

New Phone, Who Dis?

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Summary: An unknown number. An unexpected text. And a day Clark Kent won't soon forget.

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Author's Note: This is in response to the 2021 Kerth Challenge #2, which asked for a character to receive a text with a time, a place, and a warning.

Bzzzzzzzzzzzt!

Clark's phone buzzed on the night stand, where he'd left it to charge overnight as he and Lois had slept. He heard it vaguely as it pierced the pleasant, dreamless sleep he'd been drifting in. He grunted a little as he turned over, away from the offending device, and pulled the covers up over his head, as though that would block out any further interruptions.

Bzzzzzzzzzzzt!

Clark squeezed his eyes shut even tighter, gritting his teeth. Against his bare chest, he felt Lois stirring. He kissed the top of her head, hoping that the simple act would soothe her back to sleep. She sighed softly, then snuggled into him even further. She murmured something inaudible, even to his sensitive ears and stilled her movements.

Clark smiled, his lips still buried in her dark tresses, and he breathed in deeply the unique, calming scent that belonged to the woman he loved. He lavished in the trace of the lavender body wash she favored these days and the coconut conditioner that made her hair as soft as the most exquisite silk. He kissed her again, unable to help himself.

Then he let himself drift back toward the inviting nothingness of sleep. He was just on the threshold of falling back into that comforting darkness when...

Bzzzzzzzzzzzt!

This was getting ridiculous! He bit back a growl of frustration and Lois wriggled against his chest again. Her eyes fluttered beneath her closed lids and her brow furrowed. Clark scowled as he rolled back over, toward the night stand. Fumbling in the semi-darkness of the predawn world, he groped around until his fingers felt the familiar cool electronic device. He lifted it to see who could be so urgently texting him at this hour of the morning, but stopped just short of turning the screen on. As his sleep-fogged brain slowly surfaced from the last remnants of his slumber, a jolt of worry shot through him. Could it be one of their kids? With all four of them grown and out of the house, he was constantly worried for their safety. It was the result of being a parent, he knew, as all of them had inherited his Kryptonian penchant for being super, and were, therefore safer than most people. Still, there were plenty of psychos out there who might seek to hurt them, simply because their father was a renowned reporter – and one who was notably friendly with Superman.

Bzzzzzzzzzzzt!

All right already! Geez! he grumbled mentally as he pushed the small button on the side of the phone to bring the screen to life.

He had to squint against the seemingly too-bright light of the screen in the otherwise still and dark room.

He ignored the little text icon at the top of the screen and, instead, touched the text app icon with his thumb. His heart beat a little less fast as he realized none of the kids had messaged him. Neither had his parents, who, elderly as they were, had quite gotten the hang of texting. Well, his mother had. Jonathan Kent had never understood the need for phones to become pocket-sized computers and still preferred to use them mainly to talk to people.

It hadn't been Jimmy either. Or any of their coworkers. Or Mr. Wolcott, who'd taken over the Editor-in-Chief position after a series of heart attacks had forced Perry to retire some fifteen years ago. In fact, none of Clark's contact list matched with the number that had texted him. Instead of seeing a familiar name heading the messages, there was a number that Clark didn't know. Even the area code was one that he didn't immediately recognize.

Once again using his thumb, he clicked on the series of messages that had been sent to him. Apparently, he'd slept through the first couple, as there were more than he thought there would be. As he read the first one, cold fear drenched him and he sat bolt upright, waking Lois completely in the process by accident.

"Clark?" she mumbled, confused and suppressing a yawn. "Honey? What's wrong? Another job for Superman?"

He couldn't respond with words; his mouth and throat were completely devoid of moisture. He shook his head.

"What's wrong?" Lois asked, sitting up, now fully alert and switching on her bedside lamp.

Clark handed her the phone. For a moment, she seemed not to comprehend what he meant. Then, finally, she peered at the screen, which had begun to dim. She swiped a thumb over it to ensure that it stayed on. Clark peered over, rereading the messages as Lois read them.

Good morning, Clark!

Or should I say...Superman?

That's right. I know your little secret.

Don't worry, I won't say anything...for now.

