied the man on stage, recognizing him as the charlatan who had stolen Clark.

"Me?" she screamed. "You did this! It's *your* fault that the world was ruined. *You!*"

The crowd's mood turned sour as several people began to hiss at the man on stage.

"Actually, Ms. Lane. It was *you*," the man answered calmly. More of the crowd turned their scowling faces towards her. "Me? How was this her fault? Lois wondered. What had she done? She had told Clark not to step into that man's box.

The man waved his arms in a big flourish. "So, I ask you again, Lois. Have *you* changed?"

Suddenly, Lois felt dizzy. It was as if the world itself was spinning, everything became blurry as if she could see through the people around her. This wasn't really happening. She must be imagining that the magician had come back to return to her loyal fiancé. The sweltering heat combined with the lack of food and clean drinking water, she concluded. Not to mention, missing Clark as if her soul had been torn in two every moment since he had disappeared. She had dreamed of stumbling across the magician again, but usually it was at night when she tried to sleep and not during the blinding light of day. What did they call it? Heat stroke? She should return to her shopping cart and continue gathering things for her community and then go in search of water. She pushed through the imaginary crowd, who hissed at her as if they were a bicycle tire with a slow leak.

The muted colors became once more vibrant as a cool breeze filled her lungs with air. The city filled with noises: taxis honking, trucks backing up, kids playing, the flap of the flag above her head, and the chimes of an ice cream truck.

As Lois stumbled across the street, she felt a gentle hand rest on the small of her back for a moment, before moving to take hold of her hand.

"I know that you want to do the whole traditional wedding route again, Lois, but I want you to know that I'd be okay with eloping to Vegas this time," Clark said, before lowering his voice. "I'm just saying that I could fly us there this afternoon."

She was delusional. Had she passed out? "Clark?" she asked, not believing what she was seeing, knowing it couldn't be real. Was he really standing right in front of her as if nothing had happened?

"Just hear me out, honey," he continued, stopping to gaze down at her. "We could be married and on our honeymoon by this evening. After all we've been through with our first failed wedding, Perry promised me that we could leave at the drop of a hat, once you got your memories restored."

"Perry?" Lois mumbled, unable to look away from the glorious face of her fiancé. She wanted so much to believe he was real. "But he... he... and Jimmy..." She reached up and caressed Clark's face. He felt real enough.

"I know. I know. I want them there, too, and my folks, and your folks," Clark's voice took a more husky tone as he pulled her into his arms. "But, truthfully, Lois, the only ones who need this new wedding is us. They've already experienced it."

"But *I* haven't experienced it, Clark," Lois stammered, recalling what she had told Clark the first time they had had this conversation on that horrible day a year before. "My clone signed the registry and walked down the aisle. *She* was your lawful wedded wife, not me."

Clark raised a finger. "More awful, than lawful, Lois, since the marriage was never consummated," he said, tapping her nose with a teasing smile. It faded as he continued to look at her. "But if another huge wedding is what *you* want, Lois, then I'll wait. I just want you to be happy." He noticed the commotion at the park across the way.

A large crowd was gathered around some kind of booth. A woman was begging a magician to bring back her husband.

Clark glanced at Lois and tugged on her arm. "Come on. Let's go check that out."

Lois's eyes widened. "No!" she exclaimed, halting him in tracks. If they went across the street and visited the magician, Clark might be taken away from her again, possibly this time for good.

His brow furrowed.

“Let’s elope!”

Clark grinned a smile larger than his usual 1000-watt smile. This one had to be ten-thousand watt. “Really? When?”

“No time like the present,” she insisted. “Now!” She lowered her voice. “There’s an empty alley back there. We can call the Chief from Vegas. He’ll understand.”

Clark took hold of her shoulders and focused his eyes on her. She could feel a slight tremor to his hands. “Are you sure? My patience has been pushed the limit, so if you’re joking, tell me now.”

Lois took one quick glance across the street at the magician’s booth before resting her eyes on Clark. “I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life. Let’s get married, Clark. It’s now or never!”

Besides avoiding the crazy magician, if they got married now Lady Zara’s claims on Clark would be made null, because Lois knew that once they were finally together as man and wife, nothing... and she meant *nothing*... would tear Clark from her side. She would make sure of that.

