

# Coming Home

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Rated PG-13

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Summary: Clark is back from New Krypton, but he's changed.

**Author's Note:** Part of The Planes Series.

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Lois looked around the Kent living room, eyeing the Christmas tree and decorations critically. She didn't really want to admit it but Clark and his dad had managed to find the absolutely perfect tree for the corner of the living room. But there was something missing, something she couldn't quite put her finger on. Then it came to her — there was nothing of *Clark* in the room — no childhood ornaments, no photos with Santa. Nothing.

Last year, while Clark was still on New Krypton, Lois spent the holidays in Smallville with Clark's parents. Lois, Jonathan and Martha had kept Christmas despite the heaviness in their hearts at Clark's absence. Martha had pulled out all the ornaments Clark had made over the years and all the Christmas photos. It made it feel like he was there with them.

This year he was back with them, but he didn't seem to be *completely* with them. Some part of him was still in that horrible place. Some part of him hadn't come home. Some part of him hadn't wanted to be reminded of Christmases past.

Currently Martha was puttering around in the kitchen while Clark and his dad did ... well she wasn't sure what they were doing. They were supposed to hanging lights on the outside of the house but Lois hadn't heard any sounds from outside for some time. Lois hoped that Clark and his dad were talking. Jonathan Kent was one of the best listeners she'd ever met. If anyone could get Clark to open up, it would be his Dad.

The one thing she did know was that Superman wasn't out doing anything — while Clark Kent had returned from New Krypton, Superman was still absent. Clark's powers hadn't completely returned yet and the trauma of his time on that hellhole of a planet ... Lois wasn't sure if Superman would ever return to the skies of Metropolis. The physical scars were healing but the mental ones might never disappear completely.

Clark refused to tell anyone how those scars happened. And he refused to discuss the future with Lois. She knew he still wore her wedding ring on a chain around his neck — he had promised to bring it back to her when he left — but he still hadn't said a word about when he planned on giving it back to her.

Lois heard low voices coming from the kitchen. It sounded like Jonathan had come back but she didn't hear Clark.

The voices stilled when Lois appeared in the doorway. Jonathan and Martha both looked worn and weary.

"Where's Clark?" Lois asked.

"On the roof," Jonathan said. At Lois's raised eyebrow he went on. "When he was little and wanted to be alone, sometimes he'd climb out his bedroom window onto the roof."

"What about his 'Fortress of Solitude'?" she asked, referring to Clark's tree house by the barn.

Jonathan managed a chuckle. "We'd find him out there, too. But the roof is higher."

"And harder for you to get him down?" Lois asked, only half joking.

"That too," Jonathan admitted. The smile was overlaid with worry.

Lois grabbed her coat from the coat rack by the kitchen door and shoved her feet into her boots. It wasn't snowing at the moment, but not all the previous snow around the house had been trampled down yet.

"Clark?" she called as she walked around the house to catch sight of him. There he was, sitting in the snow over the laundry room. The ladder was leaning against the eave. Lois wondered if he'd actually needed the ladder to get to where he was. She knew his powers were still a little sporadic.

"Mind some company?" she asked as she climbed out onto the roof.

"I'm not very good company, I'm afraid," Clark said, but he made no move to leave his place.

Lois settled in beside him. "Want to talk about it?" she asked after a moment.

"That's what Dad keeps asking," Clark said. "And Perry, too. He called again last night, asking when I'd be ready to return to work."

"And what did you tell him?" Lois asked.

"I'm not the person I was, Lois," Clark said. "I don't know if I can be that person again."

"You're still Clark Kent," she said.

"Am I?"

"Of course you are," she assured him. "I figure Kal-El wouldn't have come back at all."

"Kal-El did some ... I did some things I'm not ... " His voice trailed off.

"You did some things you're not proud of?" Lois asked. She already suspected some of what had happened to him. According to Clark's mom, Zara, Clark's Kryptonian 'wife', hadn't been exactly forthcoming with information when she brought Clark back to Earth.

Ching had been slightly more informative. "Clark succeeded in handling the situation with Nor-Et and his house," Ching told Martha. "Lord Nor is no longer a threat to anyone. However, the price ... the price was far higher than any of us had anticipated."

