

Reality Check

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Rated G

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Summary: Even superpowers don't help when you're in trouble with Lois Lane.

My butt is getting cold. Given the fact that I'm generally impervious to extremes in temperature, I suppose that means that I've been sitting in the snow for quite a while. Now that I think about it, I'm pretty sure the shadows have shifted direction since I arrived. It's daylight, of course. It's always daylight in the Arctic in June. It's probably past sunrise in Metropolis. As much as I dread it, I'd better go home and face the music. It's not like Lois Lane is going anywhere, and she'll only get madder the longer I stay away.

Even so, I take my time flying home. I grimace in shame and regret as I remember our argument. I was a real jerk, and I know it. I don't know what's wrong with me these days. Things upset me that really shouldn't, and I find myself saying and doing stupid things. Jeez, what am I—twelve?

It started with an honest mistake. I hadn't meant to get home so late. I hadn't even been doing anything particularly exciting—just hanging out at Dylan's house after a movie. I probably didn't even have to go home any earlier, either. If I'd just remembered to call or text her by midnight, everything would have been fine. I would have, too, if I'd remembered. I just forgot, plain and simple. Stupid.

Then, when I opened the front door and she looked up at me with that particular glare that means 'You are in deep doo-doo, Mister!' something snapped. I'm an adult. I should be able to come and go as I please, right? She's not the boss of me—not any more. Stupid.

I should have just apologized and gone to bed. It would have been easy, and it probably would have been right, too. Instead, I argued back, took my stand, met her point for point and glare for glare. Finally, I played my trump card.

"What are you going to do, Mom? Ground me? Take away my car keys? I'm not a kid anymore. I'm eighteen—an adult. How are you going to ground a man who can *fly*?"

And with that oh-so-brilliant remark, I took off—literally. I can still hear her parting shout: "Jordan Elijah Kent, you get your adult butt back here this minute!" I even heard her frustrated growl. "Argh! Just wait till your father gets home!"

I half expected Dad to come after me. Either whatever rescue Superman was at had lasted all night, or Dad had decided—correctly, it turned out—that I would come home on my own sooner or later. I'm not sure which parent I'm least looking forward to facing. Dad is usually the more laid-back of the two, but I know from personal experience that the quickest way to tick off Clark Kent is to disrespect Lois Lane. It's probably a toss-up at this point.

I've never been flying without Dad before, and I'm not sure how to approach the house in daylight without being seen. Just to be safe, I land as quickly (but quietly) as I can in the outfield of the neighborhood Little League park, climb over the fence, and walk home from there. If anyone sees me walking alone at 6:00 a.m. dressed in rumpled clothes, I hope they'll take me for what I am—a kid who's missed curfew.

As I approach the front door of my house—technically for the second time this morning—I can't resist the temptation to

peek in. I want to know what kind of parental atmosphere I'm about to walk into. My folks are both there, as I figured they would be. They both seem calm, which is a pleasant surprise. The real shocker, though, is that there is a strange man sitting with them at the kitchen table—a clean-cut, middle-aged man in a suit and tie, with an open laptop in front of him. Before I even start up the front steps, the man looks up from his computer, through the open kitchen door, straight at the—closed—front door of my house. It's almost as if he saw me coming. But that couldn't be. No way.

My dad catches my eye before I even have the front door open. He's usually pretty up-front with me, but this morning I can't tell what he's thinking. I know I'll have to talk to Mom and Dad soon, but not in front of the stranger. Trying to act like nothing out of the ordinary is going on, I let myself in and call "Morning!" from the living room. "I'll be down in a minute," I say as casually as I can, "I had a really good walk, but now I need a shower." Lame, I know, but it's the best I can think of this early in the morning.

"Not so fast, flyboy." My dad is motioning for me to come into the kitchen. Out of sheer habit I obey him. I can't believe he just called me that in front of his visitor. I wonder whether I'm supposed to introduce myself or wait for Mom or Dad to introduce me. My dad just points at the empty seat next to my mom and says, "Sit." I sit, of course. Then my dad says, "Tom, this is my son, Jordan. Jordan, this is Thomas Morgan, Director of Homeworld Security. He has something to show you."

Mr. Morgan and I shake hands, but he doesn't turn his computer toward me like I expect him to. He takes a slow sip of coffee and carefully sets the cup back on its saucer. I can't help noticing how straight he sits. I wish I had a cup of coffee—I could use something to do with my hands. I've heard of the Department of *Homeland* Security, but I could swear my dad said *Homeworld*. That can't possibly be good.

