

# Missing

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Summary: After being forced from his home during the heatwave in Metropolis, Clark Kent finds himself questioning whether to put the red cape back on and serve as Metropolis' hero once again.

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Perry White stood at the window, watching the snow fall. Behind him, his two star reporters waited for him to speak.

Things in Metropolis were back to some state of normality; the hundred-plus degree temperatures of the previous week were but a memory, Superman had been vindicated of any responsibility for the searing heat, even Clark had returned to the *Daily Planet*. Everything was normal, except for one thing.

Superman.

There had been no reported sightings of the superhero since he'd shut down the leaking Lexcorp nuclear power plant — not just in Metropolis, but anywhere in the world. It was as if he'd vanished, leaving as mysteriously as he'd arrived.

He heaved a sigh and turned to Lois and Clark.

"Have either of you heard from Superman?"

Lois was the first to shake her head, Clark a beat behind her.

"Not since he disabled the plant."

"And you don't have any idea where he is?"

Again, the dual head shake.

"He's disappeared before, Chief. I'm sure it's just— temporary," Lois offered.

Perry snorted softly, dismissing the two reporters with a reminder to keep searching for Superman. The *Daily Planet's* publisher had taken to phoning hourly to ask for updates, and he was just as eager to get the scoop on Superman's return.

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Lois observed her partner narrowly over the rim of her coffee cup. As much as she hated to admit it, Clark had a closer relationship than she did with the Kryptonian. She usually got in contact with the superhero by getting into mortal peril; Clark seemed to have some sort of inside track — a fact that irked her from time to time, especially since he wouldn't share how he got in touch with Superman. If anyone could contact Superman, it was Clark. Actually, when she'd had time to think about it, she'd come to the conclusion that Clark's impulsive midnight departure had been because he'd followed the superhero into exile.

She stood up and took the few steps to the edge of Clark's desk.

"So, do you have any idea when he might be coming back?"

Clark stopped what he was doing, leaning back in his chair to look up at her.

"What if he isn't?"

"What do you mean?" Lois was stunned. Of course, Superman was coming back! Didn't he know that Metropolis needed him? That she needed him?

"The city turned on him without any proof, just a half-baked theory. They didn't even keep looking for answers to the heatwave other than Superman's powers; they just turned him into a

scapegoat. And they drove him out of his home." Clark sounded unusually perturbed. "Think about it, Lois. If you'd been forced out of your home simply because you were different, would you want to go back?"

His phone rang. Lois backed away as he picked it up.

She'd never really thought about it before, but Clark might just be on the right track. Superman had made it very clear just a few short months ago that he considered Metropolis to be his home, and yet the city had treated him like a criminal, judging him guilty without any sort of real evidence to the contrary. Was Clark right about their motivations? Was it possible that despite proving himself to be a positive force for good, and despite the hundreds of lives he'd saved since his arrival, that the people of Metropolis were still that wary of him? Was it just human nature to be fearful of the new and the different? Superman had awe-inspiring powers, it was true. Powers that in the hands of someone else could be cause for terror.

But Superman had never shown any signs of hostility.

Or was it just mob mentality?

She hadn't liked the necessity of publishing the now-disproven theory that Superman's powers were responsible for the heatwave. And while she knew that every other news service had reported the outcome of that press conference, she couldn't help but feel that the *Daily Planet* had helped turn the tide of public opinion against him.

She had to find him. She had to explain. And she had to convince him to come back to Metropolis.

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"So are you any closer to a decision?" Martha Kent's voice sounded through the telephone line.

Clark paused for a long moment, trying once again to sort through the tumult of emotions that had consumed him since he'd been forced to leave Metropolis. Hurt, betrayal, anger, all roiled inside of him, making it hard to think clearly about the situation. He'd felt compelled to return to the city, drawn by whatever it was about this place that called to him, and unwilling to sacrifice the life he'd begun to build for himself. A real life, with a real job and real friends, not the strange nomadic existence he'd led since leaving college. He thought he'd found a measure of acceptance here; that his oddities were seen as worthy of respect, not fear or anger.