Without even stopping to look around, Clark zipped the two of them into the alley, where he changed into his uniform and rocketed them up into the sky. His smile hadn’t dimmed one watt.

Once they were airborne, he pressed his lips to hers. “I’m so happy, Lois. This is the best day of my life.”

Lois tightened her arms around his neck and smiled. “Mine, too.”

Back down in the park, the magician from another dimension, a fifth dimension in fact, waved his arms, causing all the people surrounding his faux stage disappear. He smiled. Everything was just as it was supposed to be. Wait two more months? Pshaw! Lois must have been out of her mind. He was so glad he was able to put her and Clark on the right course for them, for Metropolis, for the world, even.

The little man did a quick dance, jumped into the air, spun around, and disappeared with a slight pop.

Epilogue

“You look beautiful,” Clark whispered to Lois as they walked hand in hand down the hall of the fancy Las Vegas hotel where they would be spending their first night as husband and wife.

Lois had found a simple white dress at one of the stores in the mall next to the wedding chapel. Clark looked dashing in his charcoal grey suit and avant-garde tie done in Jackson Pollock style in Superman’s primary colors.

They had opted out of going out to eat first and decided just to order room service instead. Lois still felt as if she hadn’t eaten properly in a year.

As they stopped in front of the door to their room with the king-sized bed, Jacuzzi bath, and spectacular view of the fountains, Lois looked deeply into his eyes.

This had been the right choice. Her fingers brushed his lips, knowing she needed to tell Clark about what had happened to her, even if she couldn’t explain it herself. He would want to know about the magician, Lady Zara, Ching, Nor, and the upcoming New Kryptonian invasion of Earth.

“What?” he asked, almost as if he could read her thoughts.

“Ask me tomorrow,” she whispered. “It can wait.”

His ten-thousand watt smile returned and, with it, a devilish glint to his eyes. With a roguish bounce of his eyebrows, he swooped her into his arms and pressed another kiss to her all-too-willing lips.

“One honeymoon coming up,” he announced.

Before she knew what was happening he set her down inside the room.

Clark brushed a hand through her hair and cupped her jaw.

He kissed her once more, and then again. “Thank you, Lois,” he murmured, sounding almost reverent. “Thank you.”

“For what?” she asked.

“For loving me. For accepting me. For marrying me,” he responded with a kiss between each phrase. His eyes darkened and his voice deepened. “For tonight.”

Lois licked her lips and took a step back. “Hold that thought.”

Panic darted across his face.

She bit her bottom lip at his expression, and he rushed forward the foot she had stepped away to kiss her again.

“I can’t,” he admitted bashfully. “I’ve held it too long.”

Lois giggled. “I just wanted to slip into something a little more...” She paused to let the myriad of possibilities race through his mind. “— a little less.”

He took a step back, hands in the air. “Don’t let me stop...”

His head snapped towards the room’s door a moment before someone knocked. “— you,” he finished. “That’s probably the food and champagne we ordered before heading to the chapel.”

She grabbed a pink bag off the bed and headed into the bathroom. She really didn’t have anything in the bag, except a perfume sample from the lingerie shop. She was already wearing her something a little less under her dress. She merely had wanted to check her hair and face one more time before letting Clark unwrap the gift she had bought him.

A minute later, she opened the bathroom door. She had planned on leaning seductively against the doorjamb, but Clark wasn’t alone. He had his back towards her and turned at the sound of her exiting, revealing a petite mustached man contritely holding a bowler hat in his hands who stood on the other side of him.

“Oh, no!” Lois groaned. “You’ve got be kidding me!”

THE END

Gratitude: Many thanks to the great Lynn S.M. for volunteering to beta read this for me (to give my Wrong Clark betas a night off) and for laughing in all the right spots.

Disclaimer: Inspired by the characters created by Jerry Siegel & Joe Shuster as they were portrayed on the *Lois & Clark: The New Adventures of Superman* television series, developed by Deborah Joy LeVine. The characters do not belong to me; they belong to themselves (although Warner Bros, DC Comics, and the heirs to Siegel and Shuster might disagree). The plot of the story is my own.