Physically, Clark had come home bruised and scarred. He was thin to the point of emaciation. Mentally ... When pressed, Ching admitted that Clark had been abducted and tortured by Nor-Et and his accomplices. It would have been enough to break anyone — but Clark had survived. And Nor was dead.

"I killed him," Clark said so softly that Lois almost didn't catch it. "I killed him and they hailed me as a hero."

Lois was surprised at his admission although she knew something of that kind had to have happened — she knew something had scarred his soul.

"Clark," Lois said after a moment, "did you have any choice?"

"He was a monster. He didn't care about anyone or anything besides his own ambition. And he didn't care if his ambition left no one else alive."

"So you *didn't* have a choice," Lois said "It was either him or everyone else. And I doubt Nor would have had any

compunction about killing you or anyone else who stood in his way.”

“I went there to save lives,” Clark said. “Instead, I became a killer.”

“You only did what you had to do.”

“I should have found another way,” Clark grated.

“And what if there wasn’t another way?” Lois asked.

“Want to tell me about it?”

He shook his head. “I ... I can’t ...”

“Are you afraid I’ll think less of you if I knew what you went through?”

Clark’s shoulders sagged and she knew she’d hit on at least part of it.

“Clark, I love you and your parents love you. I can’t think of anything you could do that would change that.”

He didn’t raise his head. “I can. How can you love a killer?”

Lois felt a flare of annoyance. Clark could be *so* pig-headed. “Clark Jerome Kent, you are *not* a killer any more than a police officer who has to use deadly force when everything else has failed. He isn’t a killer. He’s someone who has been forced to kill. There’s a difference and you know it.”

“I can’t sleep,” he said. “He’s in my nightmares, laughing, sneering, saying things. It’s like I haven’t really left there.”

“Clark, I still have nightmares about Lex,” Lois admitted. “They got really bad after you left. I even went to see a shrink about them and you know how I feel about them.”

“You think I should see a psychiatrist?”

“I know you went through a lot while you were there,” Lois said. “And even if you don’t want to talk to me or your parents about what happened, I know it helps to talk to someone. And I know one of the things my doctor recommended, very highly, was writing about what happened. She had me dig out my old journals and I wrote it all out like it was a novel.”

Clark’s expression brightened. “I’d like to read it.”

“Only if I get to read yours,” Lois countered.

Clark’s faint smile faltered. “You won’t like it.”

“I’m pretty sure you won’t like reading about Lex, either,” Lois said. “But it’s all in the past now. It’s all dead and gone and can’t hurt us any more.”

“We’ve thought that about Luthor before,” Clark reminded her.

“True,” Lois agreed. “But this last time, his body stayed in the morgue and the autopsy was done immediately. Then the body was cremated. The ashes were ‘lost.’ ‘Junior’ was not a happy camper when he found that out. He’d wanted to bury ‘Daddy Lex’ with all the pomp and ceremony he could muster.”

“Nor’s body was rendered for fertilizer, like he was an animal,” Clark said. “Normally on New Krypton bodies are cremated and the ashes given to the next of kin, although there were rumors that the potters’ guild used human bone in some of their finer pieces and to do that, the bones would have had to be removed from the body so they could be crushed and calcined.”

“Sounds a little gruesome,” Lois commented.

Clark shook his head. “They are a very pragmatic people. They have to be. And the potters’ guild does make some very fine pieces.” As he spoke his hand went to a spot just at the top of his sternum, as though reassuring himself of the presence of her ring beneath his sweater.

“You still have it,” Lois observed.

“I promised I’d bring it back,” he said. “I just wasn’t sure if you wanted it after everything that ...”

Lois snuggled closer. It had begun to snow again, the white flakes obscuring the landscape.

“When Nor ... when I was in that cell, he took it from me. Ching found it, after, and gave it back to me so I could bring it back to you.”

“So why haven’t you?”

Clark pulled her closer. “I wasn’t sure if you still wanted me.”

“Of course I do,” she assured him.

He reached under the neck of his sweater and pulled out the chain with the gold band. “Lois Lane, will you marry me?”

She wanted to make a smart-ass remark but stopped in the face of his worried earnestness. “Yes.”

He smiled and she knew everything would be okay. Even if Superman never returned to Earth, Clark Kent was home.

“Welcome home, Clark. Welcome home and Merry Christmas.”

THE END