He'd been wrong.

Metropolis had turned on him like a pack of vicious dogs, showing him yet again that he was too strange, too different, to be tolerated. That he'd only be accepted if he acted just like a human.

Clark heaved a sigh. "I don't know, Mom."

"Clark, you created Superman so you could help," his dad reminded him. "Don't you think the people of Metropolis still need your help?"

Clark removed his glasses and rubbed a hand across his eyes. It was the same circular argument that they'd been having for close to a week now. "And what happens the next time something goes wrong?"

It was the unanswerable question, and all three of the Kents knew it. Clark leaned back against the wall next to the phone and looked across the room at his closet. His Suits were in there, stuffed in his old suitcase in the secret compartment he'd built. Right now, he wasn't sure if they'd ever see the light of day again.

"Well, it's your decision, Clark. And we'll support you no matter what you choose," Martha added.

"Thanks, Mom. Goodnight. Goodnight, Dad."

"Goodnight, Clark."

Clark hung up the phone and heaved another sigh. Could he still be Superman, knowing that most of Metropolis wouldn't hesitate to condemn him if something else happened?

Did he even want to try?

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A week passed.

Lois slammed the phone down after yet another fruitless phone call attempting to discover Superman's whereabouts.

"Where is he?" she muttered exasperatedly. She'd tried everything she could think of to track down the elusive superhero — with the exception of throwing herself off the building. And she'd come up dry every time. For all she knew, he'd returned to his home planet.

There was no consolation in knowing that no one else was having any luck, either. Not even Clark, with his previously-valuable connection to Superman. Though, she sometimes got the feeling that Clark was just going through the motions.

Clark was acting strangely lately. Strangely even for him, she amended mentally. For all his good points, Clark Kent could be one weird guy.

He was quieter than before, his previously cheerful manner replaced by an air of sadness and frustration. And he was spending more time in the newsroom lately, his odd, poorly-explained absences having dropped to almost nil. Lois had put the change in manner down to the loss of his friend, but that didn't explain his increased presence.

A thought occurred to her. Had Clark and Superman perhaps been lovers? The disappearances due to Clark slipping away to secret rendezvous? She contemplated it for a moment before snorting in amusement, inhaling and almost choking on her coffee in the process. Both men were straight as dyes, she'd bet a year's supply of Double Fudge Crunch bars on it. She'd seen the way Clark had looked at Toni Taylor and herself, and the two kisses she and Clark had shared were seared into her memory. As was the look in Superman's eyes when he'd told her she didn't have to bid for his attention after the bachelor auction.

No, there had to be another explanation. Something she hadn't thought of yet. Which meant she didn't have the full story.

Lois hated that feeling.

She sat back in her chair, considering. All of the obvious methods of tracing Superman had been tried, both by her and by every other reporter in the city — and probably the world by now. So what she needed was an obscure method.

Mentally she ran over the events leading to Superman's disappearance. The heatwave. The half-baked theory that Superman was responsible for the unseasonable temperatures. His arrest and subsequent exile. Clark's departure. Then Superman had disabled the leaking power plant, and Clark had returned — but a very different Clark to the one that had left.

Why did she keep coming back to Clark, as if he was the key?

As if she'd summoned him telepathically, the man himself interrupted her train of thought.

"Bad?" He'd left to cover a fire in an apartment building downtown. One look at his face was enough to tell the story; that look of sadness and frustration was back, though this time it was mixed with anger.

"Three apartments were completely destroyed. Three more have smoke damage, so that's six families who are currently homeless." He heaved a sigh. "A mother and her four-year-old daughter have been taken to hospital with smoke inhalation; they're in critical condition."

"This is why we need Superman back, Clark. To help. Okay, so maybe him being there wouldn't have stopped those apartments from burning, but at least he could've gotten the mother and daughter out faster." She paused. "We need him, Clark." Something about the expression on his face struck her as familiar; as she tried to place it, he made a non-committal sound and went to his desk. Attempting to shrug off the momentary sense of déjà vu, she turned her attention back to trying to find a way to contact Superman, but the expression on Clark's face niggled in the back of her mind. Finally, she gave up with a disgruntled snort. She'd seen that look once before, but when?