BUT

If you want your secret to remain a secret, you'll need to show up to the top of the South Tower of the Metropolis Bridge at exactly 11pm tonight.

ALONE.

Any funny business and I alert the media to your dual life. I have proof.

Come late and you will regret it.

See you tonight.

Clark's stomach churned queasily as Lois handed him back his phone. She gave him a questioning, concerned look. He took the phone and tossed it onto the comforter between his knees. He searched for something – anything – to say, but no words came to his blank and whirling mind.

"Any idea who...?" Lois ventured, not needing to finish her question.

"No idea," Clark managed to squeak out. He swallowed hard, trying to conjure up enough saliva to lubricate his parched mouth.

Lois frowned. For a moment, she didn't move. She just sat scowling at the phone. Then, suddenly, she shot a hand out and grabbed it. She turned the screen back on and, with both of her thumbs flying into action, she began to text.

"Uh, honey?" Clark asked, confused. "What are you...?"

She sent the message and handed it back. He looked at what she'd written.

New phone, who dis?

Clark chuckled, despite the cold panic that had every nerve ablaze. "Honey, I appreciate it, but do you *really* think that it's going to be *that* easy?" He lifted his eyebrows as he looked at her.

Bzzzzzzzzzzzt!

Clark brought his attention back to his phone.

Nice try. 11pm. Metropolis Bridge. Or else everyone finds out.

Lois shrugged. "It was worth a shot." She consulted the time on the clock. "Come on, we might as well go into the office early. Maybe we can get a hit on a reverse phone lookup or something. Jimmy's great with this sort of thing."

Clark nodded. Jimmy had long since joined the scant ranks of those who were in the know about his secret. He could trust his best friend to keep the contents of the terrifying texts under wraps. And Lois was right. Jimmy was, in Clark's opinion, a technological wizard. He could get things done in minutes that would take Lois and Clark hours, Clark's super speed be damned.

"You're right," he conceded. "But Jimmy isn't coming in until 10 today, remember?"

Lois frowned. "I almost forgot. He's getting his cast off. I can't believe you broke his leg," she teased.

Clark's hand flew to his chest. "I had nothing to do with that! He's the one that tried to pull off that trick shot during our basketball game! He forgets sometimes that we're not as young as we used to be."

"So?" she shrugged, giving him a mischievous look. "You're Superman. You should have saved him from himself."

Clark rolled his eyes at the familiar needling. "Maybe you shouldn't have distracted me by wearing that shirt I like so much." He wiggled his eyebrows at her. Then, as the memory of the texts intruded upon his slightly improved mood, he sighed. "In any case, none of this gets us any closer to figuring out who's behind the texts and how they know about me. Or what proof they might have. Or how they got ahold of my private cell number."

Lois nodded. "Good point." She started to get out of bed, then paused. "You don't think..."

"What?"

"You don't think it might be some previously unknown spawn of Lex, do you?"

Clark felt the blood rush out of his face. Over the years, a few of Luthor's other sons and daughters had slunk out of the shadows to cause Lois and himself a multitude of headaches. Yet none had ever seemed to be aware that their father had discovered Clark's secret, and Clark had always been reasonably reassured that any proof and recordings – written down or spoken on film or audio tape – Luthor might have made had been destroyed.

"I..." he stammered, planning his words carefully. "I don't know. I mean, we know Luthor got around but how many kids could he have possibly left in his wake?"

Lois shrugged indifferently. "I don't know. Chances are, even *he* didn't know. He wasn't exactly Doting Father of the Year." She slipped off the side of the bed, stood, and stretched. "Come on. Since Jimmy's going to be a little late today, we can stop by The Bagel Brothers on the way into the office."

Clark stared at her. How could she *possibly* be hungry when his appetite was nowhere to be found in his panic?

"What?" she asked, pulling her pajama top off and tossing it onto the bed, catching sight of his expression of disbelief.

"How can you be hungry at a time like this?" he asked, flabbergasted, as he too forced himself to vacate the bed.

Lois shrugged again. "You know for a fact that I'm a nervous eater."

Clark could say nothing; he merely shook his head.

