

At the Eleventh Hour

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Rated: PG

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Summary: With Superman missing and Nightfall drawing ever closer, a desperate Lois Lane recruits some extra help in finding the hero.

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Author's Note: I exercised my author's privilege and transported my crossover characters into the mid 90's, rather than the mid 80's for this story to make it work.

Lois Lane nervously knocked on the door of the quaint suburban house. Like the houses in the rest of the neighborhood, this one was neatly maintained and almost cookie cutter in a way, matching the rest of its brethren in a not-quite identical, but clearly related manner. The evening was deepening around her and Clark as they stood outside, waiting with baited breath for an answer. Or, as Lois mentally corrected herself, *she* was waiting with her heart in her throat and the feeling of every second pressing down on her. Poor amnesic Clark was blissfully calm about how dire the circumstances were. In fact, the normal expression "in the eleventh hour" was depressingly accurate. In just three days, the asteroid would make impact.

She wondered what was going on in his mind. He knew about the Nightfall asteroid and how little time they had left before it struck Earth and wiped out...well, Lois wasn't *exactly* sure how bad of an extinction event it would be. The S.T.A.R. Labs scientists hadn't exactly been the most forthcoming with information, even when pressed by not only herself, but *all* of the other reporters at the press conference they'd held to announce the impending collision. Which, of course, meant that things were really, *really* grim. Lois was seasoned enough to know that no information meant the worst things imaginable. Clark had once known that too, before he'd been hit by that accursed car and cracked his head hard enough to lose his memories. He knew too that Superman – their only *real* hope of destroying Nightfall – had disappeared in action during his attempt to save Earth. But Clark seemed disturbingly...not quite placid, she settled on. More like... accepting of the situation.

Finding Superman was up to her, and she felt the weight of that responsibility dragging her down.

As the streetlights behind her flickered on in the encroaching darkness, she sighed heavily. Flying to this backwoods town in Indiana had been a mistake. She'd done nothing but waste her time. The cryptic call she'd received tipping her off to the possibility that there might be someone around who could help her locate Superman was a dream at best – and a stupid one at that. She was about to turn around and tell Clark that they were leaving this sleepy little, nearly frozen-in-time looking town, when the door opened slowly. A pre-teen boy stuck his head out and looked at them suspiciously.

"Are you Mike?" Lois asked in a rush, without waiting for

him to greet them. "Mike Wheeler?"

Reluctantly, the kid nodded. "Who are you?"

Lois nodded in turn. "I'm Lois Lane. And this is my partner, Clark Kent."

Mike eyeballed them again. "What's wrong with him?" he asked as Clark looked around in childlike wonder at the neighborhood, which looked to Lois like it had barely moved out of the mid 80's, complete with a main street lined with mom and pop shops, rather than many chain stores.

There was just something strange about the place, Lois decided. Something almost...creepy, though she couldn't place a finger on what, exactly, about it gave her such an unsettled feeling.

"He was hit by a car and hit his head pretty badly," Lois hastily explained. "He's got a bit of amnesia. He's harmless, I promise."

As if on cue, Clark waved dopily at Mike.

Lois cleared her throat. "Rumor has it that you know someone who might be able to help us...to, uh, locate someone."

Fear flooded Mike's eyes and he looked like he was about to slam the door on their faces. "No," he scrambled to say. "I can't help you."

"Look, you can trust us," Lois replied soothingly, showing her hands to prove she wasn't a threat and wasn't hiding anything. "If I'm not mistaken, you know someone with...a special ability. We need her help in finding someone else with powers."

That, apparently, was the wrong thing to say. Mike actually *did* try to slam the door this time, and only Lois' quick thinking and strategically placed foot prevented that from happening.

"A rumor?" he questioned. Then, as though struck by some realization, "Who called you?"

Lois fidgeted a little and cleared her throat. "I promised reporter/source confidentiality," she admitted quietly.

Mike's mouth hardened into a thin line. "Dustin," he growled in frustration. "I'd give my last dollar that it was him."

"Look, we're not here to stir up any trouble. Superman is missing," Clark explained calmly, as if unperturbed by how quickly they were running out of time to find the hero or by the chance that they may have wasted their precious time by coming to this town. "We need him to destroy the Nightfall asteroid."

Mike appeared to consider this for a moment, then something in him seemed to relax, ever so slightly. He silently nodded. His cold, hard stare softened a bit. "You promise you aren't trying to hurt her?" he asked in a near whisper, dropping his voice to a conspiratorial tone.

Lois help up one hand again. "I swear. Look, Clark and I are two of Superman's closest friends. We understand the need to protect people who...well, others might seek to use or hurt."

"We just want to find Superman," Clark assured Mike.

Mike blew out a breath as he thought again. He bounced on the balls of his feet as he made his decision. "Okay," he finally agreed. "I'll introduce you to her. But if you turn out to be like those Hawkins Lab people..."

"Lab people?" Clark asked, his eyebrows shooting up into his hairline, and Lois was heartened to see a flicker of his old fire burning within him.

"If someone is trying to hurt your friend, we can help," Lois added, bristling with the thought that anyone might seek to harm or use some other person with powers. She shuddered as she remembered how intent Trask had been on killing Superman.

"Come on in," Mike said, opening the door for them and beckoning them inside. "My parents aren't home right now, but we don't have too much time." He gestured to the couch in the living room. "Take a seat and I'll get Elle."