Then it hit her. It had been only a week or two after Clark had come to Metropolis; he'd attended a drive-by shooting and come back with that heart-wrenching look on his face. That had been the first time Superman had disappeared; he'd come back right after she'd had that conversation with Clark...

Now that she thought about it, it really had been right afterwards. Clark's story about Superman's return had been in the very next edition. She stilled for a moment, then shook her head. No, surely that was pure coincidence. And how egotistical of her, to think that a comment she made had had any impact on Superman's return.

Still... the timing was awfully convenient. To get that story filed in time for the next edition, Clark must've seen Superman within a few minutes of their conversation. Which meant... Clark knew where Superman had gone.

If he'd known then, chances were he knew now. Had Superman forced Clark to come back to Metropolis and leave him behind? No, she couldn't see Superman doing something like that. But there was definitely an odd connection between the two men. She eyed her partner speculatively. Both men had come to Metropolis around the same time, but how did a farm boy from Smallville, Kansas meet a Kryptonian superhero? Had Superman arrived on Earth far earlier than everyone — including her — had assumed? He was certainly familiar with human customs and standards of behaviour. He'd had to have learned them somewhere. Was it possible that Clark had been Superman's teacher? They both exhibited the same slightly old-fashioned courtesy. Whatever the connection was, one thing was clear.

Clark was holding out on her.

Movement caught her eye, and she looked up in time to see her partner slip unobtrusively towards the stairwell, tugging at his tie as he went. Her eyes narrowed in suspicion. Where was he going? There was no way he could've written up the apartment fire story so quickly. Pushing her own chair back, she followed his path across the newsroom to the stairwell door, waiting a beat before she shoved it open.

There was no one there. Puzzled, she walked to the handrail and looked up and down the flights of stairs. No sign of Clark. A distant clang reached her ears — one that she was positive was the sound of the door to the roof closing. She knew Clark was fit — you only had to look at him to see that, and she would certainly never forget the sight of him clad only in a towel — but even the fittest person on the planet wouldn't be able to make it up that many flights of stairs in such a short time. Only Superman could have managed it. But why would Superman come to the Daily Planet to pick up Clark when he'd been absent for well over a week now? She shook her head. There was an old saying in medicine that her father had taught her, back before he'd realised she was deadly serious about not following in his footsteps. If you hear hoof beats, think horses, not zebras. In other words, the obvious answer was usually the correct one. And the obvious answer here wasn't that Superman had collected Clark for some unknown reason.

It was that Clark was Superman.

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Clark stared unseeing at the table, his hands wrapped around a now-cold mug of tea. He'd written up the apartment fire story as quickly as he could before leaving the Planet.

The apartment fire. Unknowingly, that had been the last nail in Superman's coffin. The firefighter he'd interviewed at the scene had commented that if Superman had been around, maybe they could've gotten the mother and daughter out sooner. Lois had unconsciously echoed the sentiment a few minutes later.

Maybe.

Maybe he made a difference.

It wasn't worth it. It wasn't worth putting himself through the pain; the guilt every time he missed a rescue; the trauma of seeing

broken and mangled bodies; the second-guessing himself — what if he'd been a fraction faster, or grabbed that beam at this angle and not that angle. All of that, just to maybe make any bit of difference?

He pushed the stone-cold mug away and stood up.

Superman wasn't coming back.

He'd fish the old suitcase out of the closet and make sure every piece of the suits — the spare capes, the boots, everything — was put away. When night fell, he'd fly the case out to Kansas and stash it in his parents' barn, amongst the jumble of old farm equipment and discarded household items. Maybe — that word again — he'd pull it out every once in a while and remember the few months when he'd thought one man could change the world.

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Lois fidgeted as she waited for the traffic to clear enough to make the turn into Clark's street. She'd spent most of the afternoon deep in thought; trying to figure out what to do with the knowledge that Clark was Superman, and trying to figure out what he was playing at.

The whole city had been looking for Superman, and he'd been sitting at the desk across from hers, doing... nothing.