"Jimmy! There you are!" Clark exclaimed in a rush as he felt a tiny trickle of relief seep into his fear-drenched brain. He looked at his watch. It was nearly 11am. Just a measly twelve hours stood between now and his appointment with his mystery texter. "I was getting worried that you weren't coming in."

Jimmy gave him an odd look. "Geez, what's the matter, CK? You look like hell. And you sound like you're trying out for editor or something." He hung his coat on the hook behind his desk.

"The doctor was running a bit behind this morning. But, good news, my leg is healed." He gestured to his left leg with a flourish.

Clark beckoned him over. "We need to talk." He jerked his head toward the empty conference room.

Jimmy followed as Clark began to walk. "So much for the 'hey, congrats on getting your cast off' thing," he muttered under his breath. "Can I at least get a coffee first?"

"It's kind of urgent," Clark replied apologetically. "And congrats on getting the cast off. I'm glad your leg is healed, really. I'm just...under an enormous amount of stress. I'm sorry, Jimmy. You'll understand why in a couple of minutes." He paused in mid-stride and ran a hand through his hair. "Tell you what. Once Lois and I fill you in on what's going on, I'll run out and get that Greek food you love as a sort of thanks for your help...and discretion...with this."

Jimmy's grin at the mention of the food faded instantly. "This really is serious, isn't it?"

"You have no idea."

Clark began to walk again, and noted with silent satisfaction that Jimmy was easily able to keep pace with him now that his cast was gone. He opened the conference room door, where Lois was already waiting – and pacing – and let Jimmy in first. He shut and locked the door behind them, then turned his attention to shutting the blinds on the large windows that overlooked the bullpen.

"Uh, CK, now you're *really* worrying me," Jimmy quipped, uneasily eying Clark as he worked.

His job done, Clark guided Lois to a chair, then sat down across from Jimmy. He pulled his phone out of his pocket.

"Jimmy, we have a huge problem," he said as he opened up his messages. He slid the device across the table to his friend. "I got these texts this morning. I have no idea who they're from. Lois thinks you might be able to do some kind of reverse lookup or something and help us figure out who sent them."

Jimmy raised his eyes questioningly. Clark nodded toward the phone.

"Go on," he urged his friend.

Jimmy needed no further invitation. He lowered his eyes and began to read. It seemed to Clark that he read over the series of messages several times before he looked up again. He dragged his fingers through his hair in a mirror of the way Clark usually did.

"Damn," he said in disbelief. He looked slightly green.

"Think you can find this joker?" Lois asked.

Jimmy nodded firmly. Confidence shone on his face.

"Absolutely! Don't worry, guys, I'll find him...or her...for you."

Clark breathed a small sigh of relief. "Thanks, Jimmy. I don't know what we'd do without you."

Jimmy beamed. Then a loud, squelching sound filled the dead space between them. "Um, about that lunch?" he asked with an embarrassed smile.

Clark returned to the newsroom, feeling the weight of the day baring down on his shoulders like an actual, physical thing. He was exhausted – his shortened sleep, his terror over who knew his identity, and the full day of interviews, lead chasing, and Superman rescues had his reserves at a dangerously low level. And yet, rest would have to wait. It was nearly 4pm and he still had no clue who had texted him that morning. Nor had he had a chance to talk to Jimmy to see if the younger man had found out any information.

But now, *finally*, the day seemed to be slowing down, at least for the moment. He'd been able to make it back from Myanmar without having another call for Superman divert his path home. Still, his only thought was of finding Jimmy and Lois and checking to see what progress they'd made in his absence, not of sitting down for a few moments' reprieve. Wearily, he picked his way through the bullpen to where he, Lois, and Jimmy all had their desks clustered. Lois' was empty, he saw, but he dismissed

the thought as soon as it entered his mind. She could be anywhere – the bathroom, with their editor, grabbing something from the supply closet, even on another story that had cropped up while he was gone.

He reached his desk and sat down heavily in his chair. For a moment, all he could do was to slump against the backrest, eyes closed, while he gathered his thoughts. He groaned a little as a knot in his lower back popped – the sudden release in the tension there felt good. Approaching footsteps forced him to open his eyes. Jimmy stood before him, nervously chewing his lower lip.

“CK? I did what you asked. I checked out that number,” he began cautiously.

