

Always Darkest

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Summary: For those with no family and few connections, Christmas can be a challenging time. An alt-Clark from a very different universe tries to find a comforting place for this holiday. A prequel to the author's "The Pub."

Disclaimer: This is a fanfic based on the television show, *Lois and Clark: The New Adventures of Superman*. I have no claim on the pre-existing characters whatsoever, nor am I profiting by their use. The new story elements are mine. No infringement is intended by this work.

This is for Beverly, who has always been my guiding light out of dark places.

When Clark had been young, the Christmas season hadn't seemed so bad. Sure, he'd grown up in an orphanage, but Mrs. Feldman, the director, had always done a wonderful job of making all the kids feel special. There had been no escaping the fact that the kids in the orphanage were alone in a very hard world. However, as long as Mrs. Feldman had been in charge, they had never felt that way during the holiday season.

Years later, when Clark was older and out on his own, she had been the one person with whom he had stayed in touch. Even though times were tough, when Christmas rolled around each year, Clark knew that he was welcome to spend Christmas Eve and Christmas Day with her family. It had become so much a part of his life that for those few days every year it felt like he had a real family that he could call his own.

This Christmas was going to be his first without them. A fire had destroyed the Feldman's house earlier this year. To Clark's great relief, no one had been injured, but the entire family was crowded into one room at a friend's house. This meant that for the first time, the Feldmans — the closest people that he had in the world to a real family — had no room for him at Christmas.

So he was here in Metropolis. It was a dark city that Clark really didn't like, but he had no desire to be alone and didn't know where else to go. He didn't have many close friends, but Metropolis was home to the closest thing he had to a brother. He'd met Paul on a summer trip when he'd been in high school, and they'd been friends ever since. Clark knew Paul's family very well, and he'd stayed overnight at their house many times. This year, due to a mix of loneliness and a hope to capture some of what he'd had at the Feldmans', he'd given Paul a call and asked if he could spend Christmas Eve with his family.

It was the middle of the afternoon on Christmas Eve when Clark knocked on the front door of Paul's house. A moment later it opened to reveal Paul's father. "Hi, Mr. Karns," Clark said.

"Hi, Clark," the older man answered. He was smiling, but it was clear that he was surprised to find Clark at his door. When his eyes caught sight of the overnight bag in Clark's hand, his expression flashed to one of confusion. However, after only the briefest instant, his smile returned. "Come on in. Paul's in the rec room."

Clark stepped in and started down the hall. The rec room was a converted garage at the end of the main hallway. It had a television and a sofa, and the kids had always used it for

entertaining friends that came over to visit. When Clark reached the room, Paul was there by himself watching television. "Hi," Clark said.

Paul turned to look at him. "Hey, Clark, I didn't hear you come in," he replied. "How have you been?"

"Pretty good," Clark answered as he sat in the chair across from the sofa. "Are you sure it's okay for me to stay? Your dad seemed surprised to see me. I thought he would have said something about staying over when he let me in."

"Oh, I haven't asked yet," Paul said casually.

"You haven't? But..." Clark sputtered.

"Relax," Paul said casually. "You know you'll be welcome. I'll go tell my parents you're staying."

Paul headed down the hall to the other end of the house. He returned only a moment later wearing the same relaxed expression as when he'd left. "All set," he declared. "You can sleep on the sofa in here."

That was exactly what Clark had expected, so he simply nodded. Then Clark's thoughts turned to the evening ahead. Christmas Eve had always been the big night at the Feldman's. There would be a big dinner, almost like Thanksgiving. Then they would all gather in the room with the tree and everyone would take turns hanging special ornaments that were reserved for Christmas Eve. Then there would be singing, stories and something new and special every year. And finally, the evenings would always end with hanging stockings by the fireplace. For Clark, all the best things about Christmas were concentrated together in those Christmas Eve rituals. He knew this wouldn't be the same, but the Karnses were such a close family that Clark figured they must do something similar. "Does your family have any special plans for the evening?" Clark asked hopefully.