No rescues. No patrols. Nothing.

He'd put people in jeopardy, and for what? To throw a petulant temper tantrum?

The more she thought about it, the angrier she became. Finding a barely-legal parking space, she got out and stormed up the stairs to Clark's apartment. Finding the door unlocked, she shoved it open so hard that it slammed against the wall and bounced back, the glass inserts vibrating against their frames. He was standing in front of the open closet; from her vantage point, she could see the edge of what looked like a suitcase.

His lack of response at her entrance only served to fan the flames of her anger. Striding down the few steps into his sunken living area, she let her momentum carry her almost to his side.

"I want the truth and I want it now. Are you Superman?"

His shoulders hunched.

"I was," he replied curtly without turning.

"Was? What do you mean, was?" She rocked back on her heels, fury rising within her. "You're not coming back?"

"No."

"Did that nuclear power plant scramble your brain or something? You can't just quit! You're Superman!"

"Not anymore." He slammed the closet door shut, depositing the old battered suitcase on the floor.

"But— but—" The sheer magnitude of his decision appalled her, rendering her close to speechless. "I need you. The people of Metropolis need you."

He spun towards her.

"The people of Metropolis turned on me without a second thought," he bit out. Hurt and betrayal were etched on his face.

"Clark, I understand—"

"Really? Have you ever been kicked out of your home? No, Lois, you don't. I spent years — \*years\* — travelling around this planet, trying to find somewhere to call home. Somewhere I belonged. When I finally found it... they forced me out of my home on the strength of an unproven theory. I have never felt so different... so alien... as I did in that moment." He paused, swallowing hard. "And now they want Superman to come back like nothing happened." He trailed off.

The raw pain in his voice hit her hard. When Superman did nothing but fly around and conduct rescues, it was easy to forget that he was a real person with real feelings. She covered the momentary stab of emotion with a sarcastic comment.

"Superman going back on his word? What happened to 'I have vowed to fight for truth and justice'?"

"You said that. Not me," he snapped back.

"You know that, and I know that. But the world doesn't know

that, Clark," she pointed out.

"I can't do it, Lois. How am I supposed to fight for justice? What justice was shown to me? And don't even get me started on the truth part."

"Clark—"

"It was trial by media, and you know it."

"Not all the media, Clark." She held his gaze, not backing down. The *Planet* may have printed the theory that Superman was responsible for the heatwave, but they'd also been the loudest voice of support for him.

His eyes lost their hard, blazing edge. "No, not all of it. You kept digging." For a moment one corner of his mouth quirked into a half smile. "Thank you, Lois."

"You're welcome", she replied softly. The switch from furious anger to appealingly heartfelt gratitude surprised her, derailing her train of thought for a moment. He'd shed the worst of his anger. And so had she.

"Can you hear them?" she asked abruptly.

"Hear what?"

"People needing help."

He nodded. "Yes."

"But you haven't been responding."

He nodded again, that sad, frustrated look back on his face.

"How can you stand that?" Hesitantly she stepped forward and laid her hand on his forearm, giving it a little shake. "You need to be Superman, Clark. Not because people love you for it, but because it's the kind of person you are. You help little girls in wheelchairs and invisible men and people trapped in burning buildings. Even if you didn't have powers, you'd probably still be running into those burning buildings." She paused, looking for a sign that her words had sunk in. "When you came to Metropolis, you said you were here to help. So help."

He heaved a sigh and looked down at her.

"It's not that easy."

"Yes, it is. Put on the suit. Go be Superman. And tomorrow we'll write an article explaining where you've been."

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Lois watched until the primary colours of the suit were no longer visible amongst the lights of Metropolis. He'd changed into the Spandex in a spinning motion that had made her jaw drop in awe and launched himself from the balcony with a smile at her that was both nervous and apologetic. She'd bullied Clark into this, she knew, but he was out there. The article that they'd write tomorrow would incite both admiration and envy amongst the rest of the Metropolis press. And at some point soon, she and Clark needed to have a serious talk. But none of that was important right now.

Superman was back in the sky.

THE END