Worry seeped through Clark at Jimmy’s tone. “Oh?” was all he managed to get out.

Jimmy threw a glance over his shoulder, ensuring that they weren’t being overheard. “I’m sorry, CK. Really. I tried every trick I could think of. No match.”

Clark felt his palms go sweaty. “No...no match?” he croaked out. “How is that possible?”

Jimmy shrugged sadly. “Probably some kind of cheap throw away phone. You know. You grab it off a store rack, put some minutes on it, toss it when you’re done. It never actually gets registered to a plan or anything, so the user is essentially a ghost.”

Clark’s mind was numb. “I forgot they even still made those,” he muttered, though of course he and Lois had come across that exact scenario before. It had just been a while. As technology got smarter, most of the petty criminals they helped to catch seemed to get dumber.

Jimmy nodded. “There’s still a market for them. Not much of one, but enough. Parents who want to be able to reach their kid without racking up the family phone plan with another smart device. Criminals. Stuff like that.”

Clark raked his damp hand through his hair. “Perfect,” he said stonily. “Where do we go from here?” The question had been directed more at himself than at Jimmy, but Jimmy shrugged again.

“Have you tried calling the number that texted you?”

“Why would I do that? It’s not like our mystery texter is going to be like “my name is Joe and I’m standing on the corner of Vine and Hale.” Clark lifted his glasses off his face just enough to rub his tired eyes. When he was finished, he gestured to Lois’ desk. “Where’s Lois?”

“Meeting with a source. She said she’d be back around 5 or 5:30.”

“Did she say which source?”

“Sorry,” Jimmy apologized again.

Clark shook his head. “Don’t worry about it.” His stomach growled. He’d barely eaten anything that day; his nerves hadn’t allowed him to. “I’m gonna grab something to eat. Interested in an early dinner?”

“If you’re buying, sure!” Jimmy teased, flashing him a brilliant smile. “What were you thinking?”

Clark thought for a moment. “Fajitas,” he decided. “I’ll be back soon.”

“Great,” Jimmy agreed. “I haven’t had good fajitas in a long time.”

Clark stood again and headed back out of the newsroom. He’d been so preoccupied when he’d come in that he hadn’t even taken his coat off yet. Now he was glad of it. The sky, which had been overcast and threatening to rain all day, had finally burst. In the few minutes he’d been inside, a torrential rain had begun. Clark pulled the collar of his coat up, covering as much of his neck as he could, found a deserted alleyway, and sped off into the deluge, across the city to their favorite Mexican restaurant.

It wasn’t the same as flying down to Mexico for real, but this was as good as it got without leaving the city. Something inside him was telling him to stay close to the city if he could help it.

Once inside the restaurant, he pulled out his phone and dialed Lois. Perhaps she was already finished with her source and would like him pick up some food for her as well. The call went immediately to voicemail. He hung up without leaving a message. He could fill her in about Jimmy’s discovery when he saw her and if she wanted food, he could always come back out once she was back in the bullpen.

Fifteen minutes later, he was gently placing the bag of take out on his desk. He and Jimmy ate distractedly as they worked – Jimmy on some piece of research until he disappeared into the photo lab, Clark on one of his and Lois’ stories, though he didn’t get far. His mind kept spinning back to the damning texts on his phone. He barely even tasted his meal, robotically chewing and swallowing before taking another bite. The cherry cola he’d gotten may as well have been water for all the flavor he was aware of.

Bzzzzzzzzzzzz!

Clark reached for his phone automatically, continuing to stare at his computer monitor. He stretched a little before checking the screen.

Another text from the unknown number.

I have your wife.

Clark choked on a piece of chicken and nearly vomited into his trash can as he worked the offending piece of food out of his windpipe.

“You okay, Kent?” Vlad, one of the newer reporters asked.

Clark could only gasp and nod feebly, all of it a lie. He felt as though his world had shattered.

It can’t be real, he argued with himself, knowing on some deep level that it likely *was* real.

Ring!

Clark stared at the phone’s screen in horror. Now the texter was calling him.

Now’s my chance to get whatever information I can! Clark told himself. Something – anything - in the background could give away who this person is, or at least where they might be located.