"Not really," Paul replied as he sat back on the sofa. "Mom and dad are going out to some older-adult get together tonight. Sherry's staying at a friend's house. I don't know what Sarah and Chris have planned, but I don't think they'll be here."

"Oh," Clark replied, trying to hide his surprise and disappointment. "Does your family do anything for Christmas Eve dinner?"

"No," Paul replied. "With food being as scarce as it is, mom and dad have always skipped Christmas Eve dinner. That's why no one stays home."

"You aren't going to be here?" Clark asked, distress creeping into his voice.

"I'm staying home tonight," Paul replied quickly. "I was going to be here anyway, and once you called, then I was sure I'd made the right plan. But no one else will be here tonight."

"So what does your family do for Christmas?" Clark asked.

"We have a big thing in the morning. My mom makes her special Christmas cinnamon rolls and we spend all morning celebrating and opening presents."

"Oh," was all Clark could think to say.

It was 7:30 a.m. and Clark had been awake for several hours. The first hour or so he'd just laid there in the dark wondering where his life was going. Then, about an hour ago, he'd started hearing sounds of movement from the other end of the house. For the past 30 minutes, the sounds and smells of a family having their Christmas morning celebration had been unmistakable. At first, Clark thought it was just Paul's youngest sister checking out the presents. But it had long since become clear that the whole family was together out in the main room.

Last night, Christmas Eve had been exactly as he'd feared when he'd heard Paul's description. There had been no dinner at all, and they'd spent Christmas Eve talking about the possibility of better times while flipping between the only two television stations on the air in Metropolis.

The sound of tearing paper followed by a squeal of delight

interrupted his thoughts. That had to be Sherry, Paul's youngest sister. She must have gotten something extra special. Clark wished he could be out there with them, even if it were only to watch. But no one had asked Clark if he would like to join them. No one had offered him one of the cinnamon rolls that he could so easily smell. No one, not even Paul, had as much as acknowledged his presence this morning alone here at the other end of the hallway.

Not that he could really blame them. This wasn't the Feldmans'. They hadn't invited him here. Based on what he'd figured out from Paul's reaction to his presence, they must have thought Clark had only stayed over because he was traveling and needed a place to sleep for the night. Clark hadn't said anything about sharing a Christmas experience. He hadn't asked to be included in anything. He'd just assumed. And he'd assumed wrong. He'd come here hoping for a feeling of inclusiveness. Instead, as he heard the family sounds from the other end of the hall, he felt more alone than ever.

Clark reached for the remote control and turned on the television. Maybe if he couldn't hear them, it wouldn't hurt so much.

"Paul, I need to get going," Clark said. It was the afternoon of Christmas day, and he was still looking for a polite way out of the massive mistake that was this Christmas.

"You've been saying that all morning. This won't take long. You've got to see my place," Paul said encouragingly.

"I can't believe you're finally moving out," Clark said. "Your parents have been great about letting you live at home. The rec room has practically been your apartment for years."

"Yeah, but I've got a job on the other side of Metropolis. And besides, my dad has been riding me more and more about finding a place of my own."

"How far is it?" Clark asked.

"It'll take us about twenty minutes. Once we get there, you'll have to let me show you around."

"Isn't that kind of a rough area?" Clark asked.

"Kind of," Paul agreed. "But that's what makes it fun. There's some stuff in the zone that you have to see."

"The restricted zone? Are you kidding?! You told me that your new place was near it, but I didn't think you'd risk going in."

Paul slapped Clark's shoulder. "Relax. The whole thing with the zone is way overblown. I've been in there lots of times."

"Ok," Clark agreed nervously. "If you're sure."

"It'll be fine. You'll see."

THE END

Please see "The Pub" for what happened in the restricted zone, and why Clark didn't spend any more Christmas mornings on Paul's sofa.

Sometimes it truly is darkest before the dawn.