Before Lois could say a word, he bounded off. She heard a door open and the rush of his pounding footsteps as he descended what had to be the basement stairs. For a couple of tense minutes, Lois and Clark sat alone in the living room, with Lois wondering

all the while if this – as Perry had called it – “hairbrained” plan would come to fruition. Of course, she had pointed out his equally hairbrained visit to a fortune teller with Jimmy, and the Chief had been forced to admit that no theory was too crazy to pursue. Still, could the Chief have been right about chasing this tenuous lead?

But before she could once again begin to regret her decision to come all this way on a hope and a prayer, Mike returned, this time with another kid trailing behind.

“This is Eleven,” he announced, sweeping a hand toward the girl he’d brought into the room. “But my friends and I just call her Elle.”

The girl was skinny and looked to be of a similar pre-teen or early teen age as Mike. She was dressed in baggy clothing – clearly hand-me-downs – that looked like they might have once belonged to a boy. In fact, if Mike hadn’t used her name and said “her,” Lois may have well mistaken the gangly youth before her for a boy. Eleven’s hair was shorn so short that it was barely a layer of dark peach-fuzz on top of her head. She had a wary, haunted expression in her dark eyes, like a skittish deer stuck in a car’s headlights. Lois immediately wondered what the girl’s story was and why everything in Lois’ mind screamed that she’d been abused. It was the hardest thing Lois had ever had to do when she swallowed the questions burning on her tongue. Now wasn’t the time. She and Clark – if he ever recovered – would do whatever was necessary to help Eleven once Superman was found and Earth was no longer in danger of being blasted into oblivion by Nightfall.

“Elle?” Mike said, addressing the girl as he motioned for her to take the armchair. Lois noticed how protectively Mike hovered around her. “These are the people I told you about, the reporters who need your help.”

“Hi there, Elle,” Clark said with a friendly smile.

“Friends?” Elle asked suspiciously, a hollow tone to her voice. There was an unmistakable twang of uncertainty in her voice.

Mike nodded. “They’ve promised they won’t turn you in to the Hawkins’ Lab people,” he reassured her with a dagger-glare of warning to Lois and Clark.

Lois raised her hand as if swearing an oath. “Hi, Elle. You have our word. All we want is some help locating a friend of ours who’s gone missing.”

“Why?”

The question took Lois aback in how emotionless it had come out.

“Because if we don’t find him, our world is...in a lot of trouble,” Lois replied, choking back the word ‘doomed’ before she could scare the kids.

“Elle, remember the picture I showed you of Superman?” Mike prompted. “That’s who we need to find. There’s an asteroid heading toward Earth that he needs to destroy. Remember the news segment we saw last night?”

Slowly, Elle nodded. “Okay. I’ll try.”

“Thank you,” Clark piped up, sounding relieved.

Elle slid off the chair and sat cross-legged on the floor. Mike looked around the room and his gaze settled on Clark.

“Give me your tie,” he commanded as he extended his hand, palm upward, to Clark.

Clark hesitated for a moment. “Why?”

“Just do it. Elle needs it. We have to block out as much of the outside world as we can so Elle can concentrate. I need your tie to make a blindfold,” Mike explained in a rush, impatiently opening and closing his fingers in a clear message of ‘hurry up.’

Clark shrugged and obediently undid his tie. As he worked the knot, Mike turned the living room television on and flicked through the channels until he found one that was broadcasting nothing but noisy white static. Nodding in approval, he turned up the volume until the static was all but blotting out the rest of the world. Clark handed him his tie and Mike quickly assisted Elle in

covering her eyes and securing the silken material so that it would not slip as she concentrated.

“Okay,” Mike said at length. “All good, Elle?”

“Good,” the girl answered as she stilled her body.

“Go for it. Just remember the pictures I’ve showed you of Superman. Okay?”

“Okay.”

Mike put his fingers to his lips as Elle...well, Lois wasn’t exactly sure *what* Elle was doing as she sat motionless and unresponsive. Lois’ nerves were frayed and she toyed with the hem of her skirt as she waited – literally – on the edge of her seat. Clark, ever the more collected one of their partnership, picked up a magazine and thumbed noiselessly through it as he waited. Mike knelt down next to Elle and softly spoke to her.

“Elle? Are you getting anything?” he asked after about five minutes had elapsed.

“Getting...something,” Elle responded after several seconds of silence, her voice almost sounding like she was grunting with exertion. “He’s...not in that outfit you showed me. Wearing... something dark. Fuzzy. Hard to see. He’s...lost. No. Confused. Not himself.”

“Where is he?” Lois couldn’t help but ask.

Mike gave her a sour look that told her that *he* was the one asking questions, but Elle answered Lois anyway.

“Close,” she said. A bright red line of blood had begun to seep out of her nostril. Elle didn’t seem to notice or care. Her brow furrowed as she concentrated harder. “Close. He’s...reading.”

“Reading?” Lois asked, incredulous.

Elle dipped her head in the shallowest nod Lois had ever seen. “I can see it. Read...Reader’s Digest,” she stammered, as though she were having physical difficulty in seeing the publication’s title.

Lois shot Clark a glance to see if he was getting any of this and gasped as she took stock of the Reader’s Digest in his hands, the bright cover contrasted against his charcoal gray suit.

“Oh my God!” she gasped. “Clark?”

THE END