His hand trembling, he tapped on the icon to answer the call. He brought it up to his ear.

“Hello?” His voice sounded thin and strained to his ears.

“Clark? It’s me.”

Relief and terror ripped through Clark’s body as he heard Lois’ voice.

“Honey? Where are you?” he asked, the words coming out in a rush. “Are you okay?”

“Fine, but the texter...he’s serious, Clark. If you don’t show up, alone tonight...”

Click!

The phone went dead in his hand. Frantically, he dialed the number back, but it simply rang until frustration made him hang up. Not even a voicemail had answered. He stood up from his seat, all weariness gone in the cold fear that had encased him like a tomb of ice. His grip on his phone tightened, almost too much. The slight squeak of the plastic case it was in was the only thing that alerted him to the fact that he was close to destroying the only lifeline he had to finding his wife.

He looked down at it, contemplating it as if seeing it for the first time. Then he started to text.

Let Lois go. Trust me, you will regret it if you don’t.

He waited impatiently for a response, but none was forthcoming. Growling under his breath, he stuffed the phone into his pocket and turned off his computer. His work could wait. Whoever the mystery man or woman was, he or she had just sparked a war, and Clark was determined to win it. Fire blazed in his eyes; it took all of his self-restraint not burn something to ashes with his heat vision. Grabbing his coat out of habit rather than any conscious thought, he stormed out of the office, leaving a trail of concerned and curious coworkers in his wake. They knew it was rare for him to be in such a foul mood.

For the rest of the evening and well into the night, he scoured Metropolis and even the surrounding areas of New Troy, but there was no sign of Lois. Desperation gnawed holes in his heart. Beads of sweat glistened on his brow and froze in the cold night air. His stomach churned violently. Every nerve was at attention. Each of his senses was heightened more than he ever thought imaginable.

In fact, the only thing that had gone his way that night was that the rain came to a tapering end only an hour or so after he began his initial search, as if the heavens had dumped its heavy load all in one violent outburst and gone back to sleep again. Still, Clark's suit clung to him, uncomfortably wet and sticky. It hadn't even occurred to him to take a fraction of a second to use his heat vision to dry himself off, because even a fraction of a second not spent looking for Lois would have been a waste of precious time.

Throughout it all, he kept checking the time. He noted the position of the moon through the tattered gray clouds in the rain-washed sky what felt like every five minutes, until at last, no more time remained. He had to make his choice – to meet with the texter or not.

"It's a lose-lose situation," he whispered to himself as he came to a halt on top of the giant globe that adorned top of the Daily Planet's building. "If I meet with him, he'll know he's right, that I'm Superman. If I don't..."

He sighed, his breath puffing out as white mist, like his soul leaving his body.

"There's no choice. Lois is depending on me."

Alighting once more, he flew off in the direction of the Metropolis Bridge. In mere seconds, he'd crossed the city and the south tower was in sight. He angled sharply downward but reduced his speed so that he touched down with only the barest hint of noise as his boot squeaked slightly on the rain-slicked metal.

"Clark!" Lois came rushing at him from the far corner of the platform, which was bathed in darkness. She flung herself into his arms.

"Lois? Are you alright? Who did this to you?" he demanded softly, checking her over for any obvious signs of injury. She seemed okay, though her use of his name whilst he was in the Superman suit was a little out of character, especially with the prospect of the mystery texter being somewhere nearby.

"I'm fine, really," she assured him.

"I'd never hurt her," came a deep voice from the shadows.

Clark narrowed his eyes as a figure, cloaked all in black, stepped into the meager light from the bridge's streetlights below. Then he scowled.

"Bruce?" he asked, trying to force back his incredulity as he caught sight of the Batsuit.

"Clark," the man acknowledged with a tight smile.

"I don't understand..." Clark began helplessly, watching as Lois unsuccessfully hid a laugh behind her hand. "The texts..."

"Came from me," Bruce replied, confirming the suspicions that were slowly coalescing in Clark's mind. He raised a phone, pressed the screen, and Clark's phone buzzed.

Surprise!

"And the kidnapping..."

"My idea," Lois admitted, biting her lower lip as she gauged his reaction.