Mr. Morgan looks straight at me and says, "How much do you know about Kryptonians, Jordan?" I try not to let my panic show. I look to my Mom and Dad for help, but they just look right back at me. Neither of them says a word. So I bluff. "I know that Superman is one," I start, "and we studied the Kryptonian invasion in school. I don't remember exactly when that was—sometime in the late 90's, right?"

"That's right," Mr. Morgan says. "It was 1996, almost twenty years ago now." He takes another sip of his coffee. I think he's playing with me. "Ever since that incident, Jordan, the governments of Earth have been watching and preparing for another invasion."

"But I thought that Lady Zara and her boyfriend promised to leave Earth alone," I say.

"That was a long time ago, Jordan." He keeps saying my name. I'm not sure I like that. "Governments change. We have no way of knowing what the Kryptonians' policies are now, or even whether the colony of New Krypton is the only group of survivors from the Kryptonian homeworld." He takes another sip of coffee. It's like he's stalling, waiting for everything to sink in. "What we do have," he says, "is a way of detecting and tracking Kryptonians. All Kryptonians." I swallow hard.

He goes on as if he hadn't just turned my world upside down. "Let me tell you about my night, Jordan. I went to bed at 10:00 like I always do. At 1:30 my phone rang. It was your mother calling to tell me that you had taken off to God knows where. You see, Jordan, your mom knows that my people are always watching for unaccounted-for Kryptonian activity, and she was concerned for your safety. Not that we'd shoot down any unidentified Kryptonian on sight—they might be friendly, after all—but your mom knows that accidents sometimes happen and she wasn't taking any chances.

"Shoot down?" I start. I look at my dad, and he just nods. The

government has Kryptonite. That's the only possible way they could shoot down Kryptonians. I guess after what happened in the 90's I can't blame them, but it's still scary to think about.

Mr. Morgan ignores my interruption. "The second call of my night came at 1:40. It was my Canadian counterpart. Don't look so shocked, son. The Canadians don't like invasions any more than we do. As I'm sure you have surmised, it's a good thing that your mother called me when she did. I was able to promptly reassure our friends to the north that they had nothing more serious to worry about than a pouting youngster." I just know he used that word on purpose. I guess I deserve it after the way I acted.

He drains the last of the coffee from his cup and sets it down without a sound. Then he closes his laptop, stands up in one smooth motion, and looks down at me. It occurs to me that he hasn't cracked a single smile this whole time. Come to think of it, neither has anyone else in the room.

I can feel my cheeks burning and my throat feels like I've swallowed a walnut whole. Still, I manage to force enough air through it to say, "Believe me, sir, it won't happen again."

"I don't doubt that for a minute," Mr. Morgan says. "Because if it does, I'll only have the President of the United States to deal with. You, on the other hand, will have Lois Lane and Clark Kent."

I don't move a muscle as my parents escort Mr. Morgan to the front door and say their goodbyes. When the door closes behind him, I get up, but then I'm not sure what to do next. I should apologize to my folks, I know, but it seems kind of anticlimactic at this point. I'm standing in the kitchen doorway when they turn around, my dad's arm around my mom's shoulder, and look at me. It's times like these when I wish I'd inherited the Kryptonian telepathy along with the other powers. Maybe then I'd have some clue what at least one of them was thinking.

I open my mouth, but everything I think to say sounds idiotic in my own mind. Finally I just shrug and say, "I guess 'sorry' doesn't quite cover it, huh?" I can see my mom's expression softening. They both head toward me, and I meet them partway.

"Oh, I don't know," my mom says with a little smile. "'Sorry' goes a long way in just about any situation of this sort." She gives me a hug. I went through a stage once when I pretended not to like it when she hugged me, but this time I squeeze her back gratefully. For just a second, my chin rests on top of her head. How many times have I seen Dad hug her or Grandma Kent like that?

"Go get your shower, young man," she says as she pulls back. "I'll make another pot of coffee."

I nod and turn toward the stairs. I feel my dad's hand on my arm. When I turn to look at him, he says softly, "We all do stupid things sometimes. That's how we learn. Tom's a good man, and he has two teenaged sons of his own, so he understands that these things happen." Then he gives me a look that tells me that he's not really joking and says, "But you and I will both have things a lot easier around here if you don't make that particular mistake again."

I can't help grinning because I know that everything is okay now—with both my parents. "Don't worry, Dad. The next time Mom grounds me, I promise to stay grounded."

THE END