Clark felt as though the entire world had suddenly shifted on its axis. He could almost swear he could feel the Earth tilting beneath his feet, threatening to slide him right off of where he stood and into the void of space. His knees buckled and Lois rushed to help him remain steady.

"Why?" he croaked, the last remnants of his tension bleeding out, now that he was certain his wife and his identity were both safe.

"Clark, what's today's date?" Bruce asked, a smirk upon his

face, the only readable thing beneath the cowl of Batman.

"The first," Clark replied, dazed, his mind still half-numb. "What does that matter?"

"Of?" Bruce prompted.

"A..." Clark began to answer, before it dawned on him. His lips pressed into a thin, hard line as he grudgingly answered. "April. April first." His temper flared hotly. "This was an *April Fool's* prank?" he yelled.

Bruce made a motion with his hands, as if to lower Clark's voice. "Keep it down. You still want to keep this between only us, right?"

"Who's going to hear us? Some trucker doing 70 on the bridge? Or perhaps some wayward owl flying by?" Clark asked, sarcasm dripping from his words like poison, though he did lower his volume a bit.

He wasn't sure how he felt. Obviously, it was a relief to know there had never actually been any real danger. But there was a certain amount of anger there too, just below the surface. More than that, he had to admit that some tiny part of him might have been amused, if he hadn't just spent hours worrying for Lois' safety.

"Please don't be mad," Lois told him, wrapping her arms around his left bicep.

"Mad?" Clark echoed. "Mad? Just because I'm gonna kill Bruce doesn't mean..."

She interrupted him by pressing her index finger to his lips. "It's *my* fault you went looking for me. It was a spur of the moment idea that I got this morning, before all the rescues and stuff. I didn't have time to call it off before Bruce showed up and I didn't think..." She let her voice trail away. "None of the stuff involving me was his idea."

"But he certainly went along with it," Clark said gruffly, jutting his chin out petulantly in Bruce's direction.

Bruce shrugged. "Okay, I'll agree that maybe that went a bit too far. Still, you have to admit, it was a pretty good prank."

"Oh, yeah, sure, my impending heart attack *really* appreciates it," Clark quipped back, his sense of humor trying to push through the rest of his tangled emotions.

Bruce snorted a laugh. "And you call *me* the serious one," he retorted with a fresh smirk.

"Seriously though, do you *realize* how stressed I've been all day, thinking that not only was my identity in jeopardy, but that Lois had gone missing too?" he asked, his tiredness coming back in full force. He felt like he could curl up right there on that bridge tower and sleep for a week. He swayed a little on his feet as though buffeted by an invisible punch. "That was kind of a mean-spirited prank."

"Oh, and the one you pulled last year wasn't?" Bruce volleyed back, amused. Clark started to think back to what he'd done, but Bruce cut him off. "Pretending to be an insurance agent for the supposed fire at my house? While I was on my honeymoon. In Bali. And then getting Alfred to pretend he was at the hospital?"

"Hey now! Wait just a second! I never asked Alfred to get involved!" Clark shot back, but he was chuckling now. "And a ruined house is *not* the same as an abducted spouse."

"If you can't take credit for Alfred's part in your prank, I'm not claiming responsibility for Lois' part in mine," Bruce argued good-naturedly.

"Of course, you know, this means the gloves have come off in this war," Clark promised him, a gleam in his eye. "There will, quite literally, be no holds barred from here on out."

Bruce chuckled. "I'd expect nothing less."

Clark shook his head. "Does the League know? Am I going to get roasted at the next meeting?"

Bruce nodded. "Diana said it was a jerk move." He shrugged. "Barry got the phone for me."

Clark laughed. “Yeah, that sounds about right.” Then he shook his head again. “Well, as invigorating as this night was, it’s taken its toll on me. I need to get some sleep.”

Bruce nodded again and held out his hand. Clark took it and shook it. “See you two next week. Alfred’s making steak and ribs.”

“See you then,” Clark replied with a nod.

Bruce began to retreat into the shadows as Clark gathered Lois in his arms. But before the billionaire could disappear into the darkness that he’d adopted as his own, he turned and looked over his shoulder. “Oh, and happy April Fool’s, Clark.”

THE END